

DESIGNING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION FOR JUST SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS

Understanding and responding to
uneven participatory barriers

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DUST Project



DUST

Democratising
jUst
Sustainability
Transitions

COLOPHON

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Participating partners:



RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

Prioritise **improving trust and perceived relevance** of green transition policies, as these are among the most significant factors undermining motivation and engagement.

Recognise that **barriers are cumulative** and allocate greater support to groups experiencing multiple overlapping constraints.

Differentiate between sources of distrust and tailor participatory design principles accordingly.

Highlight the simple and tangible relevance of the discussions - to take place as part of the engagement process - to communities' life and place of residence. Prioritise a format that enables the further building of local relevance of policy and investment decisions.

Strengthen near-future relevance, particularly for groups facing immediate economic or livelihood pressures, before expanding the focus to longer-term horizons.

Address group-specific sensitivities as follows:

- **Youth:** build relational trust through in-person connection, emphasise the value of their opinions, hopes and expectations, choose a venue that is familiar to them and a moderator who is close to their age and communicates in a way they relate to.
- **Older adults from legacy industries:** design participation formats that make life and work experience visible and acknowledged, allow space for longer narratives and reflection, and link participants' knowledge to concrete outcomes.
- **Structurally disadvantaged rural communities:** emphasise the value of everyday experience as source of knowledge; immediate relevance comes first.
- **Women:** address confidence-related barriers through capacity-building support and actively counter male- or industry- dominated discussion dynamics through facilitation that ensures women's contributions are heard.

Where institutional and organisational capacity allows, **design and carry out multiple participatory events tailored to different groups**, aligning with their strengths and constraints.

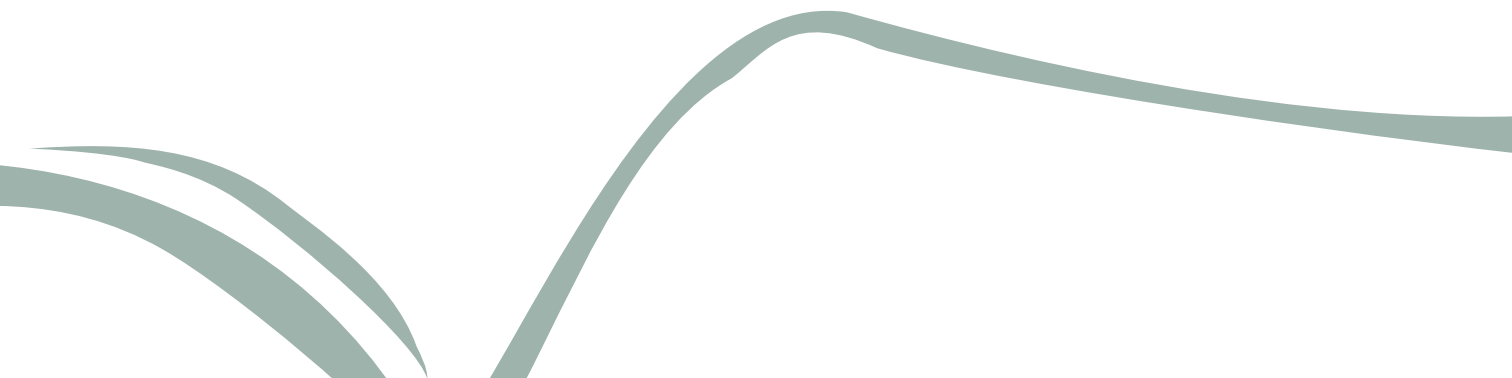
PURPOSE AND TARGET AUDIENCE

This brief provides actionable insights into how communities perceive participation in transition-related policies, and **which factors most strongly influence engagement** across different groups. Rather than prescribing specific participation tools, it supports policymakers and intermediaries in **prioritising participatory design principles** based on evidence, instead of applying uniform or one-size-fits-all approaches.

The brief is intended for public authorities and intermediaries involved in the design, coordination, or delivery of citizen participation in the context of green and just transitions at regional and local level. This includes:

