ENGAGING THE LEAST ENGAGED: GOOD PRACTICES FOR INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE IN JUST SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS

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Colophon

Authors: Martin Ferry (STRATH), Neli Georgieva (STRATH)

Contributors: Adam Drobniak (UEK), Adam Polko (UEK), Verena Balz (TUD), Samir Amin (iUE)

Design: Institute for Urban Excellence

Photography: DUST researchers

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Abbreviation list

Term	Description
EC	European Commission
FG	Focus groups
JTF	Just Transition Fund
JTP	Just Transition Platform
LECs	Least-engaged communities
MLG	Multi-level governance
TJTP	Territorial Just Transition Plan
StStG	Structural Reinforcement Act for Mining Regions
WRL	Economic Region Lusatia (*Wirtschaftsregion Lausitz*)
WSP	Economic and Structural Programme for the future Rhenish District (*Wirtschafts- und Strukturprogramm*)

1. Introduction

This deliverable provides insights into practices for engaging communities that are vulnerable to and often excluded from decision-making in the context of sustainable transitions - particularly in regions historically reliant on fossil-based industries.

It addresses both **strategic policy choices** and **practical participatory design decisions**, highlighting how **both levels must work in sequence** to support genuine community involvement.

The emphasis is on procedures, methodologies and mechanisms that – directly or indirectly – facilitate engagement of communities in policymaking, where **engagement is understood as a more advanced – dialogical - form of participation** beyond voting, receiving information or launching a consultative period. **The distinctive value of this report is in the attention paid to engaging the 'least engaged'.**

The deliverable **targets both public institutions** from national to local level as well as **practitioners in NGOs and community organisations** involved in shaping inclusive and just transition policies or projects for structural transformation and regional development. It intends to serve those seeking to leverage the added-value of engaging citizens and communities in policymaking but who may face strategic or operational difficulties.

Rather than offering a step-by-step guide on how to run a participatory process, the deliverable presents **practical examples and actionable recommendations** as sources of inspiration. These are grounded in three years of research under the DUST project and respond to commonly observed challenges to meaningful community participation.

READING GUIDE

To make this deliverable practical, its structure and content resembles those of a handbook. There are four chapters, each of which addresses one of the key principles for authentic community participation in sustainable transition policies and funding measures. These key principles were selected based on the research findings in DUST regarding key factors affecting the multi-level and deliberative participation of least-engaged communities in policies for sustainable transition.

- **TRUST**
  This principle includes good practices to address the following challenges: 1. How can policymakers be encouraged to trust active community participation? and 2. How can community trust in public institutions implementing sustainable transition processes be strengthened?

- **KNOWLEDGE & RELEVANCE**
  This principle includes good practices to address the following challenges: 1. How can policymakers be encouraged to incorporate the knowledge of communities? and 2. How to enable communities not only to possess knowledge but to recognise, activate, and apply that knowledge meaningfully within policymaking processes?

- **GOVERNANCE & CAPACITIES**
  This principle includes good practices to address the following challenges: 1. How to create a coordinated approach to participation across multiple governance levels? and 2. How to ensure sufficient capacity for community participation in sustainable transition initiatives?

- **INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION**
  This principle includes good practices to address the following challenges: 1. How to communicate effectively and affectively? and 2. How to support communities navigate a fragmented and untrustworthy information landscape?

Each chapter follows a common structure. It begins with an introduction to the core principle and explains its relevance for inclusive community participation in place-based policymaking. The introduction serves as a basis for identifying key challenges faced by policymakers, practitioners, and communities in participatory processes. The chapter then **outlines possible responses to the identified challenges**, **illustrated through practical examples, tips, and lessons**. These are derived from two main sources: (1) participatory practice and governance mechanism identified through DUST's case study desk research, and (2) DUST's own experiments. Contributions also include recommendations from DUST's scientific and external advisory broad members, which provided valuable external perspectives. Different sources are visually distinguished throughout the chapters using colour codes and icons.

Where relevant, **additional resources** such as literature references, practice guides, and toolkits from other initiatives are provided for further reading.

Each chapter concludes with a **set of recommendations**, some of which include **contextual notes** to **support consideration of transferability** and adaptation.

2 TACKLING LOW TRUST

2.1. Why does this principle matter?

Trust is both a starting point and a result of community participation in sustainable transition efforts. People are more likely to take part in planning and decision-making when they trust those leading the process. At the same time, participation, especially when it leads to meaningful results, can help build or rebuild trust.

On the one hand, trust is often necessary for individuals or groups to feel comfortable engaging with public authorities, allowing for more effective collaboration, open communication, and the sharing of ideas, which are all crucial for participation. Particularly for communities that have been traditionally less engaged in public initiatives, trust can reduce the perceived risk associated with participation, making individuals more willing to take part in activities where they might otherwise feel vulnerable or exposed.

On the other hand, we can see that trust is an outcome of participation. When individuals or communities participate alongside public authorities in developing and implementing initiatives and have positive experiences, trust is strengthened. Participating together can lead to increased familiarity and understanding, which can solidify existing relationships and foster new ones, leading to higher levels of trust. For less engaged communities, successfully participating in a task or project can build confidence, leading to greater willingness to participate and trust in future initiatives.

However, the relationship between trust and participation is not always positive and straightforward. Trust can be eroded by negative experiences during participation, such as perceptions of being ignored, broken promises or unfair treatment. The strength and nature of the relationship between trust and participation can vary depending on the specific context, including the nature of the participation, the individuals or groups involved, and the broader social environment. **There is often a disconnection between the everyday lives of communities and public officials which creates distrust on both sides.** In fact, in some situations, distrust can also motivate participation, particularly when individuals feel their interests are not being adequately represented or protected.

This shows us that there are important challenges in addressing barriers to participation caused by lack of trust and in ensuring that participation in policy initiatives contributes to trust-building. This section outlines two key challenges and presents potential solutions, illustrated with examples of good practice, and sources of support.

2.2. **Challenge 1:** How can policymakers be encouraged to trust active community participation?

Policymakers often lack trust in communities to contribute to the design of just sustainability transition initiatives. There can be a perception that communities are ill-informed, short-sighted or resistant to necessary but sometimes unpopular policy changes. This reduces the openness of policy-makers to communicating uncertainties and creates a tendency for them to pre-define transition goals, treating simple information provision and basic consultation as participation. Meaningful participation can be limited to networks of actors that are already part of (multiple) other funding channels and programmes, those with already active and strong positions in policy governance.

Policymakers' limited trust in the value of community participation according to DUST research

- Generally, deliberative participation was associated by policymakers with **consultative and dialogue-based formats**, usually involving established, institutional stakeholders.
- The **scope and depth of community participation** through these formats varied, with some described as large events, while others as dialogues in smaller groups.
- What was evident was that they frequently fell short of **stimulating exchange, assessing different perspectives or reaching meaningful results.** Direct, deliberative participation processes involving citizens was limited across policy measures.
- Although the selected policies largely recognised that sustainable development and transition away from fossil fuels will have implications over social welfare, livelihoods, and lifestyles, the evidence suggests limited **access of policy making processes to community perspectives and visions** on sustainability and transition compared to processes targeted at institutional stakeholders.

Raise policymakers' awareness on the positive contribution communities make to sustainable transition. A starting point for public authorities in the organisation of trust-based participatory processes is awareness and consensus on the positive contribution communities make to sustainable transition. Policymakers often lack trust in what local communities can contribute to transition initiatives. This means that even if a range of participatory processes are in place, the intensity, quality and outcomes may be limited. **Policymakers should recognise communities as genuine local partners, implying that participation should be seen as a reciprocal relationship.** This frequently means a change of mindset in politicians and public officials to see the benefits of building a trustful relationship with local communities as a basis for participatory processes. But what practical actions can be taken to achieve this change of mindset?

Practices, identified in the project, offer solutions to this challenge:

- **Public authorities can use legal and regulatory frameworks to build engagement and trust with communities and awareness of its benefits among policymakers.** Governments at EU, national and sub-national levels are moving to make community participation in policies compulsory and this can be a motivation to support engagement and build the trust of public authorities in local communities as genuine partners. **The first steps in building trustful relationships are often taken by statutory planners at different governmental levels.**

Multi-level regulatory frameworks institutionalise community participation in Germany.

The German Citizen Participation Charter outlines principles for citizen participation in urban development, emphasizing sustainability, integration, and place-based solutions. It encourages collaboration between different levels of government and stakeholders outside of government. Examples include public meetings with local mayors, deliberative methods like citizen assemblies and participatory budgeting, and user panels to gather feedback on public services. Citizen participation is also promoted at the local level, with many municipalities establishing guidelines for local participation.

