

# EMBEDDING ACTIVE SUBSIDIARITY IN JUST SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS AT NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVEL

Opportunities and Barriers

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DUST Project



DUST

Democratising  
jUst  
Sustainability  
Transitions

# COLOPHON

**Authors:** Remina Aleksieva, German Orejarena (CSD)

**Contributors:** Martin Ferry, Neli Georgieva (STRATH), Uwe Serdült, Marine Benli-Trichet (UZH), Verena Balz (TUD), John Moodie (NR), Samir Amin (IUE)

**Design:** Institute for Urban Excellence.

**Cover photo:** Samir Amin

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Target audience	5
Opportunities and barriers	8
Arenas for Participation	8
Stages of Participation	9
Arenas, stages, and multilevel governance (MLG)	9
Recommendations	10
Inclusion & Representation	10
Knowledge Exchange	11
Participatory Arenas	11
Opportunities for participation	11
The DUST project	13
References	14

## Participating partners:



# INTRODUCTION

In the context of eroding democratic institutions and increasing discontent within structurally weak regions (Barca et al., 2012), the European Union (EU) – in collaboration with national, regional, and local governments – seeks to bring its policies closer to citizens (European Commission, 2018). Citizens are increasingly involved in place-based approaches (European Commission, 2021) to reducing socioeconomic and territorial disparities and developing innovative interventions for just sustainability transitions as part of EU Cohesion policy and other EU, national, and local responses. Place-based approaches recognise that the relative costs and benefits of transitions – that is, who pays for what and how these decisions are made – have political, economic, and social consequences with a clear territorial dimension. By involving citizens in the deliberation and co-creation of these approaches, governance arrangements aim to empower citizens, increase their ownership of policies, and rebuild their trust in democratic institutions.

**Active subsidiarity** as a guiding principle, promotes the autonomy and self-rule of local governments and communities in a multilevel governance setting for these purposes.

Embedding this principle requires effective participatory governance structures, the identification and inclusion of marginalised or less engaged groups from the outset, and the creation of regulatory environments that facilitate stakeholder participation, including for those with limited capacity. It also calls for ongoing capacity-building and support to local governments organising participatory processes, the participation of ordinary citizens alongside formal stakeholders, cross-sectoral perspectives that address complex territorial linkages, and platforms for sharing information and knowledge among stakeholders engaged in just sustainability transitions.

This policy brief identifies opportunities for and barriers to active subsidiarity in place-based policy approaches to just sustainability transitions at national and local levels and provides recommendations for strengthening

# TARGET AUDIENCE

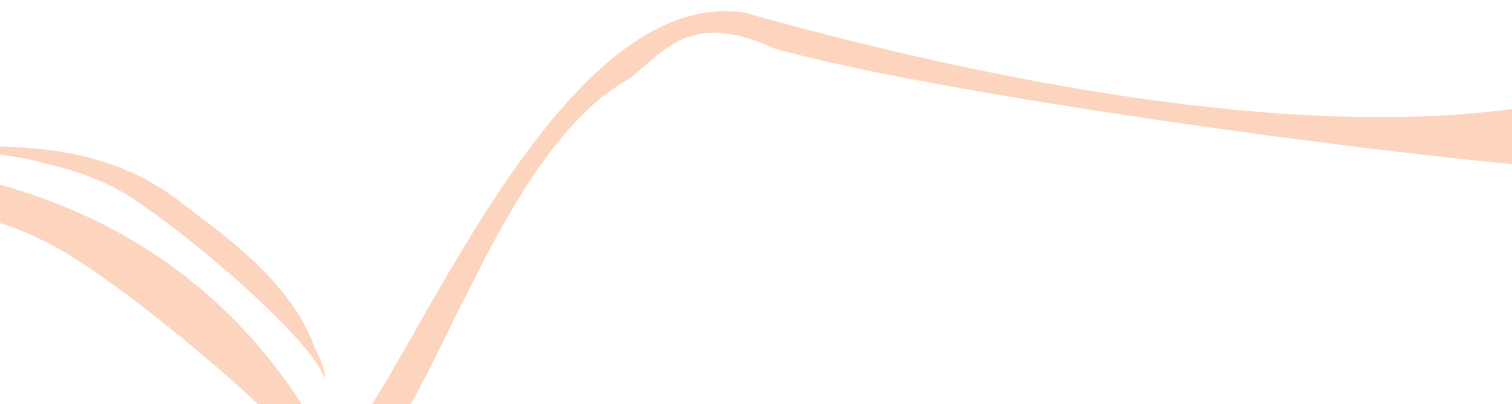
This policy brief is intended for policymakers and practitioners at member state and subnational levels who are responsible for designing, implementing, and evaluating sustainable transition measures. It is particularly relevant for national ministries, regional and local authorities, and public officials involved in participatory governance and place-based policymaking.