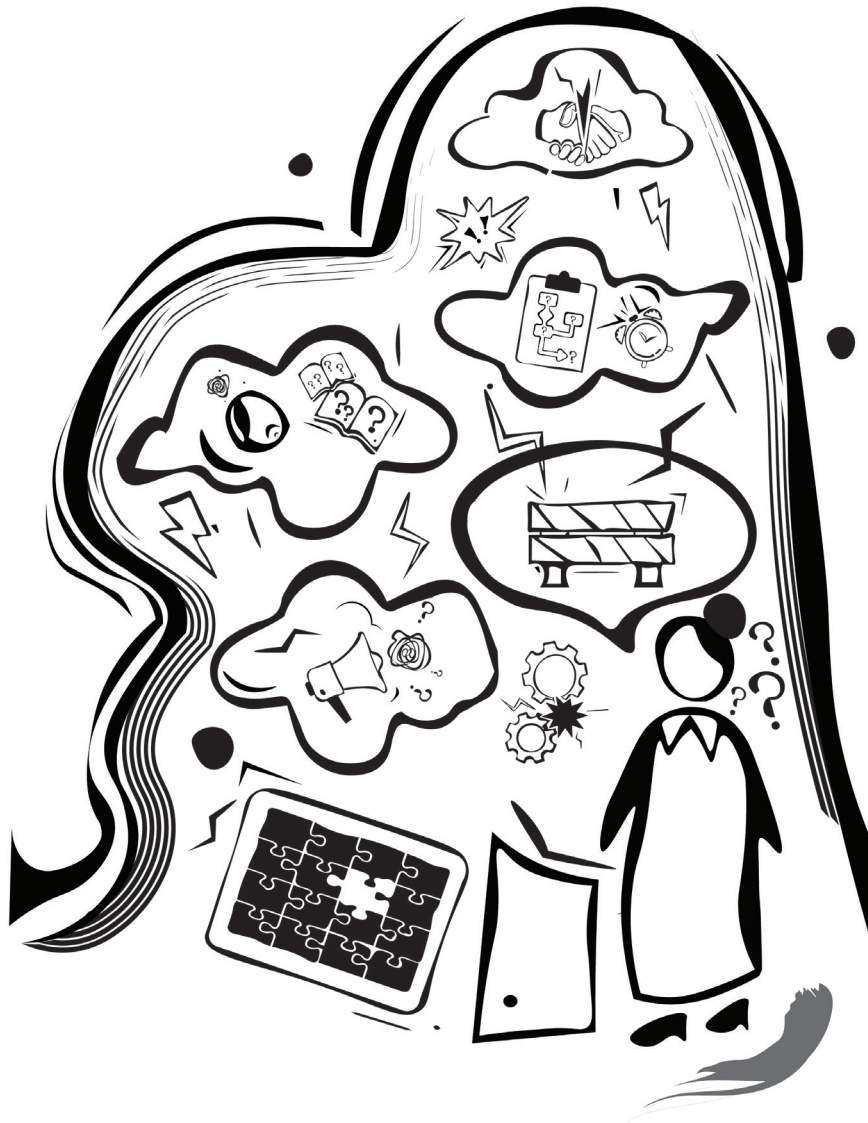
- **Regional and local administrations** involved in transition planning and implementation.
- **Managing authorities** and intermediate bodies responsible for transition-related programmes.
- **Public agencies** or publicly funded organisations with a mandate to organise participatory processes.
- **Municipalities and regional governments** using deliberative, co-creative, or community-based engagement formats.
- **Intermediary organisations** such as local development agencies, NGOs, or community facilitators that support interaction between public institutions and communities.

The brief is particularly relevant for actors engaged in, or exploring, participatory approaches that extend beyond single consultation and require sustained interaction with communities over time, and active subsidiarity in just sustainability transitions.





Effective community engagement in transitions means prioritising strategies that address the most intense barriers to participation - especially trust and relevance gaps - tailored to the needs and contexts of specific community groups, recognizing that barriers accumulate and require differentiated, evidence-based responses.



Visualisation of main policy message

WHAT SHAPES COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN TRANSITION POLICIES

Ambitious commitments to green and just transitions increasingly rely on community participation at regional and local levels. However, **opening policy processes is not enough to secure engagement**. Communities' motivation and capacity to participate cannot be assumed and are shaped by **how participation is organised and experienced**.

Decisions to engage are influenced by multiple, overlapping factors that influence attitudes towards participatory processes, and ultimately determine whether participation is seen as worthwhile. These factors can be broadly grouped into:

- **Motivational factors**, such as trust, policy relevance, and perceived influence, and
- **Ability-related factors**, such as access to information, time, perceived knowledge and capacity.

Evidence from the DUST Horizon Europe project shows that the **presence and intensity of these factors vary across regions and across communities**. Understanding how these factors combine in different contexts is essential for public institutions seeking to translate sustainability ambitions into **effective and inclusive action on the ground**.

The insights in this brief are grounded in engagement with communities in transition regions in Bulgaria, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden, covering coal and energy regions, rural and deprived areas, and multiple generations. Together, these experiences reveal where participation design requires **clear prioritisation across contexts** (p. 10-11), and where it requires **tailoring to specific community sensitivities** (p. 12-15).