In the Rhenish District and Lusatia, the institutionalisation of a participatory approach in the 'Structural Strengthening of Coal Regions Act' was facilitated by the elaboration and adoption of the Citizen Participation Charter, setting a formal standard for engagement. It aims to ensure that policymakers engage with civil society and communities and that participation is recognized as a regular part of the measure's governance. A strategic framework, politically driven by the North Rhein Westphalia's State Government, reflects a broad commitment to fostering youth engagement and integration of young people into decision-making processes. At a national scale, a strong commitment to subsidiarity principle was highlighted by interviewees.

Key messages

Use legal and regulatory frameworks as a lever to institutionalise commitment to active community participation in public administration, raise awareness of the benefits and build trust for a more transversal approach within the administration.

Read more at: URBACT knowledge hub reflections on how the Leipzig Charter has supported Citizen Participation in Europe's Cities

- **There are practical ways to embed a culture of engagement in public authorities to ensure continuity and build trust.** Political and institutional change can disrupt trust-building. Staff turnover in public administration and organisational change, particularly following elections, breaks up personal and organisational relationships and networks. This makes it important to see participation as an integral feature of public policy. Repeating policy making cycles that use the same participatory instruments several times, rather than as a 'one off' occasion or event, provides a stable basis for trust-building. **A one-off deliberative process can make a difference, but it is regular engagement that gives people and decision makers the time and opportunity to build trust**. It is also important to continuously share the success and benefits of the

engagement on an ongoing basis to maintain support for the initiative. For instance, this can involve several iterations or cycles of participatory processes. **Here, we should note that a recognised benefit of EU Cohesion Policy is the organisation of funding in 7-year programme periods and this can be used to build trust over time**. For public authorities this provides a stable policy environment, allowing longer-term planning, promoting a more strategic, long-term conceptualisation of regional development and providing greater stability of investments than domestic budget cycles. This framework can be used to embed trust in collaboration among local authorities. In the DUST research, we identified some valuable examples of how this longer timescale can be used to build trust.

The Regional Observatory of the Transition Process in Silesia, using Cohesion policy to embed a culture of trust.

As an initiative of Silesia's regional government and funded by EU Cohesion policy, the observatory aims to support and improve management of the just transformation process in the region, with particular emphasis on the issues of the *labour market*, *diversification of economic activity* and the *potential of post-industrial areas*, including post-mining areas. Project implementation is divided into three modules, including one dedicated to participation.

- The participation module currently includes over 120 tasks/subtasks which use different participatory practices supported by analyses, surveys, and 7 partners. The regional government and the Mining Chamber of Industry and Commerce organised a series of workshops for local authorities, local communities and entrepreneurs, seminars in the sub-regions and a regional conference. Eight social and economic development workshops for local communities in the subregions of Silesia, engaging 298 participants from local governments, regional associations, social organisations, entrepreneurs, and NGOs. Discussions covered project proposals, contextualised processes, transition models, good practices, and innovative technologies.

- Participation exceeded expectations, especially in the workshops series for local communities, where numerous and diverse stakeholders, actively engaged. In particular, local authorities demonstrated interest and active engagement, developing a good understanding of the transition process and their role in it, their challenges and funding needs, demonstrating their openness to dialogue.

- This increased participation not only raised awareness of the benefits of participation among local authorities and available funding opportunities but also resulted in a surge of project proposals for the region's territorial Just Transition Plan.

- Another round of observatory activities is underway, including the development of good practice manuals for municipalities.

Read more at: Just Transition Platform Case study: Regional observatory of the transition process in Silesia

- **Another way to build trust among policymakers is to start small and 'scale up'.** Where policy-makers have limited trust in community contributions to transition

initiatives, small scale projects can be useful. Not only does the 'personal' or 'face to face' scale support trust-building it also allays by policymaker concerns about the risk of committing substantial resources to uncertain outcomes. Ideas can be tested with relatively modest projects. Through this, we can see that mutual process of learning and exchange can be launched. These can support trust-building among policymakers and subsequently be developed further or scaled up. In this context, place-based measures have the benefit of applying more flexibility and granularity, supporting small projects with fixed territorial scales.

Read more at: Building a Culture of Engagement: A Practical Handbook PART 1 Securing the leadership support

2.3. Challenge 2: How can community trust in public institutions implementing sustainable transition processes be strengthened?

Distrust in public institutions and how they manage transitions was identified in our DUST research as a substantial barrier to participation. Lack of community trust in public institutions had a big influence on whether individuals or communities choose to participate in transition policies.

Findings from the DUST project suggest that distrust in public institutions can seriously limit the scope and quality of community participation.

Practitioners should take into account three specific dynamics:

- **Perceived lack of transparency or alignment with community interests.** Participation may be hindered when institutions are seen as disconnected from local priorities or pursuing externally defined goals. When planning participatory processes, consider how transparent the objectives are and whether the process is perceived as genuinely responsive.

- **The lasting weight of past negative experiences.** In some regions, prior experiences of exclusion, neglect, or corruption shape how communities view new participatory opportunities. It is important to assess whether such past dynamics may still influence current perceptions, and how they might affect expectations.

- **The cumulative effect of deep and persistent distrust.** When distrust is long-standing and emotionally charged, such as in areas affected by failures of industrial restructuring, communities may not only withdraw from participation but actively question its legitimacy. In these cases, more time and intentionality may be needed to even begin a dialogue.

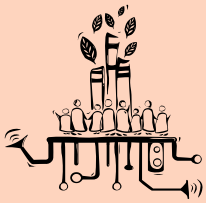
Practices, identified in the project, offer solutions to this challenge:

- **Dedicated actions aimed at trust building in communities should be integral to sustainable transition measures.** Sustainable transition policies often include commitments to engaging with affected communities. However, these commitments are often not translated into specific actions aimed at building the trust necessary for them to be realised.
- **Meet people 'where they are at' and create safe spaces**. For events aiming to foster community participation and trust, selecting the right location is very important. Ideal venues are accessible, safe, and familiar to the target community, such as local community centres or public spaces within the area.

Creating a trusted space: Responding to young people's venue preferences for participation

Across DUST case studies, the younger generations tended to place higher importance on the type of venue as a factor in deciding whether or not to participate. The arguments they shared in our focus groups used both practical and psychological reasoning. Youth in Groningen, Belchatow, and Katowice all preferred familiar, informal spaces for participation – places members of these sub-communities regularly visited for either obligation or leisure. They found it convenient to integrate participatory events into their routine activities at these locations. They highlighted, however, that the familiarity of these places also carried a sense of safety, a welcoming setting where they felt comfortable talking more openly.

Conversely, youth from Groningen reported impressions that participatory events organised by public bodies take place in 'intimidating' locations. In Groningen and Belchatow, youth were drawn to traditional and culturally relevant spaces, such as schools, community centres, or areas close to church services. In Katowice, youth leaned towards leisure spaces – like malls and entertainment venues – where they socialise with peers. Formal venues, such as municipal halls, were less favoured.



Strengthening community trust: insights from DUST Regional Future Literacy Labs

- **Recognize that meaningful participation is resource-intensive and requires expertise**. This means dedicating time, personnel, and funding to design and implement comprehensive strategies for hybrid participation. It also involves promoting a long-term mindset within diverse teams and leadership, valuing interpersonal and emotional skills alongside technical expertise and develop an organizational culture that respects community governance.

- **Collaborate with civil society organizations (CSOs)**. This concerns engaging with trusted CSOs with broad community reach through regular, informal communication and transparent collaboration.

- **Map and actively engage affected communities, especially the less engaged**. It is important to locate those communities that will be affected by transitions, to identify community networks and ongoing initiatives. This is a crucial starting point in familiarizing policymakers with communities and enables them to build links with trusted intermediaries to mobilize community members, including those that are less engaged.

Read more in Deliverable 5.2 and 4.4

- **Being transparent about what participation can lead to - and showing how outcomes are achieved - helps build trust.** Communities need a clear sense of what their contribution might result in. **These outcomes may be tangible, such as influencing policy or planning, or intangible, like gaining knowledge, building**

networks, or developing new skills. This broader understanding of possible outcomes can enhance trust in both the process and its results. Public authorities and organisers should be upfront about the purpose of participation, the form outcomes may take, and how contributions will be used. *What's the deadline for community members to participate? How will their input be evaluated? When will the results be shared?* Being transparent about this process will assist in building community trust between institutions like the local council and community members. Our DUST research identified an example where policymakers had invested considerable effort to make the results of participation clear.

