Colophon

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Purpose and scope

This handbook presents a roadmap for implementing Regional Futures Literacy Labs (RFLLs). The RFLL format is designed to engage communities that are vulnerable to transitional challenges in regions that phase out unsustainable energy-intensive industries yet have little or no engagement in transition policymaking at levels of government. The RFLL participation process consists of four interactive workshops and one digital engagement application, supported by a series of background actions that inform and enable subsequent steps. The roadmap outlines the engagement process step by step. Key recommendations derived from experimentation with the RFLL format in the DUST project are assigned to each step.

The purpose of this roadmap is to serve as a discussion document for policymakers and civil society actors who seek to involve communities in place-based policymaking. It supports planning and reflection on participatory processes, helps to identify effective engagement strategies, and highlights key aspects for successful processes. The roadmap is complementary to the policy brief D5.2 Policy brief: Expanding the participation of least engaged communities in just sustainability transitions.

References:

Chilvers, M., Balz, V. E., Moodie, J., & Jungsberg, L. (2025). DUST Deliverable 5.2: Policy brief: Expanding the participation of least engaged communities in just sustainability transitions. DUST project.

Impression of the RFLL format composed of photography, artworks, and other materials used or produced during the DUST RFLLs in four case study regions. For image authors, see colophon.

What RFLLs deliver

RFLLs combine innovative design-led territorial and digital tools to enhance direct citizen participation in just sustainability transition policy processes. The following insights come directly from policymakers, and citizens who participated in RFLL experiments across the case regions of the DUST project. They show how RFLLs reshaped engagement, strengthened capacities, and opened pathways for collaborative, future-oriented territorial governance.

Citizen Learning

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

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

Futures Literacy

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

- Helps communities understand time and links long-term visions to actionable goals in the present.
- Helps communities develop clear, detailed visions of the future and the reasoning behind them.
- Changes communities' emotional dispositions about transitions to become more positive.
- Helps policymakers appreciate community realities, motivations, and social dimensions of sustainability transitions.

Co-Design

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

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

Digital deliberation

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

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

Regional design and visual representation

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

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

How to read the RFLL's road map

Active interaction and remote action

The RFLL format was designed as a sequence of steps that alternate active deliberation in four RFLL workshops and one digital application with the backstage analysis and representation of results per deliberation. Active participation steps have an orange background, and backstage steps have a grey background.

Recommendations

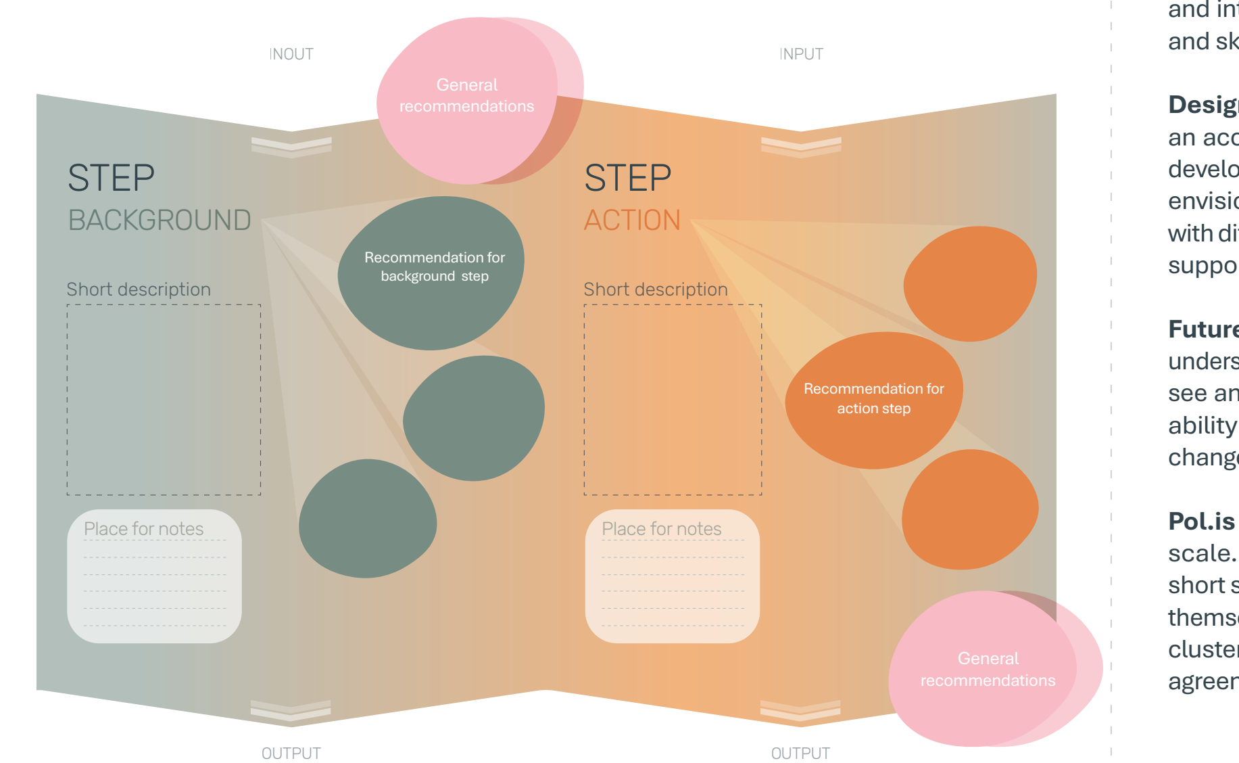
Each step is accompanied by a set of recommendations. Specific recommendations apply to an individual workshop step (orange) or backstage step (grey). General recommendations apply to the whole RFLL format and are presented in pink bubbles.

