

Deliverable D2.5: Stakeholder Engagement and Participation (STEP) Index: User manual

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Authors Dr. Mariya Trifonova (Center for the Study of
Democracy)
German Rueda Orejarena (Center for the Study of
Democracy)
Remina Aleksieva (Center for the Study of
Democracy)
Dr. Uwe Serdült (University of Zurich)
Artur Ochojski (University of Economics in
Katowice)

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Abbreviation list

Term	Description
EU	European Union
JTF	Just Transition Fund
JTM	Just Transition Mechanism
STEP index	Stakeholder Engagement and Participation index
TJTPs	Territorial Just Transition Plans

Executive Summary

The Stakeholder Engagement and Participation index (STEP index) is a tool for systematically evaluating citizen participation in just transition policies within a specific region and conducting comparative analyses across regions. With 17 indicators, it establishes a higher standard for measuring and comparing public involvement in transition planning. The STEP index acts as a catalyst for engagement, addressing gaps in citizen participation through awareness-raising, identifying improvement areas, and facilitating open dialogue. To input the index effectively, the research integrates local stakeholder perspectives through consultations and desk research, aiming to refine the STEP index for inclusive engagement in just transition policies.

This user manual serves as a comprehensive guide, offering insights into the objectives, usability, and outcomes of the STEP index that various stakeholders can use in their work with citizens. Its central focus is to provide practical guidance, insights and actionable steps for achieving inclusive stakeholder engagement in the planning and implementation of just transition policies at various governance levels in European regions.

1. Introduction

Enhancing participation and engagement in Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs) requires a comprehensive assessment and establishment of baselines, along with ongoing monitoring of participatory initiatives. The proposed Stakeholder Engagement and Participation in Policy-Making Processes Index (STEP index), based on 17 indicators, enables the evaluation of stakeholders' participation in just transition policies across different regions. This index facilitates the incorporation of diverse data sources and can be adjusted to accommodate policy modifications and advancements. The index aims to empower local and regional authorities, NGOs, and external observers in monitoring and improving citizen participation in place-based policies.

The STEP index serves as a valuable tool for objectively measuring involvement in just sustainability transition policies from a comparative perspective. Beyond its immediate practical application, the research aims to offer broader insights. **The STEP index measures and compares public participation in transition planning and implementation to a higher standard, providing a framework for assessing potential barriers faced by specific societal groups.** Utilizing the STEP index as a catalyst for engagement, stakeholders, including governments and civil society organizations, can address gaps in citizen participation effectively. The process involves raising awareness about unmet indicators, identifying areas for improvement, facilitating open dialogue, and collaboratively developing action plans. Capacity-building initiatives empower stakeholders through training programs, while policy advocacy encourages changes to foster greater participation. Establishing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating progress ensures a continuous review of index-highlighted indicators. By leveraging the STEP index, stakeholders can work together to champion transparency and ensure the inclusion of all voices in decision-making processes. To overcome the limitations of the STEP index, which currently relies on indicators derived from literature reviews rather than incorporating local stakeholder perspectives, an approach that includes consultations with experts and desk research on relevant policies was implemented.

1.1. Using the manual

This document serves as a supportive guidance to the initial release of the Excel-based STEP index: A tool for measuring involvement in just sustainability transition policies. It is targeted toward regional and local authorities using the Index as part of their work to achieve, monitor and improve successful and meaningful stakeholder engagement. Yet, the manual and the tool are open-access and can be used by other stakeholders. This manual has been designed to provide users with the necessary background information related to the emergence and logic of the tool, a step-by-step guide on how to proceed with using the tool and how to interpret and use the results from it. The tool is designed for use by a neutral evaluator, such as a researcher or consultant, aiming to gain an objective understanding of decisions related to stakeholder participation and its influence on TJTP performance.

As part of the DUST project, the tool and manual were developed in the context of transition processes in the project case study regions – Groningen, Netherlands; Upper Silesia, Katowicki region and Belchatow area in Poland; Norrbotten and Gotland in Sweden; Stara Zagora, Bulgaria; Lusatian Lignite District and Rhenish Lignite District in Germany. However, using the tool is not limited to these regions and can be implemented in other sustainability transition contexts.

Generally, in relevant contexts, transition processes relate to the phase-out of mining or extraction activities of natural resources and the substitution of fossil fuels used in carbon-intensive industries, concentrated in these regions, and the socio-economic consequences stemming from them.

A basic contention of DUST research is that to support effective, sustainable and just transitions, public policy measures must incorporate different sectors, governmental levels and societal groups. The development of the Index is part of the efforts to enhance a strategic and integrated approach to governance with a different institutional relationship that is based on the factual, effective and functional engagement of various stakeholder groups. Whether users are a regional policy-maker, municipal officer working on European policies or another expert, this manual will

Box 1: Incorporating DUST: understanding the context of integration.

STEP index and just sustainability transitions

To address the challenging obstacles associated with the transition to a climate-neutral economy, it is crucial to prioritize the allocation of financial resources toward the regions that are most severely affected by this shift towards a climate-neutral Europe by 2050. These territories necessitate additional assistance to effectively adapt to and capitalize on the advantages of this transition. To ensure an equitable decarbonization process for European regions that heavily rely on fossil fuels, the European Union (EU) introduced the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) in 2020, with an allocation of €150 billion in support. The JTM's primary objective is to aid these regions in addressing socio-economic challenges throughout the transition to a climate-neutral economy.

In safeguarding vulnerable individuals and communities during the transition, the JTM focuses on ensuring the well-being of people most affected by the changes. Against the backdrop of declining democratic institutions and growing discontent among marginalized groups and regions with limited resources, the EU collaborates with national, regional, and local governments to bridge the gap between policies and citizens. This collaborative effort involves implementing place-based approaches that aim to address socio-economic and territorial disparities and foster innovative interventions for fair sustainability transitions. These approaches acknowledge that the costs and benefits of transitions, including who bears the costs and how decisions are made, have political, economic, and social implications that are closely tied to specific geographic areas. By actively engaging citizens in deliberation and co-creation of these approaches, the EU-led governance arrangements seek to empower individuals, enhance their ownership of policies, and rebuild trust in democratic institutions.

The STEP index stands out as a bespoke instrument finely tuned to assess engagement and participation within just sustainability transition policies, utilizing a comparative lens. Its tailored design specifically caters to the requisites of territorial just transition policies, including TJTPs emphasized throughout the manual. Originally developed to support stakeholder involvement in designing and implementing TJTPs, the STEP index finds applicability across various multi-level place-based policy measures aimed at just sustainability transitions. Its adaptability and customization options ensure compatibility with analogous scenarios, thereby facilitating structured evaluations of citizen participation processes led by public administrations. This adaptability underscores its potential to significantly contribute to planned and organized assessment endeavours within transition contexts.

empower them to navigate the complexities of stakeholder engagement, ultimately contributing to the success and longevity of place-based policies in just sustainability transition contexts. Embrace the knowledge within these pages to unlock the full potential of stakeholder interactions and create a foundation for lasting success.

1.2. Index overview

1.2.1. Index methodology

The construction of the STEP index involved the selection of a quantitative methodology to systematize and arrange categories identified in the theoretical assessment as essential for delineating the current state, progress, and areas needing priority improvement in stakeholder participation within a specific public process. It's crucial to highlight that even though a quantitative methodology is employed, all variables integrated into the index inherently possess qualitative characteristics. These variables delineate the presence, degree of exposure, or absence of specific components, as exemplified in the series of questions comprising DUST. (Figure 1).