Building trust by making the outcomes of participation clear in Silesia

In Silesia's Territorial Just Transition Plan (TJTP) presentations and workshops on strategic projects to be included in the plan were used to make clear to stakeholders their impact on final decisions and the tangible results of participation.

The list of strategic projects of TJTP of Silesia contains 24 strategic projects, all of which were identified, discussed and consulted during the workshops. In terms of less engaged communities (LECs) this applied to the TJTP priority 'Social inclusion – strengthening of just transition process' which is particularly focused on mining communities, youth, etc.). Stakeholder presentations had a specific structure referring to: the context of the project idea, its name of the project, key goals, connection with the transition issues and TJTP of Silesia, assumed schedule for implementation, potential effects of the project in terms of preferred socio, economic, environmental, spatial results of transition.

The presentations were submitted by the stakeholders to the workshop organizer (i.e. the Marshal's Office, the Department of Transition) before the workshops meetings and initially consulted with by an expert. During the workshops, further discussion was held with the stakeholders, including the LEC representatives, on refining / improving the project idea, as well as creating a well-prepared project fiche or by changing the records of TJTP of Silesia to cover any new issues that arose during the participatory process.

OECD guidance on types of community contributions and expected policy impacts

The expected outcome of the inputs gathered though a participatory process can vary. This OECD guidance gives an overview of the type of contributions and expected results of different types of participatory process.

Expected objectives of the participatory process	**Examples of inputs gathered through a participatory process**	**Type of participatory process**
Integrate recommendations to suggested sustainable transition policy documents	Informed recommendations on policy changes needed to ensure just and sustainable transition	Representative deliberative process
Partner with participants to co-create solutions (Engagement)	Concrete actions such as e.g. targeted investment in revitalisation projects, employment and training strategies.	Open innovation (hackathons or cocreation workshops)
Give citizens and stakeholders the possibility to decide on the use of public resources through a participatory budget (Engagement)	Decision on how to distribute public resources for a specific purpose	Participatory Budget
Identify a way forward that does not cause strong opposition from any social groups and gain legitimacy and support to implement it (Engagement)	Broad consensus of different social groups on a contentious issue	Representative deliberative process

Source: OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes

2.4. Lessons for tackling low trust

1. **Showcase the value of community input to policymakers**.

Decision-makers need to see that communities can be serious partners in creating sustainable futures. This may require a shift in mindset, seeing public participation not as a box-ticking exercise, but as a relationship built on mutual trust. Community voices should be valued, not just heard.

2. **Use legal frameworks to encourage engagement**.

Some governments are making public participation a legal requirement. Legal tools can help embed engagement as part of how public institutions work, not just an extra consideration.

3. **Build a long-term culture of engagement**.

Trust cannot be built or re-built quickly. High staff turnover or changing political leadership can disrupt relationships. That's why regular, repeated engagement is important. When participation happens consistently and is applied across policies and over time, formal and informal ties are built up with communities, building trust.

4. **Start small and scale up.**

In places where trust is low, small projects can show policymakers how engagement works and why it's valuable. These 'pilot' efforts can help both policymakers and communities learn from experience and build confidence over time.

5. **Create safe, familiar spaces.**

Communities are more likely to join events if they're held in places they know and feel comfortable in, such as like community centres, schools, or public parks.

3 VALUING DIVERSE TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE AND ENHANCING POLICY RELEVANCE

3.1. Why this principal matters?

In the context of just sustainability transitions, the challenge of valuing more varied forms of knowledge, particularly local, lived, and experiential knowledge - has emerged as both a **practical and normative concern**. As shown in the DUST case studies, a technocratic bias tends to marginalise the contributions of communities, especially those deemed 'least engaged', whose place-based insights, aspirations and civic experiences are often overlooked in transition planning.

Critically, the **undervaluing of community knowledge undermines another essential precondition** for participation: **perceived policy relevance**. When transition policies are centred around large-scale innovation and energy production, and technological transformation, communities are less likely to view transition policies as speaking to their concerns, needs, or aspirations. This increases disengagement and weakens legitimacy. In this way, knowledge and relevance become mutually reinforcing. As a result, recognising diverse forms of knowledge not only broadens how policy objectives are framed - beyond narrow technocratic goals - but also strengthens the sense that transitions are meaningful and worth engaging with.

Importantly, the **DUST research also challenges the simplistic binary between 'expert' and 'lay' knowledge**. Many community members draw on hybrid forms of understanding grounded in professional, civic, and organisational roles. This points to the need for participatory frameworks that can accommodate and connect multiple knowledge types, enhancing the democratic quality and strategic robustness of transition policies (Barca et al., 2012). The following sections examine two key challenges in this regard and highlight practices that can help bridge the gap between formal policymaking and community-based knowing.

3.2. **Challenge 1:** How can policymakers be encouraged to incorporate the knowledge of communities?

In the context of regional structural transitions, DUST research shows that **policy goals and targets are frequently defined in narrow terms**, **limiting the possibility of designing measures that benefit from community knowledge**. Once policy frameworks are fixed - often before reaching the local level - there is little room left for adaptation or dialogue. This makes it difficult for local knowledge to contribute to or influence meaningful decisions.

Even when there is interest in citizen participation, **policymakers often struggle to translate policy language into accessible terms** and to identify appropriate tools or stages in the process where community input can be meaningfully integrated. The challenge, then, is not whether community knowledge has value, but **how to make it relevant, actionable, and usable** within current policy systems.

This brings us to a central issue: limited institutional openness to incorporate the knowledge of communities.

Practices, identified in the project, offer solutions to this challenge:

A mix of participatory mechanisms

In the Dutch province of Groningen, a mix of participatory mechanisms has been integrated into the National Program Groningen (NPG) – a national investment initiative designed to support sustainable regional development.

Within this programme, the Toukomst sub-programme plays a key role in enabling co-creation and co-production of transition measures between public authorities, stakeholders, and citizens. Toukomst is centred on promoting residential and grassroots initiatives that align with the broader goals of the Programme, including economy, work and learning, liveability, and nature and climate. A distinctive feature of the programme is the allocation of €100 million from the NPG fund specifically for the development of project proposals submitted by citizens under Toukomst. This substantial financial commitment has made it possible for community members to move beyond consultation and take an active role in shaping projects for their region.

Read more in Deliverable 3.1

- **Improving openness to community knowledge depends on how flexibly policy objectives are framed and whether they can be translated into truly place-based measures.** In the DUST project, we found that when policy frameworks are defined in a way that allows communities to contribute to shaping how objectives are reached – as opposed to narrowly defined technical and sectoral measures - this creates

opportunities for more meaningful participation. It enables local actors to reflect on what the transition means for their territory, and co-develop suitable responses. **As a first step, one promising response to this challenge is the inclusion of a dedicated measure or sub-programme within transition policies that** creates structured space for community input alongside other strands focused on industrial or technological aspects.

- **A further challenge lies in policymakers' difficulty in making sense of qualitative or experiential data.** In the DUST project, we collected insights pointing to the fact that one reason citizen knowledge is not always recognised as meaningful is that it is rarely expressed in 'policy language'. **Community expectations, concerns, or proposals often need to be interpreted or translated into tangible options and decision points for them to be seen as relevant by policy practitioners**. This highlights a broader issue: the risk of absent shared understanding between policymakers and participants – not only about the policy issue itself, but also about the specific role citizens are expected to play in shaping it. Addressing this challenge requires more **deliberate choices in the design of participatory processes**, ensuring that the method used is appropriate to the nature of the issue and **creates space for both meaningful expression** and **institutional interpretation**.

Digital tools

Digital tools can play a bridging role by helping to translate experiential knowledge into formats that are more comparable and actionable within policymaking contexts. In Gotland, a digital mapping tool was used to engage citizens in marking meaningful places within their territory. Participants were invited to reflect on how they currently use or would like to use these areas in the future, providing input on public spaces with ecological, social, or recreational value.

This approach helped express diverse community perspectives in spatially specific and comparable terms. By linking individual experiences to concrete locations and functions, the tool supported a more structured and interpretable format for planners, making it easier to identify shared concerns and relate them to planning priorities.

While not replacing qualitative depth, such tools can facilitate the translation of experiential knowledge into forms more readily understood by institutional actors, thereby improving the chances that community input informs strategic decision-making.