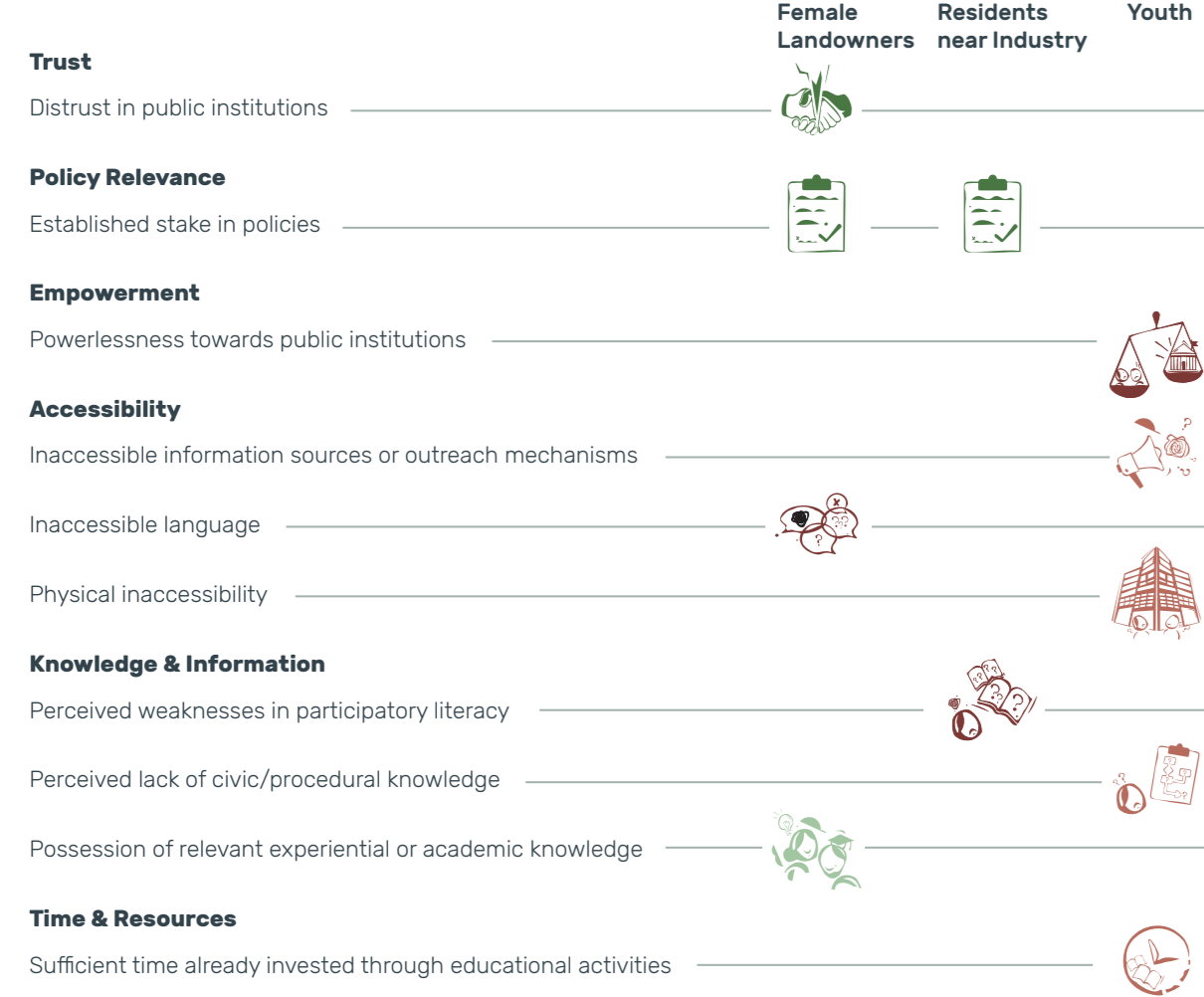
HOW COMMUNITIES PERCEIVE FACTORS SHAPING PARTICIPATION

Communities judge whether participation is worthwhile based on a mix of motivational and ability factors. The visuals on the following page show how communities across the case studies view these factors as either encouraging or discouraging participation. The visuals are organised by case study and by the different community groups involved.

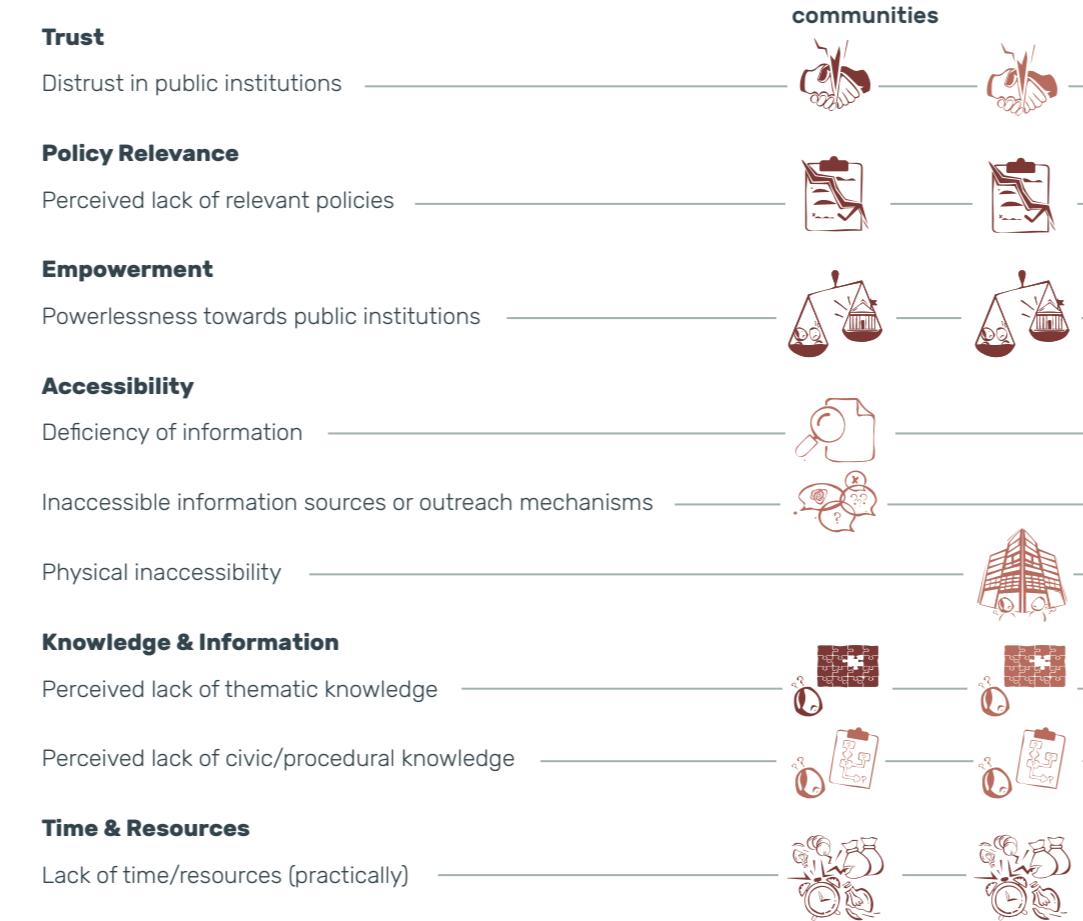
Community factors affecting participation and participatory attitudes

Each table below shows the factors impacting participation for communities in each of DUST's case study regions. The factors are shown in the left column, and the communities and their perceptions of how these factors impact their participation are shown in the right column. Green icons show factors seen as encouraging participation; Red/orange icons show factors seen as discouraging participation. The absence of an icon indicates that the factor was perceived as neutral or was not discussed by the community.