The methodology used to develop the STEP index is informed by a thorough review of factors outlined in the literature and previous CSD research on coal transitions in Central and Eastern European countries. This research involved extensive consultations and workshops with experts from the Czech Republic, Romania, Hungary, Greece, and Bulgaria, who closely observed and contributed to the preparation of TJTPs for coal-dependent regions in their respective countries. These aspects are detailed in project Deliverable 1.1: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework, and Deliverable 1.2: Methodological Framework. This literature review served as a foundational exploration of key elements crucial to understanding stakeholder engagement and participation in just transition policies. To ensure a structured evaluation, a point scale was judiciously selected, offering a systematic means of organizing qualitative responses and discerning varying levels within each question. This methodological approach not only leverages the insights gained from the literature review but also establishes a robust framework for assessing the multifaceted dimensions of stakeholders' participation in the context of just sustainability transition policies.

Given the flexibility of this tool in collecting data from various sources, such as expert assessments based on observations, direct or indirect participatory interactions, desk research, and citizen surveys covering a large sample of respondents, as well as conducting a quantitative relational analysis of the participation of different groups throughout the policy process, it will enable the assessment of the current state, comparison of participation performance across different territories, refinement of the understanding of barriers to participation among various social groups, and the identification of opportunities to promote 'active subsidiarity' within multi-level policy-making processes.

1.2.2. Index structure

The STEP index comprises Dimensions, Criteria, Indicators, Questions, and Values for each question (see Figure 1). Each of the five dimensions is equally measured on a scale of 0 to 100%. The first dimension is subdivided into five criteria and five indicators, each of which corresponds to a question, except for indicator 3, which is represented by two questions, allowing for a maximum score of 6 points.

The second dimension consists of four criteria and eight indicators, which are addressed by 9 questions. It's worth noting that the last indicator is comprised of two questions, hence the possibility of a 9-point maximum.

The third and fourth dimensions pertain to the evaluation matrix for engagement methods. Each of the six options representing methods or strategies can be applied to every stakeholder and communication tool, with a rating from the lowest level (1) to the highest level (6). If all the methods are utilized at the first level, it would yield 1 point; the second level, 2 points, and so forth. If all the listed methods are "Used" across all stakeholder engagement and communication tools, the matrix will receive 21 points or 100%.

The fifth dimension consists of two indicators, which are addressed by three questions in alignment with the established criteria, amounting to a total of 3 points. The index was designed to flexibly evaluate each dimension separately, recognizing that a composite number is not deterministic or strictly informative in this context.

This structure allows for the separate evaluation of each dimension and provides the performance of each dimension as a percentage. This version does not include a single value as a result because it is not considered useful in the evaluation process of participatory processes that involve multiple stages or levels, and different descriptions of effective participation as well as different meanings. Therefore, a sum of all the values does not necessarily represent a specific level of participation. Considering that all components have the same weight, the satisfactory achievement of all indicators would simply acknowledge that each dimension has a performance of 100%.

STEP INDEX POINT SYSTEM

In summary, the point system for evaluating the STEP index is structured across five dimensions, each with specific criteria and indicators. The first dimension comprises five criteria, with a total of six possible points. The second dimension involves nine questions, allowing for a maximum of nine points. The third and fourth dimensions assess engagement methods through a matrix, where each of the six options is rated on a scale from 1 to 6, contributing to a potential maximum of 21 points or 100%. The fifth dimension, aligned with established criteria, consists of three questions, totalling 3 points. This point system provides a comprehensive and nuanced evaluation framework for stakeholder engagement and participation.

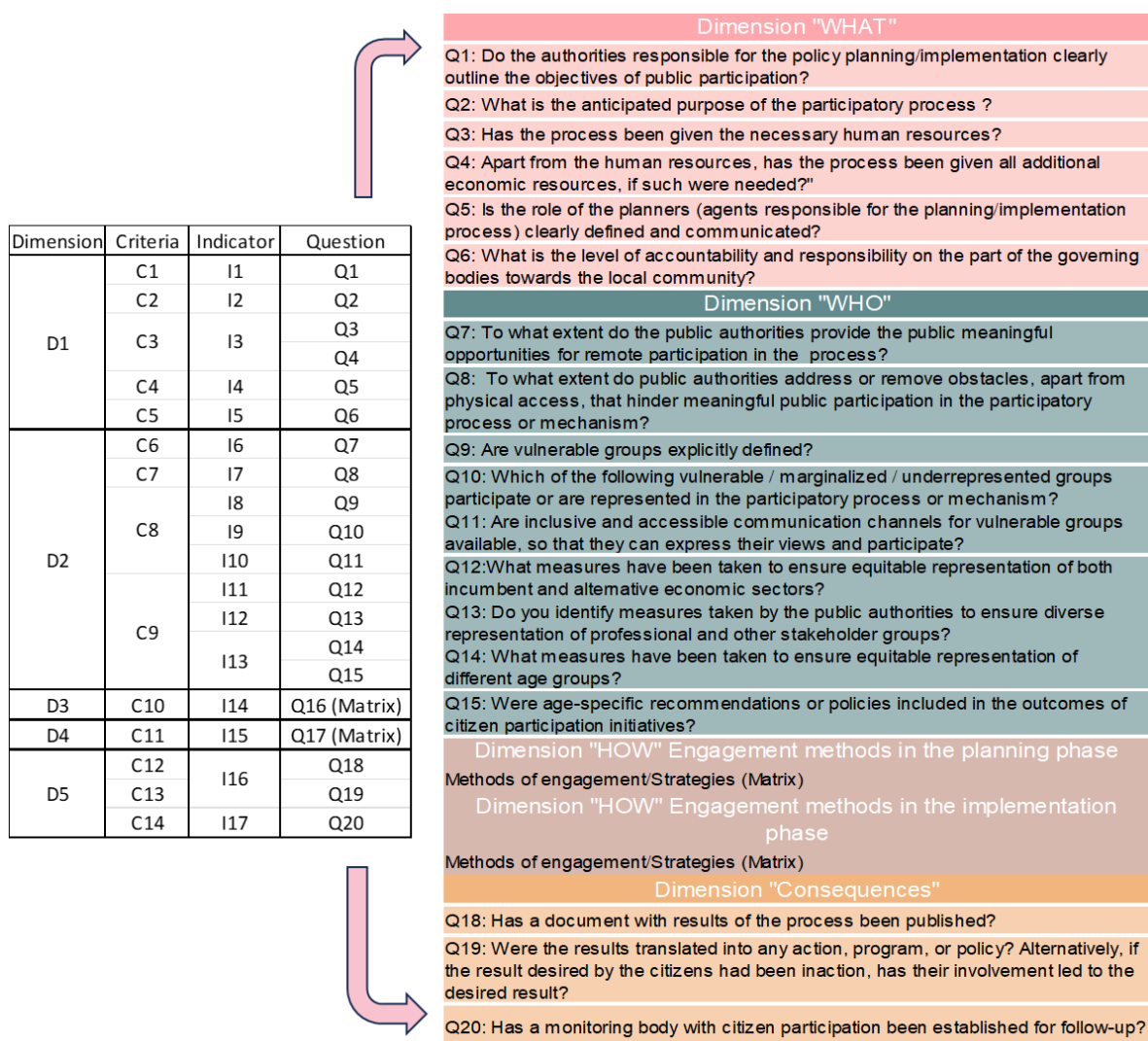


Figure 1 STEP index structure and questions.