The brief also speaks to civil society organisations, community leaders, and stakeholder representatives who contribute to issue identification, resource allocation, and policy monitoring.

By addressing actors engaged in fostering inclusive participation, knowledge exchange, and effective communication across governance levels, the brief aims to support those working to strengthen citizen engagement and embed active subsidiarity in just sustainability transitions.

## **Active Subsidiarity and Multilevel Governance (MLG)**

Active subsidiarity relies on the continuous involvement of stakeholders, creating a dynamic approach to partnership within MLG. It involves providing resources, capacity-building, and support to local authorities and communities, enabling them to actively participate in decision-making processes and MLG. Active subsidiarity also requires the establishment of mechanisms for effective communication, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing between different governance levels.





Just sustainability transition policies should embed active subsidiarity at national and local levels by involving marginalised and less engaged communities from the outset, ensuring inclusive participation across all policy stages, and strengthening territorial impact assessment, communication, and feedback mechanisms to support learning and coordination across governance levels.



Visualisation of main policy message

# OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS

Just sustainability transitions are policy-driven processes that will have varying effects on places with different territorial assets and challenges as well as communities with different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Policymakers have a responsibility to address these specificities and to reduce related disparities through place-based policymaking. Opportunities for and barriers to enabling active subsidiarity and promoting citizen engagement in this type of policymaking are summarised below.

## Arenas for Participation

Arenas for participation are the environments or platforms where stakeholders engage in policymaking processes. In practice, communities are more likely to participate in place-based policymaking when they have a voice throughout decision-making, processes are transparent, participation is linked to accountability, and clear chains of responsibility are in place.

Opportunities	Barriers
Providing a variety of participatory arenas and instruments increases the likelihood of active subsidiarity, as regions using multiple tools report broader, deeper, and more continuous citizen participation, including from less engaged communities.	Active subsidiarity is hindered when participation centres on formal stakeholders and excludes vulnerable groups; engagement among government, private sector, and civil society actors does not necessarily ensure meaningful involvement of individual citizens.

## Stages of Participation

Stages of participation refer to phases in policymaking: agenda-setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. Active subsidiarity emerges when participatory methods—such as co-production and co-creation—are effectively used and aligned with decision-making arenas, helping to balance unequal power and enable citizen engagement.

Opportunities	Barriers
Co-production, co-creation, and co-design instruments (e.g., citizen panels, workshops) directly involve citizens and foster dialogue between policy, community, and governance.	Unequal decision-making power prevents citizens from meaningful co-creation and undermines trust in governance.
Inclusive tools across policymaking stages (e.g., negotiation activities, stakeholder meetings, online platforms) boost participation and make just transition policies more accessible.	Top-down approaches constrain participation in implementation, reduce collaboration across stakeholders, and lower social acceptance of policies.

## Arenas, stages, and multilevel governance (MLG)

Active subsidiarity in multilevel just sustainability transitions requires revisiting governance structures: providing resources, capacity-building, and support to local authorities, while enabling communication, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing across levels.