Read more in Deliverable 3.1

3.3. **Challenge 2:** How to enable communities not only to possess knowledge but to recognise, activate, and apply that knowledge meaningfully within policymaking processes

While communities hold valuable experiential, contextual and technical knowledge, a major challenge lies in their **ability to recognise the policy relevance of that knowledge and apply it into forms that can influence policy**. This ability is deeply tied to **empowerment**, not only in terms of having access to participatory processes, but also in understanding how policymaking works, and recognising how own experiences and aspirations connect to broader policy goals and investments. Community members are more likely to engage, and to see their knowledge as relevant, when they understand how policies **affect their lives and places**. Yet, even when policies are directly relevant, empowerment is only possible when three conditions are met: (i) **real access to resources and decision-making spaces, (ii) individual capacity to convert those opportunities into meaningful participation, (iii) a supportive environment that enables that participation to matter.** Without one of these, participation risks becoming symbolic or exclusive.

Practices, identified in the project, offer solutions to this challenge:

- **Enhance communities' ability to understand how policies are relevant to them.** DUST research shows that the relevance of transitions, and the policies supporting them, varies significantly across communities. This is partly due to differences in context, such as income, employment, age, or education, which shape how people interpret the meaning and impact of policy interventions. Some communities, particularly those directly affected by structural changes, may perceive transitions as a loss - of income, social status, or cultural identity. Their first instinct may be to resist change or protect their immediate interests, which can make constructive participation more difficult. In contrast, other groups, like youth or retirees, may struggle to see how the transition affects them or may relate to it only through their personal circumstances and short-term concerns. Thus, for community knowledge to be meaningful in policymaking, citizens need to understand how policies connect to their lives, their territory, and their future - not only in the short term, but also long-term. This requires clear communication, space for reflection, and engagement strategies that account for different capacities to relate to abstract or long-term goals. This is especially important in an environment where populist narratives may seek to exploit or deepen existing grievances.

Foster practical and applied learning opportunities

In the DUST project, we heard about the importance of supporting communities in connecting technical sustainability knowledge to their own lives. This was an issue that young people between the age of 18-21 highlighted as part of a focus group in the case study region of Gotland.

The young residents of the island pointed that while they possessed significant academic knowledge about sustainability through education, for it to be actionable, they need opportunities – spaces – to link this knowledge with real-world applications.

Participants highlighted the value of visiting public administrations and private businesses, where they could see how sustainability goals are put into practice in day-to-day work. They saw this as an opportunity to understand how in the future they could apply their sustainability-related knowledge in real-world settings.

Read more in Deliverable 3.2

- When community participation takes place at the stage of designing policy strategies or their funding measures, **citizens benefit from access to contextual information**. This helps them better understand what kinds of changes are being proposed, what scale of transformation is envisaged, and how these might affect their lives, spaces, or futures. Crucially, such information also allows communities to **form a judgment about the fairness and relevance** of the proposal - whether the burdens and benefits are distributed in a way that makes sense from their perspective.
- However, in the case of longer-term transitions – such as those related to climate, energy, or industrial change – the full implications are initially uncertain, diffused, or not yet fully known. In these cases, **community participation must be supported not only by concrete data, but also by formats that encourage reflection on possible futures**, shared values, **and strategic vision** – even before concrete decisions are made. This underscores once again the value of continuous participation, which builds trust and shared understanding over time.

What DUST advisory board members say

In the context of Gotland, Sweden, practitioners acknowledge that policy objectives need to be flexible enough to allow for interpretation, while citizens also expect a clear sense of direction. This highlights the need to carefully balance well-defined and robust goals with openness to multiple measures or pathways that allow for discussion and local adaptation.

Agneta Green
Energy and climate coordinator
County Administrative Board of Gotland

- **State explicitly if prior knowledge is required or not.** Clarity about the type of knowledge communities are expected to contribute plays a crucial role in enabling participation. **Community members are more likely to feel confident and willing to**

engage when they understand what kind of knowledge or experience is relevant to the process. Unclear or implicit expectations – especially when technical expertise is assumed by citizens – can create a sense of exclusion, apathy or hesitation, all discouraging participation. Organisers of participatory processes, therefore, **need to be transparent about the level and type of knowledge that participants are expected to bring**. This clarity helps individuals recognise the value of their own insights and feel more prepared to contribute.

Reaching out to least engaged communities

All DUST case studies had to reach out to selected least engaged communities and attract them to engage in focus groups and workshops on themes related to the regional transitions and associated policies. As part of this work, attractive promotion materials were produced – such as paper posters and digital flyers – explaining in simple language the purpose and focus of the participatory events.

One case – the region of Groningen – explicitly included text in the poster stating that participants do not need to possess preceding or expert knowledge on the topic. Consequently, during the participatory events, some community members mentioned that one reason they decided to join was the security that their local and experiential knowledge was going to be sufficient. This confidence increased their perceived ability to engage in discussions on transitions along with other fellow citizens.

Read more in Deliverable 3.2

- **Incorporate diverse forms of knowledge while enabling broad-based participation.** A key challenge in participatory policymaking is **how to create space for diverse perspectives** to be expressed, heard, and considered. Communities differ in their experiences, values, levels of knowledge, and confidence in engaging with policy. If participatory processes assume a single mode of input or a shared level of capacity, they risk excluding certain voices. The design of participatory formats, therefore, plays a crucial role in shaping who feels able and secure to participate, what kind of knowledge is elicited, and how diverse contributions are valued.

Eliciting community knowledge

Based on the participatory practices mapped in the DUST project, we find that formats designed to elicit a wider range of community knowledge can significantly enhance both the relevance of policies and the inclusiveness of the participatory process. When citizens are able to recognise their own experiences, concerns, and values in the issues being discussed, participation becomes more meaningful - and policies more in line with the realities on the ground.

Participatory formats that support this kind of engagement are, in principle, those that are easy to access, offer opportunities for reflection and confidence-building, and create space for some form of interaction. Some concrete examples from the DUST project are described below, each demonstrating how participatory formats can help make policy more relevant by surfacing community knowledge in different ways.

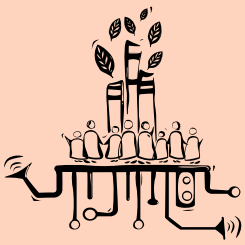
As mentioned earlier, **a digital participatory mapping tool** used in preparation for the revision of Gotland's Comprehensive Plan, and later the drafting of the Regional Development Strategy, actively involved citizens in identifying places they valued within their territory via an ArcGIS online platform. The approach followed a form of sociotope mapping, which aimed to explore public open spaces and reveal their multiple use values as defined by different individuals or groups. Participants were invited to indicate specific locations that mattered to them – whether due to ecosystem services, social functions, or recreational use – and to reflect on how they use these areas today or would like to use them in the future. This encouraged spatial thinking and revealed overlapping priorities and shared concerns. While not tied to direct policy decisions, the participatory format strengthened the strategic grounding of future planning by rooting it in lived experience.

The Toukomst programme under NPG demonstrates how participatory design can translate diverse local ideas into policy-relevant input. Citizens were first invited to submit ideas (900 were collected) – rather than fully developed projects – through **both digital and in-person outreach.** These ideas were bundled to inform potential project directions (altogether c. 40 projects were formulated based on submitted ideas). Later, citizens were invited to evaluate the proposals either using an accessible printed overview delivered to their households or online. A **representative citizen panel** then assessed the prioritised proposals, enabling different perspectives to be brought together and jointly considered. Panel members reported gaining skills and confidence in working collectively, even though some required external expertise to fully understand complex issues. This inclusive structure allowed policymakers to identify shared community priorities and connect them with strategic objectives.

Read more in Deliverable 3.1 and on the programme website (in Dutch)

- **A further difficulty, recognised in DUST and other projects, arises from the fact that community preferences and aspirations are shaped by social and economic conditions. Certain communities are more prone to under-aspire** as they become resigned to their weak socioeconomic situation (a form of *adaptive preference*), making it harder to surface or mobilise *transformative* knowledge from within these communities. This raises a delicate question for policymakers: **how to support vulnerable communities via community-defined priorities that genuinely reflect a life they have reasons to value.**

See for instance INVOLVE Horizon Europe project, https://involve-democracy.eu/



RFLL insights on unlocking and integrating community aspirations with policy perspectives

- **Adopt open and flexible framing of discussions**. Policymakers must recognize that the initial framing of deliberation is decisive for successful participation. This means allowing participants to re-frame issues to foster ownership of deliberation.