1.2.3. Dimensions of the STEP index

The index is composed of five dimensions:

- Setup of the process of stakeholder participation;
- Inclusiveness of stakeholders;
- Engagement methods in the planning phase;
- Engagement methods in the implementation phase;
- Consequences of participation.

These dimensions are the result of prior research conducted by CSD on transitions away from coal in Central and Eastern European countries which involved extensive consultations and workshop discussions with experts from Czech Republic, Romania, Hungary, Greece, and Bulgaria, who closely observed and/or participated in the process of preparing TJTPs for coal-dependent regions in these countries. All dimensions are equally weighted, offering a pragmatic and unbiased approach when there's no compelling statistical or empirical justification for different weights. This method promotes transparency, simplicity, and the perception of equal importance for all indicators, which is particularly valuable in decision-making contexts

emphasizing fairness and objectivity. While not always the most appropriate approach for country- or region-specific cases, it provides a neutral starting point, ensuring that no single dimension is presumed to hold greater intrinsic value than others, unless evidence suggests otherwise.

Dimension 1: WHAT? Setup of the process of stakeholder participation

This dimension covers the two most general aspects of the stakeholder engagement process: the responsible agents for the governance of the planning process (planners) and the main objectives. Explicitly defining the purpose of the engagement is crucial for selecting the approach for the next dimensions of stakeholder identification, engagement methods, and the strategy for engagement in the implementation phase. This dimension consists of five indicators:

- Transparency of the participation process's objective;
- Multi-dimensionality of participation process's objective;
- Resource sufficiency of the participatory process;
- Existence of a written document that clearly identifies the planners and their roles and responsibilities;
- Level of governance responsibility in front of the local community.

Dimension 2: WHO? Inclusiveness of stakeholders

This dimension aims to determine which stakeholders are considered relevant in the planning process and which sectors/professional spheres they represent. It examines the composition of different stakeholder groups and their level of influence. Eight indicators are used to determine the type of participating stakeholders:

- Opportunity for remote participation;
- Response to participation barriers;
- Existence of the definition of vulnerable groups in the supporting documents;
- Inclusion of vulnerable / marginalized / underrepresented Groups;
- Special communication channels to allow participation;
- Representation of incumbent and alternative economic sectors;
- Representation of different professional categories and stakeholder groups;
- Inclusion of citizens of different age groups in the decision-making process.

Dimensions 3 & 4: HOW? Engagement methods in the Planning and Implementation phases

These dimensions aim to evaluate the depth and coherence of the engagement methods used for stakeholder participation during the TJTP planning process. The engagement methods range from simple provision of information with the lowest level of depth to collaborative decision-making and actions ensuring a high level of public acceptance. In these dimensions, the methods are evaluated using a simple matrix that sums the coverage methods in six grades from lower (1) to higher (6) if they are effectively “Used” - Information about the process, Communication & Feedback, Consultation, Involvement, Negotiation, and Legitimacy.

Although the evaluation of the TJTPs before their implementation does not allow for the assessment of actual stakeholder engagement in this phase, it is important to evaluate how the plans envision stakeholder engagement in the implementation phase. This includes identifying whether the TJTPs include a stakeholder engagement strategy and assessing the potential depth of engagement it can achieve based on the depth levels described in Dimension 3. The previously

mentioned matrix complements the evaluation of this dimension by assessing whether the engagement strategy is explicit and available.

Dimension 5: Consequences of participation

Consequences of participation are measured by three criteria. They paint a vivid picture of the significance of citizen engagement in decision-making processes. First and foremost, when the implementation of citizens' feedback is well-documented, it signifies a commitment to transparency and accountability in governance. This documentation ensures that the voices and concerns of citizens are not just heard but also incorporated into policy and action. Secondly, when citizens' contributions lead to tangible impacts, it underscores the effectiveness of their involvement. These impacts can manifest in improved services, policies, or even societal changes, reinforcing the value of citizen input. Lastly, when participation is facilitated throughout the monitoring phase, it establishes an ongoing dialogue between citizens and authorities, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among the public. Two indicators are brought to represent the consequences:

- Influence
- Monitoring

The data is collected from various sources of information, involving individuals representing different stakeholder groups, such as public institutions involved in the participation processes related to TJTPs, civil society representatives, or those expected to participate in the process, as well as experts in participation issues involved in a specific regional process. As the first experience in constructing the index, each partner is responsible for selecting an objective and informed person who will provide a review of region-specific policy documents to explore the engagement process of different groups in the policy process. This partner or designated person will conduct interviews with the selected candidates and/or provide the index in a survey format for later tabulation and calculation.

1.2.4. Index scoring

The scoring system for each indicator is based on questions that describe the identified components in the theoretical assessment. Each question offers a range of possible answers in single or multiple selections, earning 1 point or its equivalent in a multiple-choice question—equivalent to unity if all options are chosen. This point system allows for quantifying different levels of a specific quality, resulting in measurements between 0 and 1 for Yes/No questions or an equivalent value based on the number of options chosen in multiple-choice questions. If a specific indicator question is deemed “not applicable”, it should be excluded from the assessment, with the total maximum score adjusted accordingly.

1.3. Policy implications

TJTPs emphasize the significance of public participation and engagement. To evaluate the performance of TJTPs, the TJTP Comparative Evaluation Framework encompasses three primary pillars: inclusiveness, decarbonisation ambition, and realised impact. These pillars align with the objectives and requirements outlined in the JTM Regulation and reflect broader EU economic and climate policy objectives. Used by a neutral evaluator, the tool aims to provide an objective understanding of decisions related to stakeholder participation and its influence on TJTP performance.

The European Commission advocates the involvement of stakeholders in the development of TJTPs, including who should be engaged and how they should be involved. Stakeholders are broadly defined as “citizens, businesses, informal groups, and organizations with an interest in and impact from the proposed measures and projects “. Member states are expected to establish a comprehensive partnership that includes regional and local authorities, economic and social partners, civil society (such as environmental organizations and non-governmental organizations), and research institutions and universities. These partners should be involved at every stage of the preparation, implementation, and evaluation of Just Transition Fund programs and TJTPs. They should also serve as members of monitoring committees under the corresponding programs, actively participating in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation processes. Furthermore, a broader public consultation process is incorporated into the strategic environmental assessment, which is required for all programs receiving support from the Commission's Just Transition Fund.

1.4. Using the results effectively

When the STEP index highlights indicators that have not been fully achieved, it becomes crucial to utilize it as a means to engage stakeholders, including governments, civil society organizations, and international bodies, in discussions and actions aimed at enhancing citizen participation.