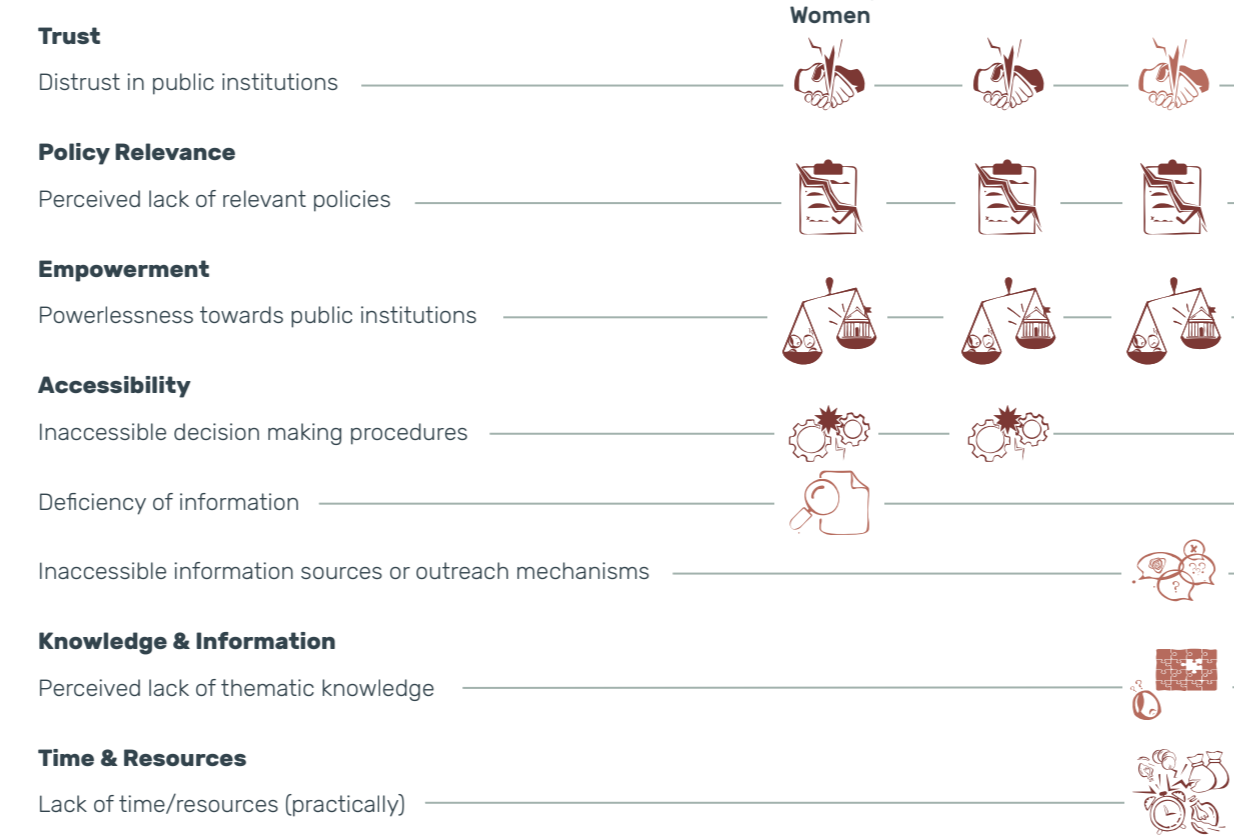
Gotland



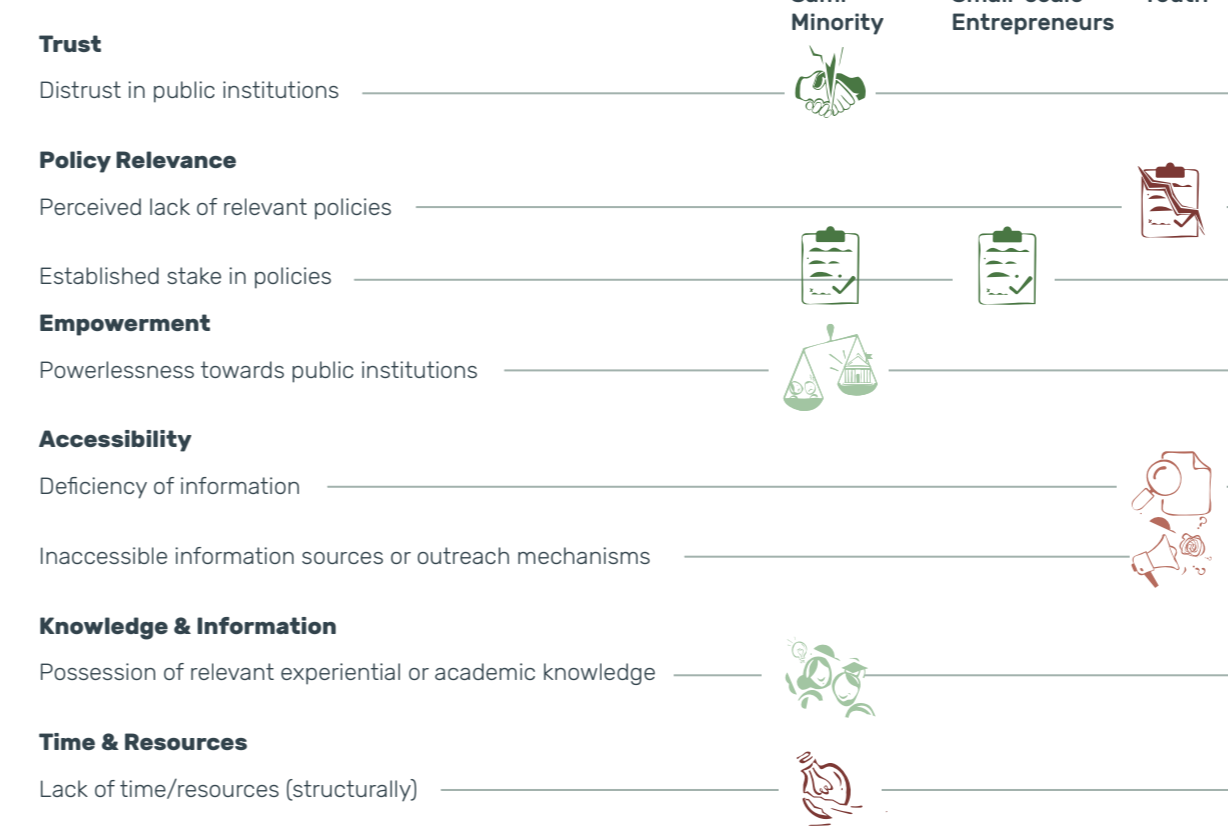
Groningen



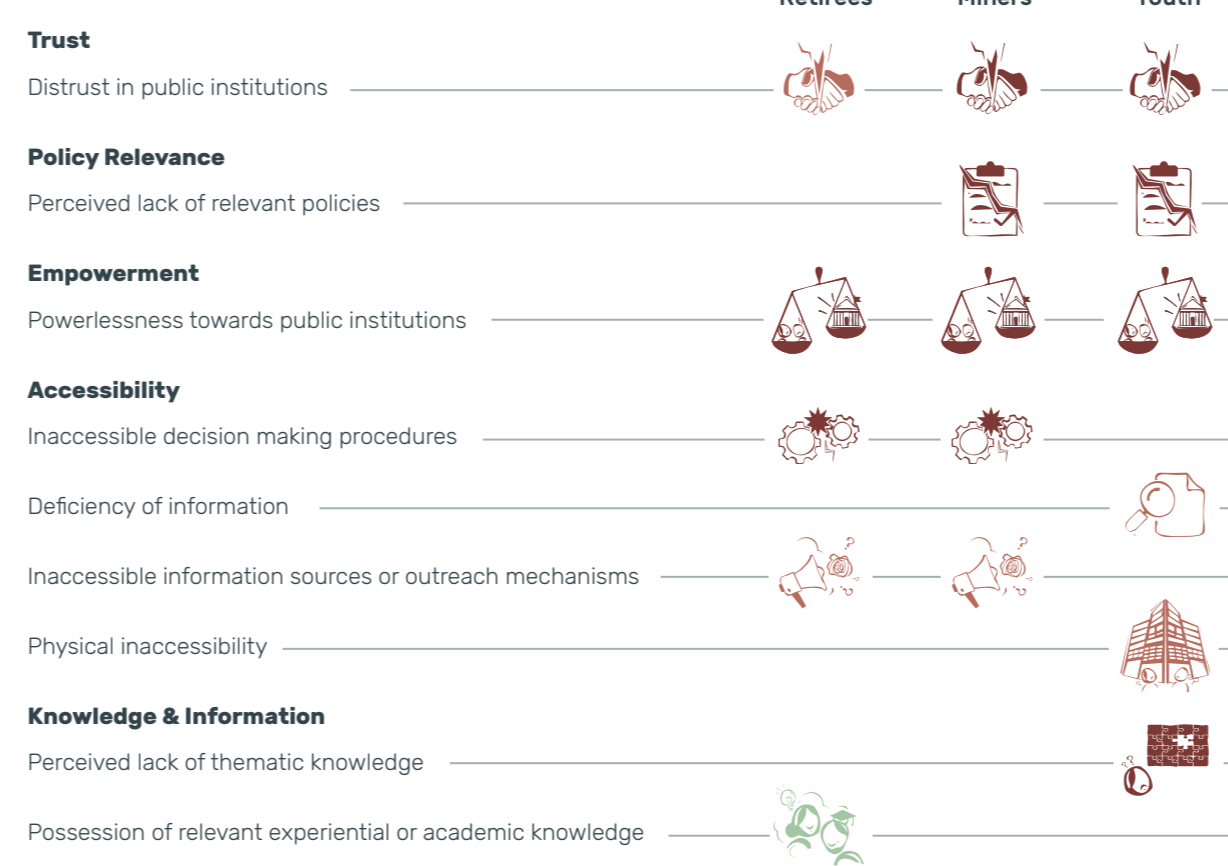
Stara Zagora



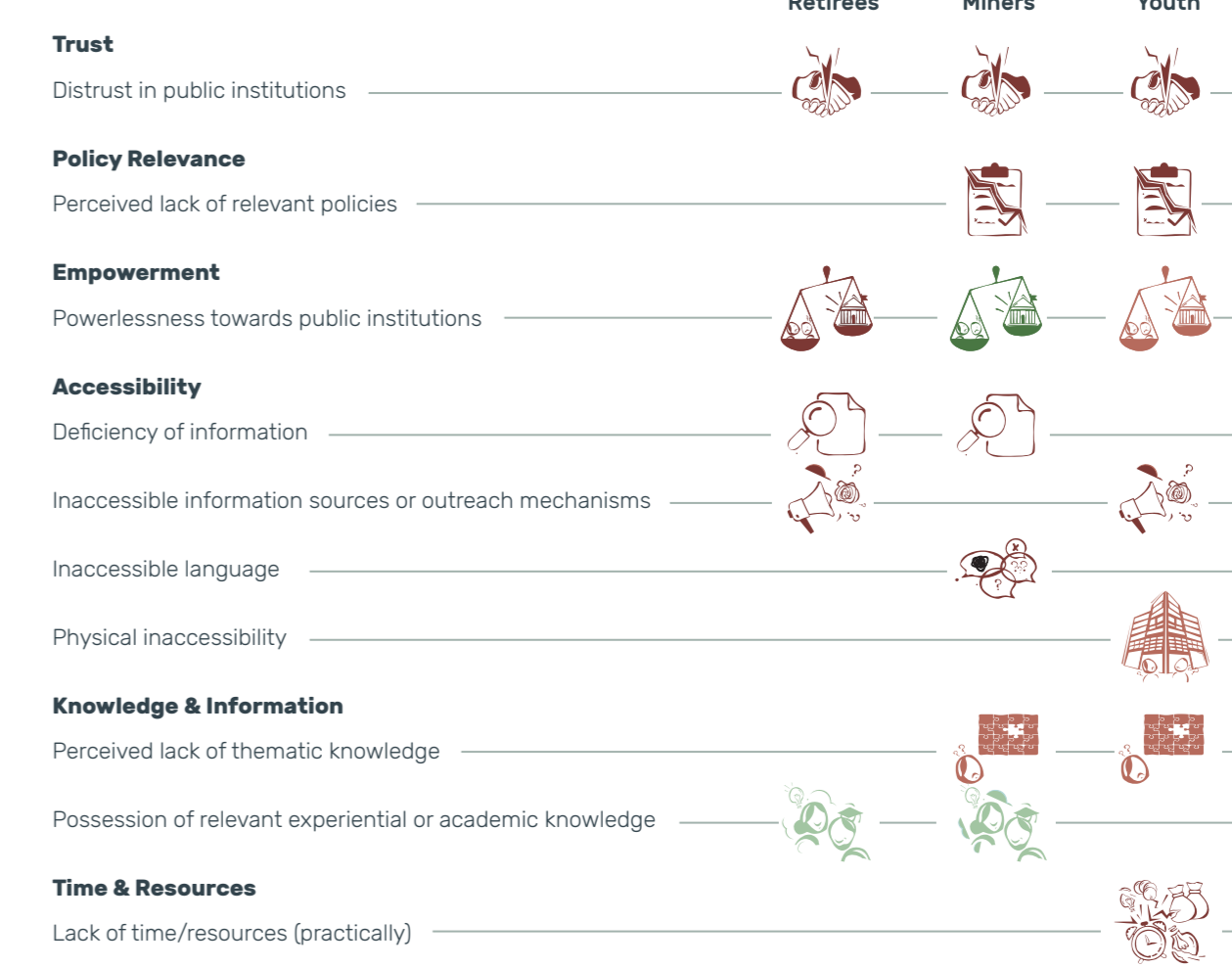
Norrbotten



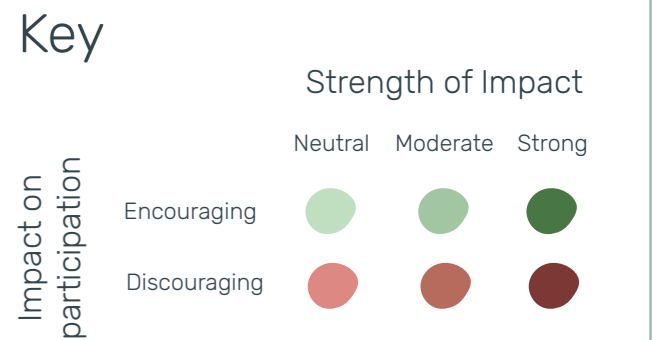
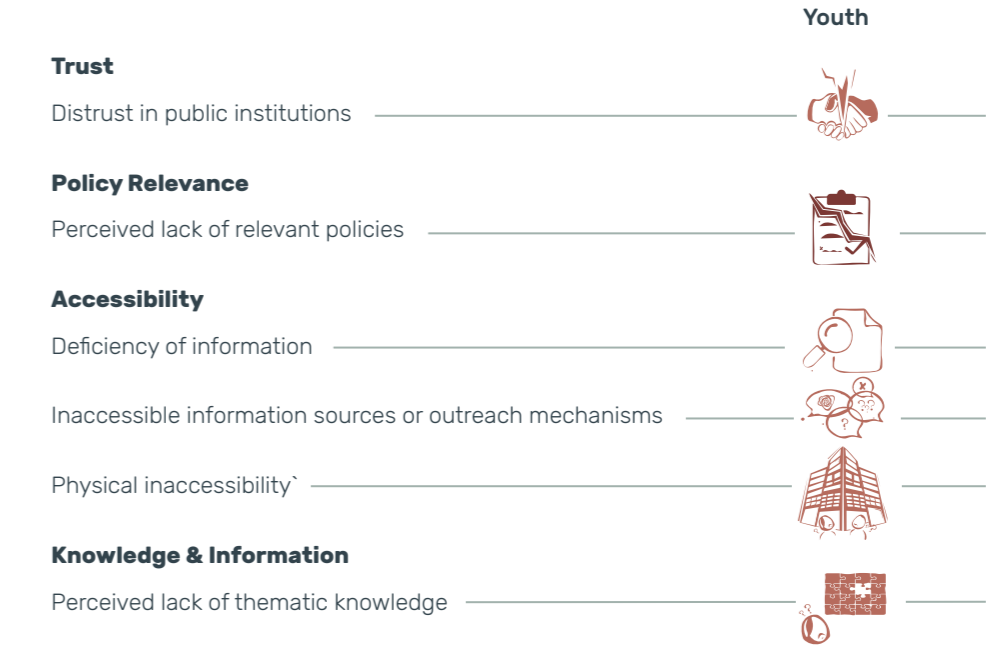
Bełchatów



Katowice



Lusatia



KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE COMPARISON ACROSS CASES AND COMMUNITIES

Several insights are worth noting from the comparison shown in the visual above:

1. **Some factors play a consistently stronger role** in encouraging or discouraging engagement, while **others become more significant for specific groups**.
2. **Motivational factors have a stronger impact** on whether individuals choose to participate.
3. Factors are **experienced predominantly as discouraging** rather than encouraging participation.
4. These discouraging factors often accumulate, creating **multiple barriers** to participation.
5. **Distrust has the strongest influence** on whether and **how** communities engage in participatory processes. **Distrust can both discourage or encourage participation**.
6. **Distrust varies both in what drives it and in who is being distrusted**.
7. **Variation in relevance**. Green transition means different things across places and communities, and is associated with different scales – local to global.
8. Communities often **perceive green transition policies as irrelevant** because they are seen as unrepresentative of local interests or lacking clarity about local stakes.
9. On the ability side, **limited access to clear, comprehensible, and meaningful information is a key barrier to**

participation. However, accessibility barriers extend beyond information alone.