- **Ensure structured deliberation that connects to policy.** Keep community interests central in deliberation, while nudging discussions toward policy relevance.

- **Position policymakers as support for community-led positions.**

- **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.

- **Create safe, continuous, and iterative engagement spaces.** Plan a series of workshops to yield meaningful outcomes. Base these in community-only spaces for reflection and negotiation.

- **Implement practical measures to support participation.** Use personal invitations, familiar and accessible venues, and a welcoming atmosphere to encourage participation. Plan in sufficient time for informal exchange, such as welcoming moments coffee or lunch breaks.

Read more in Deliverable 5.2 and 4.4

3.4. Lessons for incorporating community knowledge and enhancing policy relevance

1. **Create dedicated spaces within policy frameworks for community input**

Include a dedicated measure or sub-programme in transition policies explicitly oriented toward communities. This should exist alongside strands targeting industrial, technological, or environmental components.

Contextual note: In more centralised systems, this may require regulatory or administrative flexibility to allow bottom-up processes to feed into planning. In regions with weaker civic traditions, starting with pilot projects may help demonstrate value.

2. **Tailor participatory methods to issue and audience**

Make deliberate design choices when selecting participatory formats. Choose methods appropriate to the issue at hand, and which enable both meaningful expression by citizens and interpretation by institutions.

Contextual note: Rural, ageing, or low-connectivity areas may require more face-to-face or paper-based formats, digital tools must be supplemented accordingly.

3. **Be transparent about expectations for knowledge contribution**

Communicate clearly in the invite to the participatory event the type of knowledge sought in participatory processes, or, if applicable, that no technical or expert knowledge is needed.

4. **Leverage trusted intermediaries to bridge gaps**

Engage intermediaries - such as trained facilitators, NGO staff, community leaders, or skilled external consultants - to translate between institutional language and local meaning-making.

Contextual note: In areas with low institutional trust, locally rooted actors may be more effective than external facilitators.

5. **Use digital tools thoughtfully to translate knowledge**

Apply digital platforms and tools to help capture and translate experiential knowledge into formats that are comparable, visualisable, and actionable for policymakers.

Contextual note: Ensure digital inclusion - design interfaces for all literacy levels and provide support where connectivity or skills are low.

6. **Foster practical and applied learning opportunities**

Provide spaces for youth and students to connect academic learning with real-world applications. Facilitate visits to public institutions and private businesses to observe how sustainability is implemented in practice.

Contextual note: Work with schools, universities, youth centres, or local businesses – depending on who is active in your region - to increase engagement.

4 REFLECTING ON GOVERNANCE AND CAPACITY

4.1. Why does this principle matter?

Governance of just sustainability transitions operates across multiple levels and this influences the location, depth and inclusivity of participatory processes. Governance structures are needed to support participative input from communities in steering local policies. This makes measures better informed, with stronger local commitment and ownership, and more transparent with stronger accountability at the local level (EEA, EIONET, 2016). Sustainable transition involves a range of actors across policy sectors, administrative levels and stakeholder types (public, private, third sector, communities). In this context, multi-level governance structures are valued in informing the territorial mix of resources and investment priorities and achieve necessary coordination of sustainable transition initiatives but also in mobilising local actors to become involved and creating spaces for meaningful participation of communities, including those that have been traditionally less engaged (Rodríguez-Pose and Ketterer, 2019).

Participation in just sustainable transition measures through MLG involves negotiating power and authority relations. To become valuable participants, communities and citizens have to be empowered to contribute their own knowledge, to challenge experts and institutions, and to change and reframe the process of participation.

These power dynamics have to be considered along different dimensions. There are vertical relationships to be considered. This refers to the linkages between higher and lower levels of government (e.g. central government, regions, provinces, communities, cities, etc.) including their institutional, financial, and informational aspects. There are also horizontal dynamics, referring to co-operation arrangements for the sharing of power between actors at the same level. This includes sub-national public authorities but also the contribution of non-state local actors such as communities and citizens in informing or implementing policies and plans.

There are substantial barriers to the operation of multi-level governance arrangements that support community participation in transition initiatives. Some barriers are created by the domination of higher level administrations. Policy management and implementation tasks are often concentrated at national level and while this facilitates strong engagement from experts and interests representing a specific set of sectoral issues, it can restrict participation from territorial and community-based groups. Related to this are coordination difficulties, across officials and administrative units involved in different policy fields related to transition, across multiple levels of public administration and between public, private, and community realms. Structural, culture and functional divisions and variation in traditions of collaborative working often fragments governance and limits the creation of shared arenas for community participation (Fenton and Gustafsson, 2017). Capacity constraints, especially at sub-national levels represents an important barrier. Local authorities often have limited financial, human and technical and resources and tools available to support community and citizen participation, especially in reaching out to less engaged communities.

The following sections look at two broad challenges to participation caused by governance issues and considers steps that can be taken to improve coordination and build capacity to facilitate participation.

What DUST advisory board members say

(,,,) (T)he surfacing of expectations regarding power and responsibility, hopes and fears, typically remains at a superficial level when the task is defined as fixing a problem that has been defined in advance (usually by others) and using instruments/powers that are taken as given

Riel Miller
Senior Fellow at several academic institutions, &
DUST advisory board member

4.2. **Challenge 1:** How to create a coordinated approach to participation across multiple governance levels?

An important governance challenge for ensuring the participation of less engaged communities in sustainable transition measures is multi-level coordination. This concerns the relationships across and between higher and lower levels of government (e.g. central government, regions, provinces, cities and communities) in the organisation and implementation of participatory processes. Multi-level governance emphasises the importance of local autonomy, local knowledge, and community and citizen participation in shaping policies and decision-making processes. These principles are often associated with active subsidiarity, which argues that decision-making authority to be exercised at the lowest possible level while ensuring cooperation and support among different levels of government. According to evidence from the DUST research, decentralised governance was valued by citizens in the organisation of participatory processes. There was a strong preference for participatory processes organised by local authorities or civil society over national governments, indicating a desire for localized and community-driven approaches. However, the dominance of top-down governance frequently limited role of regional and local stakeholders as facilitators of community participation. National level control of policy design and authority over who was involved in deliberative processes and how they were conducted hindered the ability of local authorities to engage other local stakeholders, including LECs.

Besides this vertical coordination challenge, there are difficulties in ensuring horizontal cooperation across actors with a stake in sustainable transition, particularly at the local level. There are risks fragmentation, duplication and rivalry in the organisation of deliberative processes, all of which limits the scope for meaningful participation, especially from LECs. Horizontal coordination challenges were identified across different types of stakeholders:

- **Coordination challenges between sub-national public authorities**. Lack of coordination and rivalry between local authorities involved in sustainability transition measures was in some contexts a barrier to participatory processes. DUST evidence indicated that while regional and local policy practitioners believed that participatory processes were more manageable at the local level, this was challenged where traditions of inter-municipal cooperation were weak and where there was competition for investment from sustainable transition measures. Local governments and their communities prioritised their own interests, resulting in fragmentation or rivalry in accessing investment, engaging with sustainability transition measures and ultimately undermining efforts to co-design solutions at a larger spatial scale.
- **Coordination challenges between public authorities and 'third sector' or community organisations**. DUST research identified a risk of parallel, disconnected deliberation processes, with different groups engaging in different participatory processes. Voluntary democratic spaces have aimed to mobilise and engage communities in just transition. However, there is a risk that these initiatives fail to join up with and feed into the design and implementation of public policies. DUST evidence indicated weak coordination between a bottom-up, third-sector driven approach to knowledge generation and the process led by policy practitioners in the public sphere.

Barriers to participation caused by coordination challenges – evidence from DUST research

- Barriers were created by **centralised governance systems**. Governance tasks were often concentrated at national level and while this facilitated strong engagement from experts and interests representing a specific set of sectoral issues, it restricted participation from territorial and community-based groups.

- **Coordination gaps**, across officials and administrative units involved in different policy fields related to transition, across multiple levels of public administration and between public, private (market), and community realms impeded the establishment of integrated arenas for participatory processes.

- Sub-national variation in **traditions of horizontal, collaborative working** (e.g. rivalry between local authorities, experience of engaging with communities) contributed to fragmentation and complexity in governance and influenced levels of community participation.