The results from this tool can be used:

- **Enhance policy documentation.** To support reporting, write-up, and partnership arrangements and practices applied during the process of development and implementation of just transition and other place-based sustainability transition policies.
- **Performance insights.** To gain insights into the performance of just transition and related policies, facilitating comparisons with other territories when it comes to involving and empowering citizens to participate in the decision-making process.
- **Stakeholder transparency.** To inform civil society and external observers on the level and depth of stakeholder participation, facilitating monitoring of different aspects of citizen participation in place-based policies.
- **Raise awareness.** Present the index findings to stakeholders, emphasizing the specific indicators that are not fully met. This creates awareness of the existing gaps and the need for improved citizen participation.
- **Identify areas for improvement.** Encourage stakeholders to analyse the indicators that require attention and identify the specific areas where citizen participation falls short. This identification helps in prioritizing efforts and allocating resources effectively.
- **Facilitate dialogue.** Initiate discussions among stakeholders to explore the underlying reasons behind the indicators that are not fully achieved. Encourage open and inclusive conversations that involve diverse perspectives to identify barriers, challenges, and potential solutions.
- **Collaborative action planning.** Engage stakeholders in developing action plans that address the identified gaps in citizen participation. Encourage the formulation of concrete strategies, policies, and initiatives that can enhance citizen engagement and involvement in decision-making processes.
- **Capacity building.** Highlight the importance of capacity-building initiatives to empower stakeholders. Provide resources and support for training programs, workshops, and

educational campaigns that promote active citizenship and enhance participation skills.

- **Policy advocacy.** Encourage stakeholders to advocate for policy changes or improvements that foster greater participation. Collaboratively develop recommendations and proposals for integrating participatory mechanisms into existing policies and frameworks.
- **Monitor and evaluate progress.** Establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the progress made in enhancing citizen participation. Regularly review the indicators highlighted by the index to track improvements and identify areas that still need attention. By using the index as a starting point for engagement, stakeholders can work together to address the shortcomings in citizen participation, promote transparency, and ensure that the voices of all stakeholders are heard and considered in decision-making processes.
- **Comparative Participation.** Comparing participation levels across territories expected to be the most negatively impacted by the transition towards climate-neutrality offers insights for policy learning and transfer. Understanding variations in stakeholder engagement helps identify successful strategies for enhancing citizen involvement in place-based policies, fostering collaboration and sharing best practices among regions undergoing similar transition processes.

2. Indicators and questions

Dimension 1: Setup of the process of stakeholder participation

Indicator 1: Transparency of the participation process's objective

This indicator focuses on the availability of a document that clearly states the objectives, goals, or purpose of engaging stakeholders in the policy-making process (planning or implementing). It ensures that there is a defined framework or strategy in place for engaging stakeholders, clarifying the intended outcomes, and guiding the engagement activities to achieve those objectives.

Question 1: Do the authorities responsible for the policy planning/implementation clearly outline the scope and objectives of public participation?

Possible answers:

- Yes: The responsible authorities clearly outline the scope and objectives of public participation in the process.
- No: The authorities do not clearly outline the scope and/or objectives of public participation in the process.
- Not Applicable (-)

Criteria	The objective of the participatory process is clear for the public.
Data source	Local, regional or national documents published by the local authorities on the policy-making process under evaluation. Legal determinations that enforce participation processes in policymaking.
Data collection process	Desk research.

Indicator 2: Multi-dimensionality of participation process's objective

This indicator evaluates the effectiveness and appropriateness of the stakeholder engagement efforts in relation to the goals and objectives of the planning process. It examines the extent to which stakeholders are effectively involved, whether their inputs are considered and incorporated into the planning decisions, and whether the engagement process is transparent, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse perspectives and needs of the stakeholders.

Question 2: What is the anticipated purpose of the participatory process?

Possible answers:

- Requirement: compliance with formal requirements
- Expectation check: identifying expectations and perceptions of the participants
- Vulnerability: addressing level of vulnerability
- Knowledge gain: local knowledge gathering
- Learning: effectiveness (facilitating social learning, continuous improvement)
- Legitimacy: ensuring legitimacy of the policy (achieving collective reflection, negotiation and consensus)

Criteria	The purpose of the participatory process goes beyond a simple compliance check of regulatory requirements.
Data source	Interviews and desk research.
Data collection process	Stakeholders will inform verbally or written whether an expected engagement for the planning objectives is adequate and which level of adequacy it represents.

Indicator 3: Resource sufficiency of the participatory process

This indicator assesses whether a participatory decision-making or engagement process has received adequate economic resources to effectively carry out its objectives. It evaluates whether the financial and material resources allocated to the process are sufficient to support its various components, such as outreach and communication, facilitation, data collection and analysis, and the overall management of the participatory initiative.

Question 3: Has the process been given the necessary economic resources?

Possible answers:

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

Criteria	The participatory process is well-resourced and supported.
Data source	Interview, survey, and expert observation.
Data collection process	Stakeholders will inform, verbally or in writing, whether resources are sufficient to reach the goals in a participatory process.

Question 4: Has the process been given the necessary human resources?

Possible answers:

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

This question evaluates whether a participatory decision-making or engagement process has access to an adequate number of qualified personnel, volunteers, or participants with the necessary skills, knowledge, and capacities to effectively carry out its objectives. It assesses whether the human resources allocated to the process are sufficient to support various activities, including outreach and communication, facilitation, data collection and analysis, and the overall management of the participatory initiative.

Criteria	The participatory process is well-resourced and supported.
Data source	Interview, survey, and expert observation.
Data collection process	Stakeholders will inform, verbally or in writing, whether resources are sufficient to reach the goals in a participatory process.

Indicator 4: Existence of a written document that clearly identifies the planners and their roles and responsibilities

This indicator refers to the presence of a registered document that clearly outlines the individuals or entities involved in the planning process and their specific roles and responsibilities. It ensures that there is a clear understanding of who is responsible for what aspects of the planning process and helps establish accountability and coordination among the planners. A well-defined purpose for the public's role in the policy-making actions that are real, practical, and shared among stakeholders can be flexible considering that "As the involvement by the local communities increases, the nature of their role changes. If, for example, they play an active role at strategic points in decision-making (resource evaluation), or at an executive level, the nature of their role changes from being 'subjects' to 'directors' of the process. Different processes may benefit from different methods".

Question 5: Is the role of the planners (agents responsible for the planning/implementation process) clearly defined and communicated?

Possible answers:

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

Criteria	The roles and responsibilities of planners are explicitly outlined.
Data source	Local, regional or national documents published by the local authorities on the policy-making process under evaluation. Legal determinations that enforce participation processes in policymaking.
Data collection process	Desk research.

Indicator 5: Level of governance responsibility in front of the local community

This indicator assesses the degree to which the governing body or authorities are accountable and responsive to the local community. It measures the extent to which the local community has a voice in decision-making processes, how their concerns and needs are considered, and the transparency of the governance system in engaging and involving the community in the planning process.

Question 6: What is the level of accountability and responsibility on the part of the governing bodies towards the local community?

Possible answers:

- Highest level: Local community (self-organization)
- High level: Local authority
- Intermediate level: Regional (NUTS2 and NUTS3)
- Intermediate level: National authority
- Low level: External consultant
- Not applicable

Criteria	Co-shared accountability and responsibility.
Data source	Local, regional or national documents published by the local authorities on the policy-making process under evaluation. Legal determinations that enforce participation processes in policymaking.
Data collection process	Desk research.