10. **Communities rarely view themselves as lacking knowledge overall**. While limited technical expertise discourages participation, most emphasise the value of experiential, local, and work-based knowledge.
11. **Uncertainty about what knowledge is valued** in policy design, together with the **belief that only expert knowledge matters**, undermine confidence and reduce participation.
12. **For certain livelihoods**, shaped by seasonal or nature-based demands, **time flexibility is particularly limited**.



DESIGNING PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENT: OVERALL PRIORITIES

Across regions, consistent patterns emerge in how communities perceive factors that shape their motivation and ability to engage in participatory processes related to transition policies. This section distils these cross-cutting insights into priorities that practitioners should consider when embedding community participation in transition planning and implementation.

Design participation with cumulative barriers in mind.

Design engagement strategies using **context-sensitive approaches** that account for the cumulative nature of participation barriers. This involves combining measures that strengthen trust, relevance, and emotional safety with practical constraints.

Prioritise strengthening motivational factors.

Prioritise strengthening motivational factors first, as these are more frequently reported and more intense than ability-related barriers.

Differentiate trust-building approaches based on the source of distrust within communities.

Distrust affecting participation can stem from **different underlying experiences**, and requires differentiated responses rather than uniform trust-building efforts.

- Among some communities, distrust is primarily shaped by **past negative experiences, long-term insecurity, or perceptions of neglect**. In such cases, engagement should demonstrate that transition policies can lead to **tangible, people-oriented outcomes**, and allow scope to translate higher-level policy priorities into actions that reflect what is locally valued.
- Among other communities, distrust rather reflects **limited familiarity with institutions or decision-makers**. Here, engagement should prioritise **visibility, presence, and open communication**, supported where appropriate by trusted local intermediaries.
- Finally, distrust may be linked to **perceptions that participation does not influence outcomes**. Addressing this requires establishing **clear feedback loops**, including transparency on how input is considered and how decisions are shaped alongside other stakeholder views.

Prioritise policy relevance by strengthening connection to local realities.

Focus on helping people understand and relate to policies, investments, and development directions, including the trade-offs and uncertainties they raise. This can be done by:

1. **Making the issues under discussion tangible**, by explaining what they mean in practice and how they may affect people's livelihoods and everyday lives; and
2. **Making them relatable**, by linking these issues and their potential implications to meaningful local development priorities.

Prioritise near-future relevance before expanding to longer-term horizons.

Work carefully with the timeframes that different communities prioritise when understanding the relevance of the policy priorities or decisions being discussed. Even when the goal is to discuss forward-looking developments or visions, do not overlook near-future relevance as a basis.

Start with near-future relevance of the discussions to which communities are being invited. This is especially crucial for groups facing immediate livelihood pressures or uncertainty (e.g. redundancy, rising energy costs). Only then expand the discussion to longer-term outlooks.

Among ability barriers, address first accessibility of information.

Improving the availability and accessibility of information is critical. Accessibility is shaped by multiple, interrelated factors. Information needs to be **communicated through trusted figures and channels**, which often involves local sources and intermediaries. At the same time, **responsibility for communication should be shared across governance levels**, as delaying communication until issues are handled locally can allow uncertainty and fear to accumulate. Finally, **information materials supporting participatory processes should avoid jargon**, remain manageable in volume, and clearly explain the purpose of participation and what is expected from participants.


Clearly communicate what kind of knowledge is needed to participate.

Recognising and validating local knowledge is essential to enable inclusive participation and to lower perceived entry barriers. Invitations to participatory processes should **clearly state** whether prior or **expert knowledge is NOT required** for participation. They also need to specify the type of knowledge that is desirable for meaningful participation. If experiential, local or professional knowledge such as lived experience, knowledge of local conditions, or practical expertise is relevant, this should be clearly underlined as part of the invitation to the process.



DESIGNING PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENT: WHAT MATTERS FOR WHOM

Women

“You sit and listen, but then they do  nothing with the input you provide [...] they talk a lot for the companies. [...] There are so many of us women who are involved in this and ask if the earth’s resources can handle this? [...] But we are constantly rejected.”

Women from Gotland

Distinct enabling factor: empowerment through confidence, skills, and voice.

Distinct barrier: Self-doubt, particularly among younger or less experienced women; and unequal recognition of contributions, where voices associated with economic or corporate interests tend to carry more weight than other concerns raised by female participants.

Design implications: Capacity-building and facilitation/orchestration techniques that promote balanced participation. Establish clear feedback loops.