Contextualizing the format

White spaces allow you to place notes that contextualize the format for your region and community.

Input and Output

At the top of the roadmap, the input identifies the key elements that are needed for the next step of the process. At the bottom of the roadmap, the output identifies the key elements that are the results of a step. These outputs are used as inputs for following steps.



Glossary

Deliberation involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern

Place-based approaches recognize that the relative costs and benefits of development policies have political, economic, and social consequences with a clear territorial dimension.

Just sustainability transition is the slow evolutionary development of social, economic, and environmental systems that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Least-engaged community (LEC) is a community that is affected by a sustainability transition yet not involved in related policymaking.

Territorial capital is the potential of an area for future development. It includes tangible assets, such as infrastructures and nature, and intangible assets, such as knowledge and skills.

Design-led territorial tools encourage an account of the territorial dimension of development during participation. Through envisioning and comparing development with different scales and time horizons they support imagination and learning.

Futures literacy allows people to better understand the role of the future in what they see and do. It empowers the imagination, ability to prepare, recover and invent as changes occur.

Pol.is is a digital tool for deliberation at scale. Users can agree or disagree on short statements and propose statements themselves. An algorithm identifies opinion clusters and statements that attract broad agreement or polarization.

Long-term preparation

Long-term preparation begins at least six months before the first interaction. It includes preparing a framework for monitoring and assessing the RFFLs. Participation works well when embedded in an organizational culture that respects community governance. The phase therefore also includes the building of sustainable relationships with least engaged communities (LECs), policymakers, and experts and the consideration of resources for participation.

Notes

Ensure **documentation, analysis, and transparent representation** of input and output in all RFLL steps. This enhances a continuous flow of deliberation across the RFLL workshops and supports evaluation.

Recognize that meaningful participation is **resource-intensive** and requires **expertise**.

Familiarize yourself with communities; seek to understand how past political, social, or societal events may have influenced their trust in institutions.

Promote a long-term mindset within **diverse teams and leadership,** valuing interpersonal and emotional skills alongside technical expertise.

Collaborate with **local universities or research centers.**

Build **strong relationships with civil society organizations (CSOs)** through regular, informal communication and transparent collaboration.

OUTPUT

Framework for monitoring and assessing RFFLs

Short-term preparation

Short-term preparation begins at least three months before the first RFLL workshop. It focuses on preparing the series of four interactive workshops that are part of the format. Per workshop RFLL guidelines and action plans are drawn up to ensure that the workshops build on each other. The timing and location of workshops are defined. Importantly, workshop participants are identified and invited.