Dimension 2: Inclusiveness (Composition of the stakeholder groups)

Indicator 6: Opportunity for remote participation

This indicator assesses the accessibility and inclusivity of participatory initiatives by evaluating the availability and effectiveness of remote participation mechanisms, such as virtual meetings, online forums, or other digital platforms. It examines whether public authorities have established and adequately promoted remote participation options, enabling individuals who cannot be physically present to still contribute to decision-making, discussions, or public consultations.

Question 7: To what extent do the public authorities provide the public with meaningful opportunities for remote participation in the process?

Possible answers:

- High: The authorities provide meaningful opportunities for remote participation by empowering the public to make decisions around formulation or implementation, or partner with the public to co-create alternatives, through digital and online spaces.
- Medium: The public authorities provide some basic opportunities for remote participation through digital and online spaces.
- Low/None: The public institution provides no or limited opportunities for remote participation or only informs the public of decisions around formulation or implementation through digital and online spaces.
- Not applicable

Criteria	Potential participants face no hindrances in joining the decision-making process, which includes ensuring physical access to the venue, employing a streamlined registration protocol, waiving fees, and accommodating varying working hours and geographic constraints.
Data source	Interviews, expert observation.
Data collection process	Stakeholders will inform, verbally or in writing, whether public authorities provide meaningful opportunities for remote participation in the process.

Indicator 7: Response to participation barriers

This indicator is designed to evaluate the responsiveness of the governing body or institution conducting the participatory initiative in identifying and mitigating barriers that may prevent diverse groups of citizens from engaging effectively. The indicator focuses on the proactive measures and strategies adopted by public authorities to ensure inclusivity, equity, and accessibility in the participatory process. It considers the efforts made to remove hurdles such as language barriers, physical accessibility challenges, technological limitations, or any discriminatory practices that may hinder the full and meaningful engagement of all interested stakeholders.

Question 8: To what extent do public authorities address or remove obstacles, apart from physical access that hinder meaningful public participation in the participatory process or mechanism?

Possible answers:

- High: The public institution recognizes and takes clear measures to effectively address or mitigate multiple barriers to participation
- Medium: The public institution recognizes and takes clear measures to address or mitigate select barriers to participation.
- Low/None: The public institution exhibits limited or no interest in, or evidence of, addressing key barriers to participation
- Not applicable

Criteria	Potential participants face no hindrances in joining the decision-making process, which includes ensuring physical access to the venue, employing a streamlined registration protocol, waiving fees, and accommodating varying working hours and geographic constraints.
Data source	Local, regional or national documents published by the local authorities on the policy-making process under evaluation. Legal determinations that enforce participation processes in policymaking.
Data collection process	Desk research.

Indicator 8: Existence of the definition of vulnerable groups in the supporting documents

This indicator seeks to determine whether the relevant documentation includes a precise and comprehensive explanation or classification of the specific populations or communities considered vulnerable, as well as the criteria used to identify them.

Question 9: Are vulnerable groups explicitly defined?

Possible answers:

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

Criteria	The design of participation process addresses vulnerability.
Data source	Local, regional or national documents published by the local authorities on the policy-making process under evaluation. Legal determinations that enforce participation processes in policymaking.
Data collection process	Desk research.

Indicator 9: Inclusion of vulnerable / marginalized / underrepresented groups

This indicator aims to identify and measure the level of inclusivity and diversity achieved within the decision-making or engagement initiative. The indicator considers a range of groups that may face social, economic, cultural, or structural disadvantages, such as ethnic and racial minorities, women, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, indigenous communities, low-

income populations, and other marginalized groups. It examines whether these groups have the opportunity to actively participate, provide input, or hold representation in the participatory process.

Question 10: Which of the following vulnerable/marginalized/underrepresented groups participate or are represented in the participatory process or mechanism?

Possible answers:

- Women
- Youth
- Senior Citizens
- LGBTQI
- National or ethnic minorities
- Religious minorities
- Linguistic minorities
- Indigenous peoples & communities
- People with disabilities
- People living in poverty
- Other

Criteria	The design of the participation process addresses vulnerability and inclusivity.
Data source	Survey, expert observation.
Data collection process	Stakeholders will verbally or in writing indicate whether they represent vulnerable, marginalized, or underrepresented groups.

Indicator 10: Special communication channels to allow participation

This indicator seeks to determine whether inclusive and accessible communication methods are in place to enable these groups to express their views and participate actively. It specifically focuses on whether there are communication channels that are specially designed to accommodate the needs and preferences of vulnerable groups. These channels may include formats such as easy-to-read materials, sign language interpretation, braille documents, audio or video messages, community meetings in accessible venues, or digital platforms with features that cater to diverse communication styles and abilities.

Question 11: Are inclusive and accessible communication channels for vulnerable groups available, so that they can express their views and participate?

Possible answers:

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

Criteria	The design of the participation process addresses vulnerability and inclusivity.
Data source	Survey, expert observation.
Data collection process	Stakeholders will verbally or in writing indicate whether they represent vulnerable, marginalized, or underrepresented groups.

Indicator 11: Representation of incumbent and alternative economic sectors

This indicator seeks to evaluate the inclusivity and diversity of economic perspectives in the decision-making arena. It considers whether mechanisms have been put in place to provide a platform for stakeholders from both well-established economic sectors (incumbent) and emerging or non-conventional economic sectors (alternative) to participate, express their views, and contribute to the decision-making process.

Question 12: What measures have been taken to ensure equitable representation of both incumbent and alternative economic sectors?

Possible answers:

- Invitations: Invitations to participate are sent to both traditional and emerging sectors
- Separate discussion platforms: Separate working groups are formed for incumbent and alternative sectors, so that each group discusses sector-specific issues and contributes to the decision-making process
- Quotas: A predetermined percentage of participants are selected from each sector to ensure proportional representation of different sectors
- Advisors appointed: Advisors from various sectors are appointed to provide expert opinions during decision-making
- Public hearings: Sector-Specific Public Hearings are organized where representatives from both types of sectors present their perspectives
- Collaborative actions: Collaborative brainstorming sessions are held to find innovative solutions that benefit all sectors
- Separate impact assessments: Each sector conducts impact assessments for proposed decisions
- Other measures
- No measures: No measures have been taken to ensure equitable representation of both incumbent and alternative economic sectors
- Not applicable

Criteria	The participation process allows for the representation of diverse stakeholder groups and for a balance of their different interests.
Data source	Surveys, expert observation. Also, local, regional, or national documents published by the local authorities on the policy-making process under evaluation. Legal determinations that enforce participation processes in policymaking.
Data collection process	Stakeholders will verbally or in writing indicate whether measures have been taken to ensure equitable representation of both incumbent and alternative economic sectors. Desk research.

Indicator 12: Representation of different professional categories

This indicator assesses whether public authorities have implemented measures to promote diverse representation of various professional groups and other stakeholder groups within a participatory process or mechanism. It aims to evaluate the inclusivity of decision-making by examining the steps taken to ensure that a broad spectrum of professional perspectives is included.

Question 13: Do you identify measures taken by the public authorities to ensure diverse representation of professional and other stakeholder groups?

Possible answers:

- Business: Large enterprises
- Business: SMEs
- Trade Unions
- Financial institutions
- Academia
- Environmental organizations
- Civil society/ Local communities
- Local government
- Regional development agencies
- Others

Criteria	The participation process allows for the representation of diverse stakeholder groups and for a balance of their different interests.
Data source	Surveys, expert observation. Also, local, regional or national documents published by the local authorities on the policy-making process under evaluation. Legal determinations that enforce participation processes in policymaking.
Data collection process	Stakeholders will verbally or in writing indicate whether measures have been taken to ensure equitable representation of different professional categories. Desk research.