Youth

“Public institutions responsible for policy planning are a ‘parallel world’ to our lives”

Youth from Katowice

“Everything we learn about the transition, we learn outside of school”

Youth from Belchatow



“Participation is seen as “just talking without any effect”

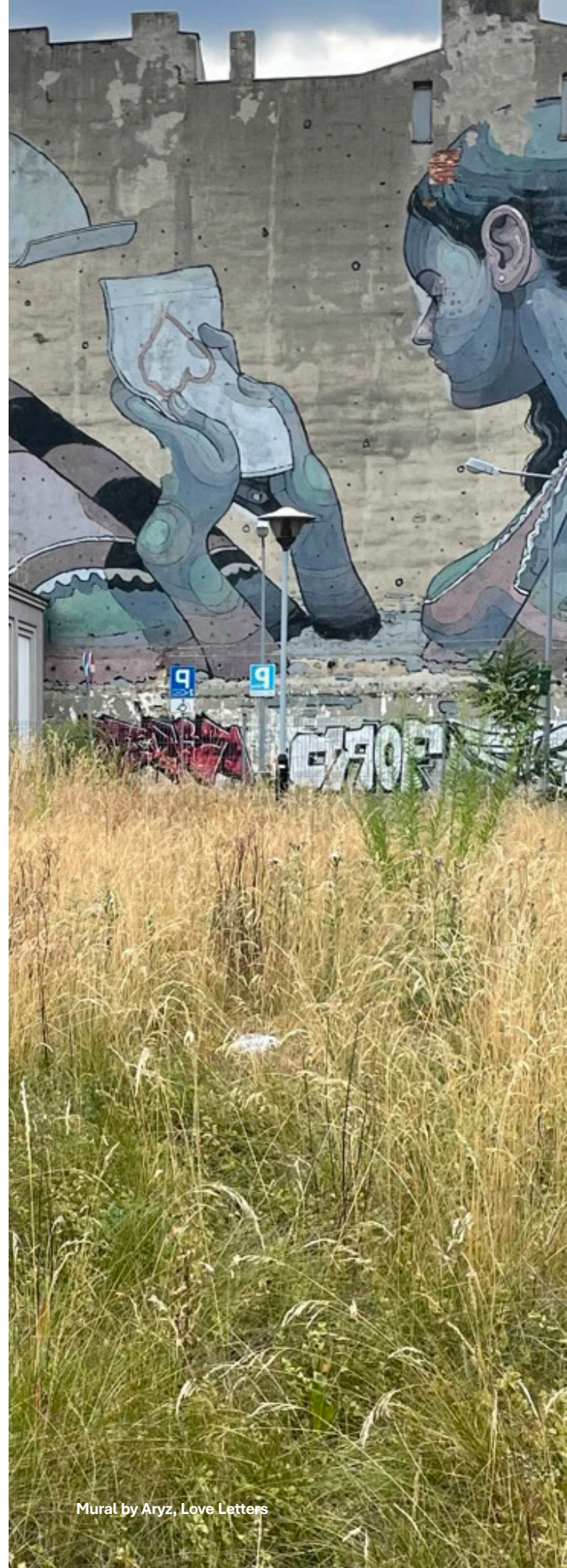
Youth from Groningen



Starting point: Youth often approach green transitions with a hopeful but initially abstract outlook, shaped by broader narratives, and frequently feel that policies are too abstract or disconnected from them.

Key barrier/enabler: A strong need for agency and recognition, combined with distrust due to limited direct engagement with institutions.

Design implication: Make transitions tangibly relevant to young people’s lives and ensure participatory processes deliver visible, short-term outcomes. Embed trust-building through meaningful interaction with the people behind institutions, combine online options with in-person engagement, and prioritise familiar, non-hierarchical settings that ensure emotional safety.



Mural by Arys, Love Letters



Older adults/(retired) workers in legacy industries

“transitions fail to take place [...] there should be a direction, new jobs should be created”

Working women in the coal mining sector in Stara Zagora

“They [actors involved in the transition] believe that they are more knowledgeable than us”

Retired mining and energy sector workers in Belchatow

Starting point: Older adults and workers in legacy industries often feel empowered to participate because of their accumulated work experience, values, and technical knowledge, which they use to interpret the relevance of transition policies.

Key barrier/enabler: A strong sense that their vast knowledge is relevant and valuable acts as a key enabler of participation. At the same time, distrust, shaped by past negative experiences with policy change, is a key barrier.

Design implication: Use deliberative formats that surface and share knowledge, and explicitly connect lived experience, values, and expertise to concrete policy decisions and future development options.


Participatory design should also include explicit trust-building elements that demonstrate tangible and people-oriented outcomes, and rely on outreach and moderation through trusted intermediaries.


Remote, rural, and structurally disadvantaged communities



“We need more cultural sensitivity in the transition, in particular when dealing with informing and engaging poor people.”

Youth from Groningen 

 **“There is a big conflict between jobs, development and environment/climate. A lot of it is basically about how we should have local development [...] in general. I think there is fear behind the hatred.”**

Residents near a cement factory and adjacent limestone quarries in Gotland 

Starting point: Participation is strongly shaped by attachment to place and concerns about the distributive impacts of transitions on livelihoods, wellbeing, and landscapes.

Key barrier/enabler: Distrust varies across rural contexts. In some remote and deprived communities it reflects long-term neglect and perceived unfairness; in others it stems from distance from decision-making, uncertainty, or limited engagement experience. Limited access to information and weak institutional presence reinforce both.

Design implication: Tailor participation to the source of distrust. Prioritise fairness and distributional sensitivity, emphasise tangible and near-term improvements alongside long-term goals, embed place-based capacity-building, and improve access to information by strengthening the local presence of institutions and trusted intermediaries.



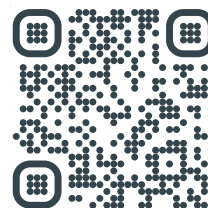
Mural in the Belchatow region

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 findings from Work Package 3 of the DUST project, which examined the factors influencing citizen participation in sustainability transition policymaking through focus groups with community members.

We thank all academic and societal partners, as well as the citizens who contributed to or participated in the DUST research underlying this policy brief.



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



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