Notes

Plan in sufficient time for **informal exchange,** such as welcoming moments coffee or lunch breaks.

Engage **trusted intermediaries** to mobilize community members. In collaboration with these intermediaries, use **personal invitations when** inviting LEC members.

Select **familiar and accessible venues,** and a welcoming atmosphere to encourage participation.

Include **diverse LEC members**, especially **intergenerational groups**, to generate viable community positions.

Plan for **safe, community-only spaces** for reflection and negotiation, with **occasional participation from policymakers** involved in transition policies at levels of governance, including at least one local representative.

OUTPUT

RFLL guidelines and action plans
List of RFLL participants

A selection of ongoing key place-based policy measures
Knowledge about LECs
Media narratives on transitions

INPUT

STEP 1
Context mapping

This backstage step also begins at least three months before the first RFLL workshop. To guarantee that deliberation in the RFLLs is relevant for both LECs and place-based policymaking, the step involves mapping the concerns of LECs and the projected territorial impact of ongoing transition policies. A comparison of these mappings leads to the definition of key sustainability transition themes openly framing discussion in the first RFLL workshop.

Notes

Pay attention to (media) **narratives about transitions;** groups may speak about similar aspects but view these from different angles.

Positioned deliberation at the **intersection of community and policy interests** where learning is likely and conflict is low.

Recognize that the **initial framing of deliberation** is decisive for successful participation and begin with broad themes that openly address both community and policy concerns, creating space for new arguments.

In collaboration with CSOs and community initiatives, **map communities** that will be affected by transitions; together identify community networks and ongoing initiatives to understand their concerns.

In collaboration with spatial planning and geographic information departments, map the projected **impact of sustainability transitions and transition policymaking** to understand which territorial assets are at stake.

OUTPUT

Key sustainability transition themes
Regional transition policy impact projections

Key sustainability transition themes

INPUT

STEP 2 (WORKSHOP 1)
Building trust

Workshop 1 brings together LEC members and policymakers for the first time. Their discussion is structured around the earlier identified key sustainability transition themes with the goal to build trust between groups and raise awareness on transition policymaking. At the end of the workshop LEC members decide on the territorial aspects that are most relevant for their lives and places. The selected aspects form the thematic scope of deliberations in the next workshop.

Notes

Use **affective communication styles** for creating a welcoming atmosphere that encourages participation.

Allow participants to **re-frame issues** to foster ownership of deliberation, while ensuring that LEC interests remain safeguarded, as initial framing can otherwise be dominated by more powerful actors.

Alternate deliberation on broad themes and **formats that simplify complexity,** such as voting.

Use skilled **moderators** who maintain openness, encourage creativity, and support nuanced perspectives.

Always keep **community interests central in deliberation.** Nudge discussions toward policy relevance instead of making policy objectives a starting point.

OUTPUT

Sustainability transition topics prioritized by LECs

Sustainability transition topics prioritized by LECs

INPUT

STEP 3 (WORKSHOP 2)
Anticipating futures

Workshop 2 is attended by LEC members only and builds on the UNESCO Futures Literacy Lab (FFL) format, which stimulates communities to imagine long-term futures and build agency around these. The themes that were prioritized in Workshop 1 are re-introduced. During the workshop LEC members share and discuss stories about their expected and preferred futures in relation to these themes. Their stories form an important input for all following steps of the RFLLs.

Notes

Let participants **speak freely** and **raise own issues. Listen** to what they say.

Plan for **safe, community-only spaces** to foster deep reflection and negotiation.

Employ **Futures Literacy Lab (FFL)** methods to foster optimism, engagement, and forward-looking perspectives in transitional development.

Carefully document this workshop for further analysis. Do this preferably in the form of **audio-recordings** to maintain the original tone.

Listen to communities. Recognize that **sharing stories and knowledge** about regions enables meaningful discussion. Use collective **reflection on memories** to deepen an understanding of time.