Indicator 13: Inclusion of citizens of different age groups in the decision-making process

This indicator evaluates the extent to which measures have been put in place to ensure fair and inclusive representation of various age groups within a participatory process. This indicator examines the strategies and actions taken to promote the active involvement and engagement of citizens from distinct age categories. This indicator focuses on identifying the specific measures and approaches employed to achieve equitable representation of different age groups.

Question 14: What measures have been taken to ensure equitable representation of different age groups?

Possible answers:

- Invitations: Invitations for participation are extended to targeted networks and organizations associated with distinct age groups, such as youth movements, pensioners' clubs, schools, etc.
- Consultations: Age-specific consultations/ Focus groups/ Interviews to gather age-specific viewpoints and feedback

- Participation quotas: Quotas for each age group to ensure proportional representation
- Random: Randomly select participants from various age groups to ensure a balanced representation
- Advisory Councils: Youth/Senior Advisory Councils
- Ambassadors: Elder and youth Ambassadors are appointed from elder and youth communities to represent their respective groups
- Age-Responsive Communication: Selected communication methods that cater to various age groups to ensure information reaches and resonates with all ages
- Age-Disaggregated Data Analysis: Age-disaggregated data analysis is considered in the decision-making to identify trends and preferences across different age segments
- Others
- No specific measures: No specific measures for equitable representation of different ages are identified

Criteria	The participation process allows for the representation of diverse stakeholder groups and for a balance of their different interests.
Data source	Surveys, expert observation. Also, local, regional or national documents published by the local authorities on the policy-making process under evaluation. Legal determinations that enforce participation processes in policymaking.
Data collection process	Stakeholders will verbally or in writing indicate whether measures have been taken to ensure the inclusion of citizens of different age groups in the decision-making process. Desk research.

Question 15: Were age-specific recommendations or policies included in the outcomes of citizen participation initiatives?

Possible answers:

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

It assesses whether citizen participation initiatives have resulted in the formulation or inclusion of recommendations or policies that specifically address the unique needs, concerns, or preferences of different age groups within the population. It seeks to determine if the outcomes of these initiatives reflect a deliberate consideration of age-related factors, to promote equitable and age-responsive governance.

Criteria	The participation process allows for the representation of diverse stakeholder groups and for a balance of their different interests.
Data source	Local, regional or national documents published by the local authorities on the policy-making process under evaluation. Legal determinations that enforce participation processes in policymaking.
Data collection process	Desk research.

Dimension 3 and 4: Engagement methods in the planning phase and Engagement methods in the implementation phase

Indicators 14 and 15: Depth of engagement

Depth of stakeholder engagement and communication tools is referred to as various communication tools, each predefined as appropriate for specific levels of depth, and it is measured in a matrix type to confront methods of engagement/strategies priorly identified.

<p><i>Methods of engagement/Strategies:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletter/Email • Media Platform/Website • Presentation • Working Groups • Written Public Comments • Modelling/Analytica Tool • Other 	<p><i>Depth of stakeholder engagement and communication tools:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about the process: Unidirectional flow of information about the problem, the existing alternatives and solutions. • Communication and Feedback: The information flows from planners to the stakeholders + requires the feedback from the participating parties, • Consultation: Requires more detailed input about stakeholders' concerns and aspirations and seeks to acquire local knowledge. • Involvement: Requires co-working between planners and stakeholder assuring their concerns, knowledge and perceptions are consistently understood and taken into account. • Negotiation: Requires complex and dynamic interactions with stakeholders that involve a close coordination in the final choice of projects and policies. • Legitimacy: Requires the planners to establish high level of public acceptance of the proposed alternatives and solutions. It requires additional communication tools to ensure such acceptance (e.g., foresight methodologies, voting procedures, etc.).
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Criteria	The quality of engagement increases with the use of multiple communication tools and depth of the selected engagement strategy.
Data source	This information will be collected before every policy making participatory event to be found in documents or materials prepared by the organizers and during the event through observation.
Data collection process	Expert evaluation and desk research.

Indicator	Engagement methods	Depth of stakeholder engagement and communication tools					
Depth of Engagement	Methods of engagement/Strategies	Please select from the drop-down list					
		Information about the process	Communication & Feedback	Consultation	Involvement	Negotiation	Legitimacy
	Newsletter/ Email			Used			
	Media Platform/Web-site			Not used			
	Presentation			Not applicable			
	Working Groups						
	Written Public Comments						
	Modelling/ Analytica Tool						
	Other						
		<input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable					

Figure 2 Visual representation of matrix for engagement methods.

Dimension 5: Consequences of participation

Indicator 16: Influence (Dissemination)

This indicator refers to the extent to which the results of a particular process or project have been made accessible or disseminated to a broader audience, typically through the publication of a document.

Question 18: Has a document with results of the process been published?

Possible answers:

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

Criteria	The implementation of citizens' feedback is documented.
Data source	Printed and online publications available.
Data collection process	Desk research.

Indicator 16: Influence (Impact)

This indicator assesses the degree to which the results of a specific process or project have had an impact on decision-making and practical outcomes. It measures how effectively the findings or outcomes have been used to inform and shape actions, programs, or policies.

Question 19: Were the results translated into any action, programme or policy? Alternatively, if the result desired by the citizens had been inaction, has their involvement led to the desired result?

Possible answers:

- To a great extent: This indicates that the results have had a significant and substantial influence on actions, programs, or policies. They were a major driver in decision-making and led to substantial changes or initiatives.
- Very high extent: This suggests that the results have had a strong influence on actions, programs, or policies. They played a crucial role in shaping decisions and contributed significantly to changes or initiatives.
- Moderate extent: This implies that the results have had a noticeable but not overwhelmingly strong influence on actions, programs, or policies. They contributed to some extent to decision-making and led to moderate changes or initiatives.

- Low extent: This indicates that the results have had a limited influence on actions, programs, or policies. They played a minor role in decision-making and led to only minor changes or initiatives.
- Very low extent: This suggests that the results have had an almost negligible influence on actions, programs, or policies. They had little to no impact on decision-making, and there were minimal changes or initiatives as a result.
- Not applicable

Criteria	Citizens' contributions have generated impact.
Data source	Surveys, interviews, expert observation.
Data collection process	Stakeholders will verbally or in writing indicate whether results were translated into any action, programme or policy. Desk research.

Indicator 17: Monitoring

This indicator assesses the presence of a dedicated entity or organization that has been set up to oversee and track the progress, implementation, or performance of a specific project, program, policy, or initiative. Importantly, this monitoring body also involves citizen participation, meaning that members of the public or relevant stakeholders are actively engaged in the monitoring process.

Question 20: Has a monitoring body with citizen participation been established for follow-up?

Possible answers:

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

Criteria	Citizens' participation is facilitated in the monitoring phase
Data source	Interviews
Data collection process	Stakeholders will verbally or in writing indicate whether a monitoring body with citizen participation has been established for follow-up.