Practices, identified in the project, offer solutions to this challenge:

- **Clarify governmental roles, recognising the supportive role the national level can play in coordinating participation.** Effective participation requires clear distinctions between the roles of local and central actors. When responsibilities for organizing and implementing participation duplication, rivalry or disconnections between 'top down' and 'bottom up' processes. In this context, higher levels of public administration can serve as a source of overarching coordination and political authority for participation of communities in sustainable transition measures. The national level can provide a stable and enduring platform that supports, connects, and amplifies the voice of communities in the public arena. Central governments can implement formal coordination platforms to ensure that local governance of participation operates in harmony with national priorities while maintaining community-driven contributions.

Central level coordination of participation: the Danish Youth Climate Council

The Danish Youth Climate Council acts as is an independent youth led advisory board to the Minister for Climate Energy. Consisting of young volunteers with different educational and occupational backgrounds it serves as a forum for Danish youth to bring innovative thinking and inputs to the climate politics. It gathers and coordinates input from young people across the country, including local level Youth Climate Councils in some cities. Of particular value is the direct, formal connection to the Minister for Climate: ideas are included in the decision making process through meetings with the Minister at least twice per year, the council adds briefings to the Minister's briefing box, and it has the ability to make official submissions to legislative proposals. The Minister is obliged to reply to

proposals ensuring meaningful engagement. It should be noted that this initiative was facilitated by Denmark's long history of democratic youth participatory structures.

Case study featured in the Annex to EC (2021) Youth for a Just Transition: Good practices of youth engagement.

- **Design multi-level governance arrangements to create spaces for participation.** Both the challenges associated with sustainable transition and the competences and resources necessary to implement policy responses are usually dispersed across administrative levels. Transition-related restructuring of economic activities, (in)direct employment and industrial value chains span across the boundaries of existing administrative regions and municipalities and policies often struggle to find the optimal territorial scale for participation in decision-making. Mismatches between territories facing substantial economic, social and environmental implications of transition and regional and local administrative structures where participatory processes are organised. Thus, it is important that the design of associated participatory processes is based on multi-level governance**. In our DUST research, this often emphasised the role of meso-level governance structures that could upscale local, 'bottom up' inputs in participatory processes within overarching national and regional frameworks.** Some of our DUST case studies built on existing experience and established coordination channels at the regional level to facilitate participation of less engaged communities.

Building on regional experience and multi-level coordination systems to facilitate participation in Silesia

In the DUST research, the case study of Silesia illustrated the coordination benefits of having an experienced regional administration situated between central government and local communities. For its Territorial Just Transition Plan, Silesia's regional government organised a series of workshops for stakeholders, including the LECs representatives. These were conducted by its Department of Transition, in particular by a team specially dedicated to programming the just transition in the frame of the Just Transition Fund (which guaranteed access to the necessary human and institutional resources). The Silesian regional government has extensive experience in using 'bottom up' participatory practices dating back to the 1990s, when it was already planning work on the first regional development strategy (in Poland). This experience meant there was an established approach to identifying local stakeholders, established communication channels to local level, and set standards to follow for workshop organization with stakeholders.

- Such experience is not available in all cases. Sometimes new systems, structures and tools are needed to create spaces for participation. DUST research identified examples where new multi-level governance arrangements have facilitated this combination of 'top down' and 'bottom up' participation.

Establishing regional coordination structures that facilitate participation in Lusatia

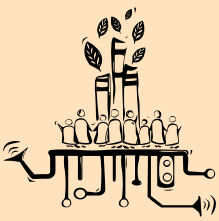
In Lusatia, strengthened coordination between regional and local authorities in sustainable transition issues was reflected in the signing of a contractual arrangement between the Federal-State Coordination Committee (BLKG) and Wirtschaftsregion Lausitz GmbH (WRL). The latter was set up by equal-standing shareholders at the State level (State Brandenburg) and the district level (seven districts of the States Brandenburg and Saxony) covering the historic Lusatia coal region.

The company has had a key role in organising participatory processes during the policy formulation of the Lusatia Programme 2038 & the Development Strategy, and the implementation of a regional programme (STARK) funded by the Structural Reinforcement Act for Mining Regions.

In essence, the activities that the entity has been tasked with facilitate the shaping of a newly institutionalised space for cooperation, planning and participation at the functional regional level. For instance, WRL launched the Zukunftswerkstatt Lausitz project in 2018 to develop the potential of digitalisation together with the municipalities, business, science, civil society and citizens . The project aimed to develop a digitalization strategy that would pursue a long-term digital vision and the associated social goals for the Lusatian region. Its development included specialized workshops where measures were defined together with local actors from civil society, the private sector and the public sector.

Decentralisation of governance tasks does not inevitably lead to greater citizen participation

DUST research revealed that decentralisation of competences for managing and implementing sustainable transition initiatives tasks does not automatically lead to greater community participation, especially if this is not accompanied by increased competences and resources. Where experience is limited, significant challenges in establishing a genuinely participatory arena at the local level are likely to remain and central government often retains the dominant role. Emerging multi-level structures may in reality maintain a top-down approach or central control, which consequently may limit their potential to create a truly inclusive participatory arena.



Insights from DUST RFLLs: embedding participatory processes in multi-level governance of sustainable transition initiatives.

- **Ground participation in local context and ensure relevance.** Map the 'territoriality' of sustainability transitions and transition policymaking to understand which assets are at stake. Identify policy pathways and relevant governance arenas where community concerns can be addressed, linking participation to ongoing policymaking.

- **Incorporate structured documentation, analysis and representation.** Ensure that input and outcomes from participatory encounters are continuously documented, analysed, and transparently shared

- **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).

Read more in Deliverable 4.4.

4.3. **Challenge 2:** How to ensure sufficient capacity for community participation in sustainable transition initiatives?

Designing and implementing participatory processes in sustainable transition initiatives invariably takes time, effort and substantial resourcing to have a meaningful impact, underlining the importance of capacity-building especially at local level. This concerns ensuring the requisite levels of skills, resources and structures to enable communities to engage effectively in sustainable transition initiatives and it applies to capacities both on the side of public administration and in the communities themselves.

In the DUST research, policymakers at the local level, noted the capacity demands they faced in integrating direct inputs of communities and citizens, particularly those that were less engaged. Whilst sub-national, especially local-level, authorities are expected to play a leading role in mobilising and organising participatory instruments targeted at communities and citizens, technical and human capacity issues are particularly prevalent at lower administrative levels. The challenge for local government is not just about fulfilling the requirements of higher level administrations, nor about stimulating communities to participate in the governing process. Rather, it is about balancing the two and actually carrying out the programs with limited time, energy, and resources. Practitioners reported persistent difficulties in engaging directly with relevant and diverse communities, stemming both from the difficulty in recognising whose participation needs to be facilitated but also because of the lack of resources to engage with and articulate the views of communities, lack of suitable participatory tools and difficulties in shifting administrative cultures to embrace more experimental approaches. Given the administrative demands and time pressures on public authorities, there was a tendency for policymakers to prioritise a focus on organisations that were already active and willing to support the transition to sustainable economy.

What DUST advisory board members say

Particularly in the context of the Just Transition Fund, regional policy makers have a challenge to meet when engaging communities in the multi-level and multi-sector policy landscape of sustainability transitions. It is very difficult for them to decide whom to engage with and when. The challenge is complicated by the fact that some of the most important decisions are taken not at the regional level, but at EU and national levels of government.

Paolo Graziano,
University of Padua

On the community side, arrangements put in place for participation frequently fail to consider whether the targeted community has the necessary capacity and skills to meet these requirements. This has significant implications for less engaged communities where cultural, socio-economic or other factors can reduce the pool of suitable candidates for

collaborative or participatory mechanisms. DUST focus groups in communities emphasised the importance of capacities for developing co-operative relationships, articulating views and accessing policy systems through their participatory arenas. Communities underlined the link between capacity-building and empowerment. The literature notes the risk that government's use the language of community capacity-building or participatory processes to co-opt local interests to government agendas, rather than for collective empowerment and developing the resources of communities to participate meaningfully in deliberative (Schugurensky and Mook, 2024). In the majority of DUST focus groups, sub-communities highlighted feelings of powerless and being ill-equipped when it came to participating in policy.

Barriers to participation caused by capacity constraints – evidence from DUST research

- Gaps in **human and technical resources and tools** available for local authorities to support community and citizen participation, especially in reaching out to less engaged communities.
- Insufficient **budget allocations** to support participatory initiatives, including outreach, consultation, and feedback mechanisms.
- Limitations in **community access** to financial resources, physical spaces, equipment, and information to support their participation.
- Variation in **community organisational structures** needed to mobilise and support participation and advocate community needs.