OUTPUT

LECs' stories about their futures in transitions (in audio-recordings)

LECs' stories about their futures in transitions (in audio-recordings)
Inventory of context-specific visual languages

INPUT

STEP 4
Regional designing

In this backstage step the stories that were told by LEC members in Workshop 2 are analyzed and visually represented. Analysis provides insights into the territorial aspects of transitions that are most meaningful for LECs. The regional futures that LECs expect and would prefer to happen are visually represented. This is done to document LECs' positions, to encourage deeper reflection, and to catch the public attention that is needed for the next RFLL steps.

Notes

Use visuals to actively **facilitate discussions,** specifically with young people. Create informal settings for this.

Together with spatial planners and designers, use **visual and artistic methods** to make abstract policy issues tangible and relatable.

Ensure that visuals accurately represent local contexts and are a **sensible reflection of communities.** Involve community members in this assessment.

Use **concise, plain-language** at all times to increase clarity and inclusion.

OUTPUT

Territorial aspects of transitions that are meaningful for LECs
Visual representations of LECs' expected and preferred futures in transitions

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Territorial aspects of transitions that are meaningful for LECs
Regional transition policy impact projections

INPUT

STEP 5
Making a difference

In this backstage step the territorial aspects of transitions that matter for LECs are compared to aspects that change in policy impact projections (output of Step 1). The comparison provides insights into LECs' opinions on place-based policymaking and supports the strategic positioning of their concerns at levels and sectors of governance. Positions are translated into community-led draft policy statements to be discussed during the next workshop.

Notes

Identify **policy fields** that are **of both community and policy relevance.** Prioritize statements that relate to these fields to increase the likeliness of impact.

Use **analytical frameworks** that allow for the systematic comparison of different stances on territorial development.

Formulate statements that are concrete and close to everyday life of the community.

OUTPUT

LECs' strategically positioned draft policy statements

LECs' strategically positioned draft policy statements

INPUT

STEP 6 (WORKSHOP 3)
Formulating statements

The RFLL Workshop 3 prepares the upcoming digital deliberation with a wider public using the e-democracy tool Pol.is. LEC members discuss, prioritize, and refine the draft policy statements from the earlier step. The key output of this workshop is a list of practical and action-oriented statements for use in the Pol.is application.

Notes

Use skilled **moderators** who maintain openness, encourage creativity, and support nuanced perspectives.

Use workshop formats that allow negotiation on multiple statements, such as the World café format. Support negotiation with **visual materials.** Reduce complexity, for example through **voting** mechanisms.

Involve **young people** in preparing communication in digital realms.

Allow statements to reflect **opposing opinions,** specifically when deliberation concerns sensitive transition topics.

OUTPUT

Policy statement for digital deliberation
LECs' policy statements for public digital deliberation

LECs' policy statements for public digital deliberation

INPUT

STEP 7
Deliberating publicly

In this step the policy statements that were formulated by LEC members are submitted for public digital deliberation. The step includes the planning, training for, and implementation of the digital application. It also includes a campaign to attract a variety of users and the analysis of results from the deliberation. The output of the step is in refined policy statements, as well as insights into agreement and disagreement around these.

Notes

Reach out to the public using **various (social media) networks** to increase the representativeness of results.

Integrate digital participation in ongoing policy processes through anticipating **pathways to institutional uptake.**

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

Promote and motivate digital participation through **simple messages,** powerful **visuals,** and **information contextualizing the application.**

OUTPUT

LECs' policy statements rated by the public

LECs' policy statements rated by the public

INPUT

STEP 8 (WORKSHOP 4)
Co-creating policy

In the final RFLL workshop, LEC members and policymakers translate the outcomes from earlier steps into practical recommendations and discuss how to strategically target policymakers at levels and sectors of government with this advisory. The recommendations are published in position papers and disseminated. Showcasing the earlier accomplished visual representations of LECs' imagined futures reminds the public of their positions.

Notes

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).

Summarize output in **concise recommendations and visually attractive ways.**

Use and/or collaborate with regional governance platforms, community sustainability initiatives, traditional and social media, just transition platforms, as well as national and EU channels.

Involve **policymakers as** support for communities when formulating recommendations (instead of the other way around).

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

Report back to participants on how their contributions were used, reinforcing trust by showing their impact on policy.

OUTPUT

LECs' policy recommendations for sectors and levels of governance