Dimension	Criteria	Indicator	Question	Value	Evaluation methods
Consequences of participation	The implementation of citizens' feedback is documented	Influence	Q18: Has a document with results of the process been published?	Single selection is possible <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	Expert evaluation APES Tool Analysis of documents Records of participation
	Citizens' contributions have generated impact		Q19: Were the results translated into any action, program, or policy? Alternatively, if the result desired by the citizens had been inaction, has their involvement led to the desired result?	Single selection is possible <input type="checkbox"/> To great extent <input type="checkbox"/> Very high extent <input type="checkbox"/> Moderate extent <input type="checkbox"/> Low extent <input type="checkbox"/> Very low extent <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
	Citizens participation is facilitated in the monitoring phase	Monitoring	Q20: Has a monitoring body with citizen participation been established for follow-up?	Single selection is possible <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	

Figure 3 Visual Representation of Dimension 5.

3. Step-by-step guide

3.1. Filling in initial findings

Using the initial version of Excel is a straightforward process, with the tool intuitively guiding you through the evaluation.

- **Step 1. Launching the index excel-file and filling in the questions.**
 - *Step 1.1.* Open Excel on your computer. Enable macros if prompted for proper functionality: When you open the Excel workbook, you may encounter a warning message or a notification at the document's top, indicating that macros are disabled for security reasons. To enable macros and allow them to run, look for the 'Enable content' option. In the Security Warning dialog box, select 'Yes' to establish the document as trusted and enable macros.
 - *Step 1.2.* Navigate to the "Read Me" sheet for an overview of the tool.
 - *Step 1.3.* Access the "Evaluation Form" with questions and checkboxes.
 - *Step 1.4.* Answer questions and tick checkboxes as per indicators. The checkboxes provide information on how to respond to the questions.
 - *Please note that, for dimensions 3 and 4, choose the cell that corresponds to “Depth of stakeholder engagement and communication tools” for each of the “Methods of engagement/Strategies” and select one of the following three options: “Used”, “Not Used” or “Not Applicable”.
 - *Step 1.5.* Proceed to the “Results” sheet for performance data represented numerically and graphically in radar charts.

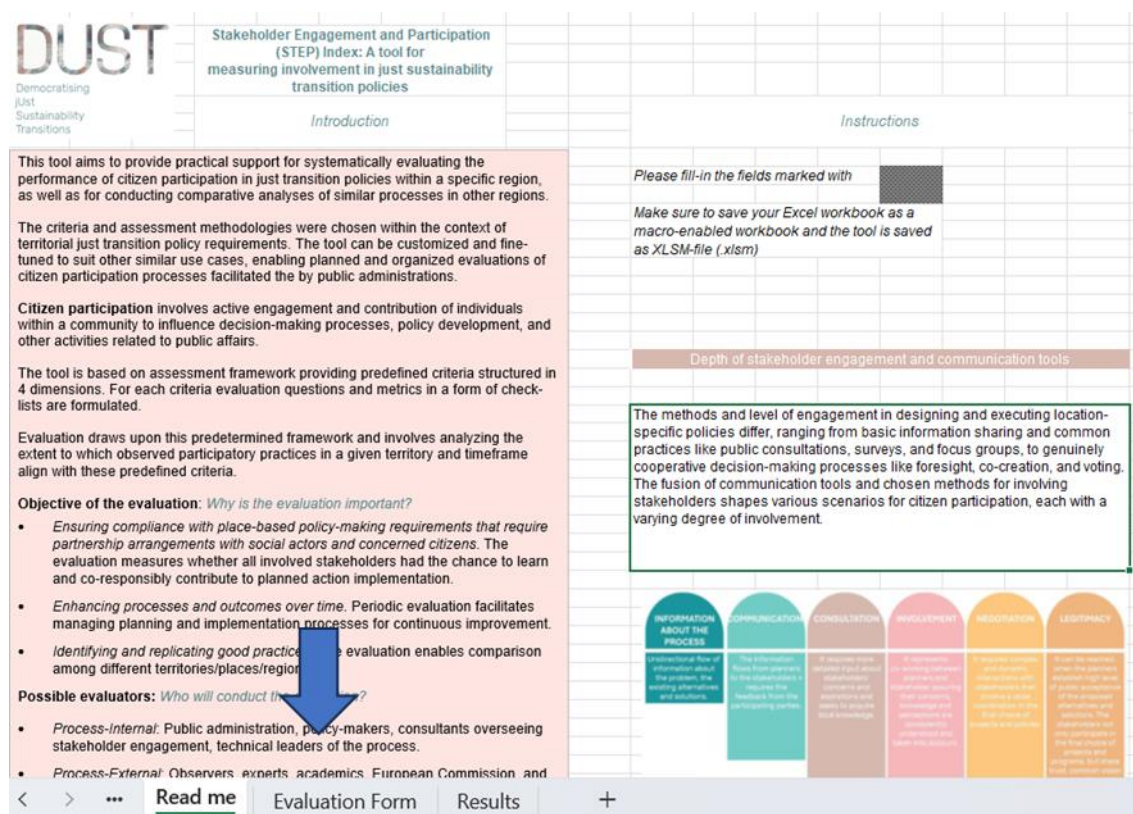


Figure 5 STEP index visual Read me in Excel format.

substantiate an alternative rating. To aid in discussions and deliberations, a "validation meeting" should be arranged, with participation from essential stakeholders within the institution. These stakeholders should receive the assessment and interim findings at least one week in advance of the meeting.




- **Step 4. Optional Written Confirmation.** If the institution concurs with the findings, the researcher can ask for written confirmation of the assessment from the public institution. In cases of disagreement, the researcher can request a written submission of objections, accompanied by new evidence, within a designated timeframe. This procedure enables the researcher to thoughtfully review the institution's input and make necessary adjustments to the assessment. The institutional validation process should occur after the interim findings have undergone an external review.

By implementing these external quality control measures, users ensure that the STEP index can ensure the reliability and validity of its findings, contributing to higher integrity and credibility of the assessment process.

4. Interpreting the results

The STEP index is a flexible measurement in terms of time and place. It means that it can be applied to a single case study, where the result would indicate the state of participation for that specific activity, or it can be used for multiple case studies, enabling comparisons between them. If the measurement is conducted repeatedly over an extended period, it becomes possible to compare the measurement's state over time and determine a trajectory. Due to the varying timing and conditions of policy-making processes related to TJTPs and other place-based sustainability transition policy initiatives, the indicators can be constantly evaluated and reevaluated either independently or collectively at a single moment. If evaluated independently, the result would be suitable for analysis of the specific case study at a particular moment. If all components are assessed collectively, it is possible to obtain a STEP outlook and a category for that specific moment in each of the dimensions evaluated. Although the dimensions of the index follow a logical sequence, it is not strictly necessary to adhere to this order when evaluating its components.

Once the results have been calculated and the State of Participation in the policy-making process has been determined, the researcher can assign one of the following assessment performance categories:

-  High: State of Participation Score Between 80% – 100%
-  Medium: State of Participation Score Between 50% – 79%
-  Low: State of Participation Score Between 0 – 49%

With this interpretation, the results can be compared at different geographical levels because the parameters included do not conflict with dimensions related to a population or its characteristics. Since the object being measured is an activity (participation and engagement) concerning the policy-making process, it is possible to numerically compare its state with other locations where similar activities are taking place. For example, if STEP – Dimension 1 is 20% in locality A and 45% in locality B, both would be considered to have a Low level of participation, although locality B has a more advanced process.