Practices, identified in the project, offer solutions to this challenge:

- **Public authorities should draw on support available at different levels to build the capacities of practitioners to organise meaningful participation with less engaged communities.** This can involve providing guidance, training and advice to ensure that officials, particularly at sub-national levels have the requisite skills to collaborate effectively and sensitively with diverse groups of citizens in the design and delivery of sustainable transition measures. Specific actions can be identified at EU and national levels.

EU-level capacity-building for public officials to support participation: the Just Transition Platform and other initiatives

The Just Transition Platform (JTP) is an EU-level source of capacity-building for Member States and regional authorities involved in the EU's Just Transition Mechanism. It aims to provide stakeholders with guidance, information and knowledge to implement Just Transition Plans and it includes specific services to build capacity for organising participatory processes:

- JTPeers is a support service that facilitates exchanges between Just Transition Fund (JTF) territories and just transition experts to support JTF regions in the implementation of their Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs). The support programme includes a database of professionals working on Just Transition across Europe.

- JTP Exchange - a peer-to-peer exchange programme to facilitate in-person and online exchanges between different JTF regions as well as between JTF regions and JTPeers Experts listed on the database.

- JTP Groundwork delivers tailored support, based on the needs that regions have identified. Participating regions work with a dedicated JTP Groundwork team to develop a service package where content and scope are tailored to the region's needs and TJTPs. For each selected region this includes a scoping, planning and implementation of the technical assistance, as well as an in-person capacity building workshop to engage with local communities and citizens.

- The European Commission has also produced toolkit to support the participation of young people in the Just Transition Fund. The toolkit can also be useful for other policies addressing the transition. It is addressed in particular at regional and local policy-makers responsible for implementation of the Just Transition Fund.

Key message

There are various resources available at EU level to strengthen the capacity of public authorities to organise community participation in sustainable transition initiatives.

For more information: About the Just Transition Platform
EC (2021): A toolkit for youth participation in the just transition fund

- Actions at the national level can also include dedicated central units or agencies, which can provide guidance, leadership and training in citizen and community participation processes.

Capacity-building for public servants to support participation: meaningful citizen participation: the Interministerial Centre for Citizen Participation in France

In France, the Interministerial Centre for Citizen Participation (*Centre Interministériel de la Participation Citoyenne - CIPC*) provides line ministries and state services with:

- resources and methodological tools that enable them to understand the challenges of citizen participation (presentation of the different modes of participation and participatory bodies, methodological kits, frameworks for commitments, recommendations for measures to be implemented according to the objectives of the consultation and the degrees of participation envisaged).
- access to service providers specialized in facilitating consultations (in person or online)
- meetings, training and peer-learning through a dedicated community of public officials responsible for citizen participation.

Source: OECD (2025), Exploring New Frontiers in Citizen Participation in the Policy Cycle, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/77f5098c-en.

- **Sustainable transition initiatives should include dedicated resources to strengthen the capacities of public officials in organising participatory processes.** Beyond the establishment of broader supportive frameworks, sustainable transition policies themselves can include provisions explicitly devoted to enabling public authorities to conduct participatory processes. This ensures targeted support to address the specific gaps in skills, resources and equipment necessary to organise participation with less engaged communities. Even where some tasks are outsourced to other actors, public authorities will become more experienced in running participatory processes. A prominent example of this from DUST research was *Toukomst* sub-programme, implemented as part of the National Programme Groningen.

Dedicating resources to capacity-building for participation: the Toukomst programme in Groningen

The National Programme Groningen set aside €100 million for the development and execution of participatory processes to generate ideas submitted from local residents which strengthen the vitality, economy and quality of life in the province. It commissioned a consultancy firm to help mobilise citizens to propose, vote, and select community projects.

The approach includes creative engagement methods and structured project support. Alongside the consultants, municipalities and other governmental agencies involved in the development and implementation of the NPG were committed to the project. A collaborative governance model between citizens, local governments, and the national government, creating new forms of partnership and civic empowerment.

Overall, there is a diversity of projects in the NPG but those under the Toukomst programme are notable as they had 'the participation process as the key element because it is not only a prerequisite but a goal in itself' (Interviewee from public official involved in implementation of NPG).

More information available at this factsheet.

- **For community capacity-building and empowerment, support of non-material elements are often key, particularly 'bonding' and 'bridging' organisations and community leadership.** Sustainable transition initiatives must recognise the crucial role of an enabling local environment for community participation. DUST focus groups with less engaged communities emphasised the importance of capacities for developing co-operative relationships, articulating views and linking communities to policy systems and their participatory arenas. There was variation across case studies in this respect, related to levels of social capital and traditions of civic engagement.
- **Involve community organisations and leaders in the participatory process to build community capacity.** Respected local or community leaders or organisations can help build the capacity of communities to articulate their views in participation processes, especially vulnerable or hard to reach groups. DUST research revealed perceptions of detachment from the transition initiatives among some community groups. Established networks and individuals who were already close to these groups, such as educators, social workers, and community leaders, played a crucial role in bridging this gap. Leveraging existing, respected relationships can help in better overcome capacity constraints to participation.

What DUST advisory board members say

One of the most important capacity issues from a community perspective is the presence of territorial polities, such as local action groups. These organisations are essential in the consolidation of community power and capacity. They are also important in laying and maintaining links to communities, and in building a foundation for non-standardized policies and processes of co-creation.

Cristina Cavaco, Associate Professor
Lisbon School of Architecture, Universidade de Lisboa

The role of respected leaders: building participatory capacity among young people in Groningen and the Rhenish District

In Groningen, the NPG established its own Youth Department whose role was to ensure the participation of young people in the policy. The NPG advisor under this heading worked at one of the municipalities of Groningen very closely with youth organisations and this connection helped when designing the approach to engaging with them. Similarly, in the Rhenish District, a process to set up a Youth Committee (Jugendgremium) as part of the StStG is underway, supported by the running of strategy workshops. The importance of the existing administrative structures was also highlighted by an interviewee from the Rhenish District, pointing out that all municipalities have experts on youth participation.

The role of community leaders and representative organisations in participation is crucial but there are risks

Community leaders with the relevant governance skills can become overburdened in their attempts to meet the aspirations of increased community participation. The value of these individuals lies in the skills and experience they can offer. However, there is a risk that over-commitment can lead to increased rates of participant 'burn out'.

The influence that these active individuals might exert on multiple projects or issues also requires further consideration. While these individuals are clearly accepting a community leadership role, this dynamic might also replicate existing patterns of power and influence.

Source: Howard, T.M. (2017)

- **The participatory process itself is a means to build community capacity. Participatory mechanisms should be designed in a way that increases the capacity and willingness of communities to participate.** Capacity-building in this way can range from informal to very formal processes. Networking through participation in different forums, best-practice visits and exchanges itself builds the sense of community that was emphasised in DUST research. The design of participatory processes and how it takes

into account community particularities is therefore crucial if capacity is to be built. Less formal participatory processes (e.g. asset mapping) that provide input informally and take place at neighbourhood level create an accessible context for building capacity and willingness among communities and this can lead on to more formal engagement activities.

- **Tailor participatory activities to make them more familiar to specific communities and groups.** Engaging groups that lack trust in public institutions may require tailored participatory mechanisms. Participatory tools can vary in terms of formats of the activities, to suit diverse social backgrounds and age groups. The use of easy-to-understand tools or tasks including digital mapping, walks, etc. is important for trust- and confidence-building as participants feel more comfortable expressing their concerns and needs.

Tailored participatory processes for community capacity-building in Gotland and Groningen

I**n the case of Gotland, the participation of communities was of high importance for sustainable transition**. The island is composed of diverse communities with very specific profiles. There is a general desire to participate in policymaking for community development across a range of areas including sustainable transition. However, capacity to do this is often constrained by peripheral geographic locations or specific socio-economic characteristics. In response to the recognition that participatory processes may still be excluding certain social groups, public authorities leading the drafting of Gotland's Master Plan made efforts to tailor participatory mechanisms in a way that can increase the capability and willingness of identified communities to participate. For instance, they organised open meetings near arranged activities for small children in order to engage with mothers and fathers. Timing was also highlighted as important for this group, with the participatory process adapted to parts of the day when parents were more likely to be available.