Opportunities	Barriers
Aligning participatory arenas with MLG frameworks enhances subsidiarity. Early planning and evaluation of MLG participation supports cooperation between EU, national, and local authorities and ensures civil society and environmental partners are effectively represented.	Unequal power, competing interests, and fragmented responsibilities limit active subsidiarity. Participatory instruments are often not designed to facilitate interaction among stakeholders across governance levels and policymaking stages.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Active subsidiarity and citizen engagement are enhanced in cases where sustainable transition measures utilise an inclusive, consistent, and diverse set of tools. To support this, it is recommended that sustainable transition measures at member state and local levels adopt the following suggestions.

# INCLUSION & REPRESENTATION



## Identify and include marginalised or less engaged groups in sustainability transition measures from the outset

- Member state or subnational authorities should assess a measure's impact on specific territories and communities during the preparatory stage, considering sociopolitical, economic, regulatory, and other factors that may hinder participation, especially for marginalised or hard-to-reach groups.
- The views of these territories and communities should be directly gathered to represent their needs and potential in setting strategic objectives. This involves including their representatives in working or steering groups that inform the drafting process, with committees serving as arenas for stakeholders and civil society to contribute to issue identification, resource allocation, and progress monitoring.

# KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE



Facilitate the dynamic exchange of knowledge and information between all levels of government through reflexive evaluation, efficient feedback and effective communication.

- Establish regular evaluation and feedback mechanisms to assess local policy impacts and incorporate community input, enabling iterative improvements and policy refinement.
- Provide platforms for exchanging information, best practices, and lessons learned across governance levels to foster collaboration and learning, highlight successful local initiatives, and amplify citizen-shared knowledge.
- Establish transparent and accessible communication channels across governance levels to coordinate objectives effectively. At the local level, authorities should work with civil society and community leaders to ensure clear communication among all stakeholders.

# PARTICIPATORY ARENAS



Utilise the multiple arenas available at different stages of the policy design and implementation cycle.

- Citizen or community involvement in implementation-stage participatory processes (e.g., collective decisions on resource allocation) is rare, yet crucial for engaging marginalised or less active communities meaningfully

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION



Ensure that continuous and diverse opportunities for participation are present.

- Enable the participation of ordinary citizens and non-formal stakeholders—such as community leaders, caretakers, and artists—to enrich place-based policymaking through co-creation mechanisms and diverse participatory arenas.
- Provide continuous and flexible participation opportunities that account for citizens' daily realities, including work, childcare, and transportation constraints, to ensure meaningful engagement



# THE DUST PROJECT

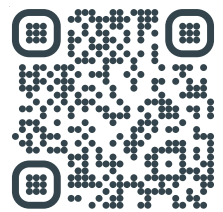
The DUST project develops new participatory instruments in sustainability transitions, focusing on structurally weak regions that are dependent on energy-intensive industries. It supports the development and implementation of place-based policies at a scale that enhances citizen participation and democratic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

This policy brief draws on initial DUST research into the factors influencing citizen participation in sustainability transition policymaking. A literature review positioned the research within the larger context of the policy, democracy, and planning studies and identified an initial set of factors influencing participation and active subsidiarity. The Actor–Process–Event Schemes (APES) tool (D2.3) was used to analyse and visualise participation in policymaking in various stages of policymaking and at different levels of government. Participatory processes in sustainability transition measures were identified and assessed in case study research conducted in eight regions via documentary analysis (D3.1). Furthermore, this research examined different participatory instruments designed to support inclusive deliberative governance of transition policies. Finally, the results obtained from these different methods were synthesised to identify opportunities for and barriers to active subsidiarity in just sustainability transition policies.

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

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Find out more about the DUST project and read the deliverables that inform this brief here: [www.dustproject.eu](http://www.dustproject.eu)



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