Since each of the components is also measured on a scale from 0 to 100%, it is possible to describe at what point the participation stands for each dimension and assess its content.

However, evaluating only one dimension to calculate the STEP index is not suitable for comparison with other STEP indices, as another dimension or all dimensions may have been calculated. The analysis needs to indicate if one or several elements or dimensions were not evaluated or were evaluated as Not Applicable (-), because in the first case, it would not be possible to compare the index result, and in the second case, this condition would mean not considering such component or indicator. Therefore, for the index analysis to be comparative, all components must be evaluated and rated within their respective ranges. A graphic example, in the form of a radar graph, illustrates a case study in which all indicators were evaluated, revealing varying performance levels across all dimensions. This is shown in the figure below:

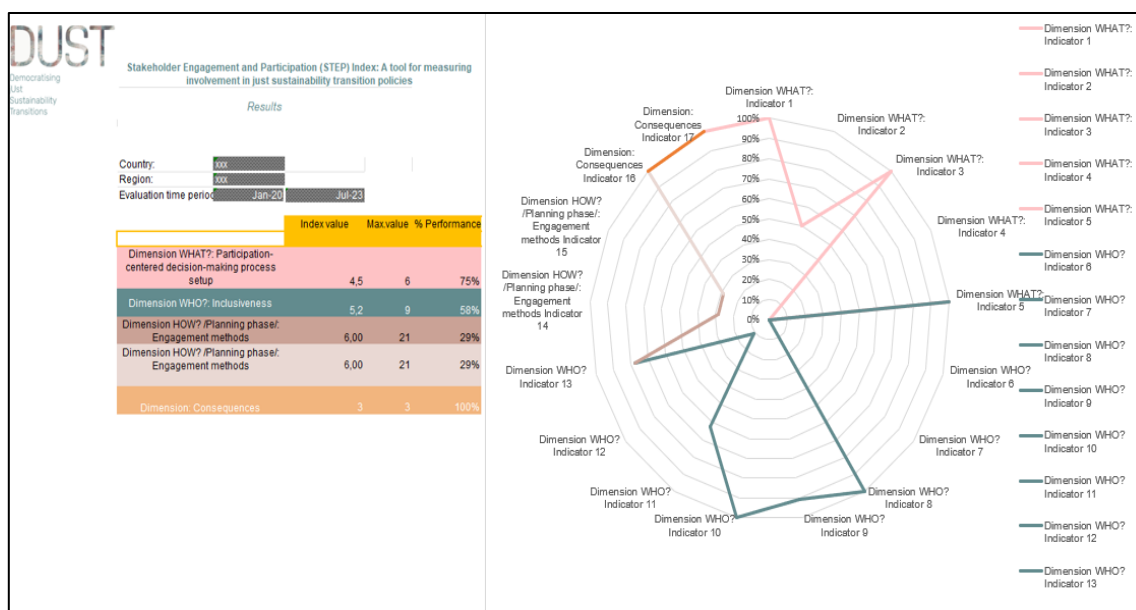


Figure 6 Example STEP index results in a radar graph.

This example illustrates a hypothetical study case where all dimensions were individually evaluated and ranked. A performance of 75% was observed in Dimension 1, considering that the objective of the multi-dimensionality of the participation process is not fully achieved. The role of planners in the self-organized process by the local community, as indicated by Indicator 5, is not clearly defined and communicated. In Dimension 2, a performance of 58% was recorded, as there was no opportunity for remote participants to adhere. The public institution acknowledges and takes measures to address or mitigate only partial barriers to participation. Although vulnerable groups were represented in the participatory process, they were not explicitly defined, and only a few measures were implemented to ensure equitable representation across different age groups. As for Dimensions 3 and 4, a performance of 29% was achieved. Only three engagement methods—Information about the process, Communication & Feedback, and Consultation—were considered in the planning and implementation phases. Consequently, Dimension 5 achieved a 100% ranking, indicating that the participatory process resulted in some impact, and citizens were taken into account for a monitoring phase.

The results can be updated at any given moment, serving as a comprehensive checklist of requirements that must be met to ensure full effectiveness of participation.

5. Next steps for the STEP index

To ensure continuous improvement, the following four steps from the process of STEP index development, testing and refinement are outstanding and planned to be implemented in the next months. These subsequent steps would further enhance the reliability, usability, and effectiveness of the STEP index, positioning it as a valuable instrument for assessing and enhancing citizen participation within the context of just sustainability transition policies:

Validation and calibration (conditional). This step is contingent upon the availability of external benchmarks or existing measures that allow for meaningful comparisons. Up to this point, WWF has created a single assessment framework (in the form of a checklist) following similar objectives as the STEP index and designed for analyzing the comprehensiveness of TJTPs in coal regions. Once the evaluation process for the STEP index is completed, the results of the existing framework could be employed to validate the ones obtained for the DUST case study regions.

Additionally, the Working Group on Horizontal Stakeholder Strategy as part of the e Just Transition Platform (JTP) has included a dedicated task in its work plan. This task is specifically geared towards developing supplementary assessment tools, aligning with Action 2 of the JTP Implementation Plan. If such reference points are found and accessible, the validation and calibration phase will be initiated. This involves rigorously assessing the congruence between the STEP index results and these external benchmarks. By aligning the index's outcomes with established standards, its reliability and accuracy can be verified. Adjustments and refinements, if needed, can be implemented to ensure the index's alignment with trusted external measures.

Ensuring usability as an excel-based tool. Recognizing the importance of seamless user experience, special attention is directed towards enhancing the usability of the STEP index as an Excel-based instrument. This involves streamlining navigation, optimizing layout, and refining functionalities within the Excel environment. The tool's accessibility, ease of use, and intuitive interface are prioritized, ensuring that users can engage with the index efficiently and derive meaningful insights without unnecessary complications.

Integrating regional case-specific issues and results' interpretation. Practical examples that effectively demonstrate the assessment process and provide guidance on result interpretation will showcase the index's applicability and ensure a standardized approach to interpreting STEP index results. To meet this requirement, the project's activities include the implementation of the index in specific case study regions. The outcomes and experiences from these real-world implementations will subsequently be incorporated into the user manual, serving as valuable practical illustrations, enabling for benchmarking of different regions in their success of including least engage communities in place-based participatory processes. In addition, the regional case-specific examples of civil society engagement in sustainability transition policies will enable local, regional and national governmental bodies and EU institutions to assess the success of their policies over time. Last, but not least, the implementation of the tool provides insight and arguments to raise regional voices and concerns, ultimately leading to an increased Societal Readiness Level (SRL).

Developing guidelines for interpretation and communication of results. A critical phase of the process involves continuous improvement of the comprehensive guidelines for interpreting and communicating the results generated by the STEP index. This will encompass strategies to refine and update the index as new insights and data emerge, ensuring that the tool remains

relevant, accurate, and aligned with evolving needs and standards. These will be included in an updated version of the STEP index User Manual (D2.5).

For further guidance, please check the website of the [DUST project](#) and [Center for the Study of Democracy \(CSD\)](#). For any queries or concerns regarding using the tool and/or suggestions for its improvement, please contact Dr. Mariya Trifonova at mariya.Trifonova@online.bg, German Rueda at german.rueda@csd.bg, and/or Remina Aleksieva at remina.aleksieva@csd.bg.