In Groningen, NPG interviewees recognised the difficulty of engaging individuals from rural areas. This was in part due to distance (as a result of peripherality and lack of public transport) but also due to low trust in public institutions, which made people unwilling to engage in activities driven by the government. The company responsible for the participatory processes under the Toukomst programme invested in efforts to overcome these barriers. The primary approach to supporting participants' capacity to engage was through interactive and engaging participatory tools. Playful activities such as serious games and role playing, that were both simple and explored citizen views, were employed. Tailored participatory events were needed for elderly people and youngsters who tended to think in the frames of individual problems (family level) and needed more support in recognising and articulating opinions regarding collective challenges.

4.4. Lessons for inclusive governance and capacity building

1. **Clarify governance roles.**

National governments can support and coordinate local participatory efforts, without dominating them.

2. **Create multi-level spaces for participation**.

Governance structures should allow community input to feed into higher-level decisions. Regional level administrations can have an important role in this respect.

3. **Train public officials**.

At EU and national levels, support is often available to help local staff run effective participatory processes. The Just Transition Platform offers training, advice, and tools for regions to engage communities.

4. **Dedicate funding to participation.**

Some programmes set aside specific budgets to support participatory work and involve consultants to help with outreach.

5. **Participatory learning and action methods should be used to provide people with the capacities, self-confidence, and organisational structures needed to plan and implement development projects and influence policy formation.**

Exercises in assessing transition issues, identifying causes and planning actions can also serve as training to develop community capacities to implement these actions on their own.

5 PROVIDING INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATING INCLUSIVELY AND MEANINGFULLY

5

5.1. Why does this principle matter?

User-friendly, diverse in source, and regularly updated information forms the backbone of a trusted and inclusive participatory policy-making. When public institutions provide such information, especially through face-to-face communication, they help foster trust and create the conditions for meaningful engagement.

Information and communication as a principle for genuine community participation in policy is closely connected to the other principles discussed earlier.

Namely:

- **Information needs to be trusted. Communication must build trust.** As highlighted in Chapter 2, meaningful participation relies on — and helps to build — trust between society and public institutions. However, trust is fragile and can quickly erode when people feel ignored or unfairly treated. The language and formats that public institutions use when communicating about policies or during participatory processes can significantly influence how such interactions are perceived.
- **Information needs to be simple and clear.** Chapter 3 explored how abstract, technocratic policies or measures can hinder relevance and openness to community knowledge. This challenge is partly linked to the dominance of technological and large-scale solutions in transition policies. However, it also arises from the use of abstract, bureaucratic language — particularly by higher levels of government — even when addressing issues of core importance to communities, such as social security or job prospects. In this case, **communication may miss the point when it focuses on technicalities instead of creating space to discuss what matters locally** — like how new jobs can offer a similar standard of living, preserve community ties, or carry the same sense of purpose and public recognition.
- **Communication and outreach need to be tailored to the characteristics of different groups**. Chapter 4 highlighted challenges stemming from varied capacities across society. These differences may relate to age — for example, interviewees from public institutions noted that both older and younger generations tend to be more self- or family-centred and may require more interactive tools or capacity-building elements to engage with broader policy issues. The chapter also highlighted that policy outreach is affected by practical barriers such as distance, particularly for residents in rural areas. Same challenges apply when it comes to communication.

Information and communication as a principle for inclusive and meaningful participation involves several key dimensions, as identified through DUST research. Some of these affect more significantly the ability or capacity to participate, like:

- when and how public authorities communicate with the public about the policy at hand,
- how public authorities inform citizens about related participatory processes (including considerations about suitable outreach channels and language), and
- if public authorities provide simple and clear information materials to support communities construct views and prepare for the future.

However, there are other aspects that may have more substantial influence on the sense of empowerment and thus the willingness to participate now or in the future, like:

- **how participants interact and communicate with each other during the participatory process** itself. This is particularly important in dialogical and deliberative formats aiming not simply to inform but to provide space to learn and reflect on the experiences and perspectives of others and co-create knowledge. How participants interact in such setting, thus, is something that strongly influences the quality of the outcomes of the process and the (perception of) inclusivity.
- **how to ensure that communication is two-way.** Participation should not end with the collection of public input - it must also include feedback on how that input is being considered and reflected (or not) in policy decisions.

5.2. **Challenge 1**: How to communicate effectively and affectively?

One of the key challenges in participatory processes is how to communicate in ways that are both **effective** - ensuring people are well-informed - and **affective** - ensuring they feel seen and valued. Communication includes both tangible elements (e.g. accessible formats, plain language, multi-channel outreach) and intangible ones (e.g. tone, body language, and how power is expressed or perceived in dialogue).

Effective communication ensures that communities receive the information they need to be able to participate. Affective communication - how people feel seen, respected and valued based on communication - builds trust and a sense of belonging. Both are equally important for genuine participation.

Effective communication was key to implementing DUST RFLLs and the process revealed crucial points in this respect.

What DUST advisory board members say

In the context of Stara Zagora in Bulgaria, transitions and associated policies must be framed in ways that are responsive to community values and priorities, fostering greater ownership. Efforts to shift negative framings in the public space are important, along with capturing opportunities to reshape positively the image of transitions.

As an example, there is a potential to move away from the negative narrative about the energy transition in Bulgaria framed around losing energy security to a narrative around achieving energy sovereignty. In this framing the transition has a positive connotation. Importantly, such framing implies a possibility for common action in not just a national dimension, but also regional and local ones. Such framing allows, for instance, for the region of Stara Zagora to be portrayed as an 'energy transition hero' that supports sovereignty by providing energy storage for the country.

Apostol Dyankov,
Holding consecutive expert roles in WWF,
national and local government in Bulgaria

Principles for effective and inclusive communication - insights from DUST RFLLs.

- **Use visualization and storytelling to make issues tangible.** Use visual and artistic methods to make abstract policy issues tangible and relatable.

- **Communicate outputs**. Disseminate results broadly through digital channels and public events, recognizing that impact can emerge in unforeseen ways.

- **Focus on using clear, accessible language.** Implement practical measures to strengthen communication. Notably, use concise, plain-language communication to increase clarity and inclusion.

Read more in Deliverable 5.2

A great guidance for affective communication can be found in the DUST handbook 'Affective communication': https://www.dustproject.eu/knowledgehub

5.3. Challenge 2: How to support communities navigate a fragmented and untrustworthy information landscape?

Information is abundant, but the diversity of information sources also means that not all information is trustful and some actors may use information to exacerbate grievances and to polarise society. In DUST research, youth communities from Bulgaria and Poland particularly highlighted this challenge. They reported **uncertainty which sources of information are trustful, mentioning the risk of fake news**. Lusatian youth mentioned among **key source of information podcasts** and referred to topics related to the negative social effects of the green transition in Germany, while rural communities in Groningen and Gotland were highly concerned about the health effects of energy installations.

Given the wide access to online content, no place or community is immune to mis- or dis-information, or **media amplification of polarising or emotional frames** that influence the disposition of communities to sustainability policies or measures.

One important response to disinformation and emotionally charged narratives is to strengthen people's ability to critically assess the information they encounter, especially among young people. Responses to this challenge require coordination across levels. **Promoting digital literacy among young people depends on the active role of local schools and teachers.** To support their efforts, the European Commission has produced 'Guidelines for teachers and educators on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training' (European Commission 2022). This provides concrete, hands-on guidance for teachers/educators.

However, teachers are only likely to prioritise efforts in digital literacy if they are supported by broader national signals, such as the integration of media literacy into formal education curricula. The 'Final Report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation' produced for the European Commission (2018) calls on national governments to '*sharpen actions in support of media and information literacy for all citizens, including integration of media and information literacy in teacher training and national curricula requirements*'.

5.4. Lessons for providing information and communicating inclusively and meaningfully

1. **Use trusted local facilitators**

Engage community-based organisations, mediators, or informal local leaders who are seen as legitimate and neutral. Make an inventory of such organisations as part of a communication strategy.

Contextual note: In some places, these actors are formal, in others, more informal.

2. **Engage youth through relatable peers**

Use facilitators who are closer in age to young participants to build openness and relevance.

Contextual note: This approach can be implemented via youth workers, student associations or environmental NGOs depending on which structures are active locally and already engage closely with young people.

3. **Strengthen media literacy**

Strengthen (young) people's capacity to critically evaluate information and detect mis- or dis-information.

Contextual note: National education policy support varies across countries. In some cases, this may need to be driven by local initiatives rather than national curriculum changes.

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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 handbook is based on research conducted as part of the DUST Academy.

For more information on the project, see here:

DUST | Democratising jUst Sustainability Transitions