



PROMOTING ACTIVE SUBSIDIARITY FOR JUST SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS AT THE EU LEVEL

Recommendations for EU policymaking

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DUST Project



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Democratising
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Sustainability
Transitions

COLOPHON

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Participating partners:



INTRODUCTION

In response to growing concerns about eroding democratic institutions and territorial inequalities (Barca et al., 2012), the European Union is seeking to make its policies more accessible and responsive to citizens (European Commission, 2018). Within EU Cohesion policy and other EU responses, citizens are increasingly involved in place-based approaches (European Commission, 2021) aimed at reducing socioeconomic and territorial disparities while developing innovative interventions for just sustainability transitions. Recognising that the relative costs and benefits of transitions generate political, economic, and social consequences with a clear territorial dimension, these approaches emphasise citizen participation. Through the deliberation and co-creation of such approaches, EU-led governance arrangements aim to empower citizens, strengthen their ownership of policies, and rebuild trust in democratic institutions.

‘Active subsidiarity’, positioned as a guiding principle for multilevel governance, advances the autonomy and self-rule of local governments and communities. Promoting this principle at the EU level calls for the establishment of key

performance indicators, notably transparent and comprehensive indicators measuring both the effectiveness of sustainable transition policies and the strength and impact of community participation. It also requires supporting the identification and inclusion of marginalised groups; encouraging cross-sectoral responses to transition challenges; creating regulatory frameworks that enable stakeholder participation; providing capacity-building support; establishing principles for effective participatory governance structures; facilitating platforms for knowledge sharing; and enabling the participation of ordinary citizens.

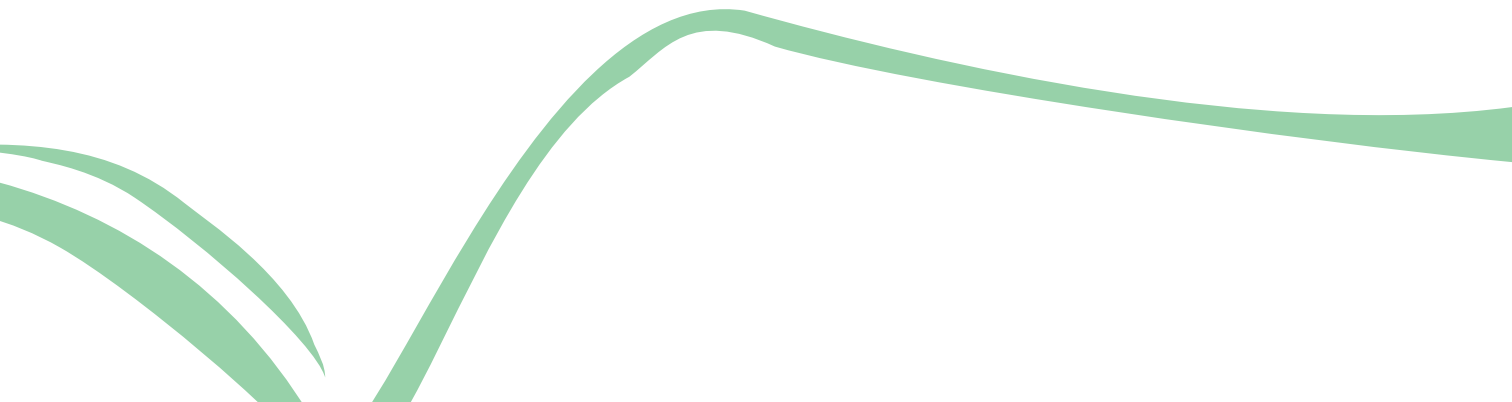
Accordingly, this policy brief sets out recommendations for promoting active subsidiarity in EU policymaking for just sustainability transitions.

TARGET AUDIENCE

This policy brief is primarily aimed at decision-makers and stakeholders involved in EU-level sustainable transition policymaking. Its recommendations are intended for:

- EU institutions – to integrate active subsidiarity, citizen engagement, and place-based approaches into policy design and implementation.
- National, regional, and local authorities – to support participatory governance and address territorial and social variations on the ground.
- Policy analysts and researchers – to support evidence-based policymaking and assess the effectiveness of multi-level governance and participatory processes.

By targeting these audiences, the policy brief aims to strengthen the design, implementation, and evaluation of EU sustainable transition measures while ensuring that citizen participation and territorial considerations are fully integrated.





Promote active subsidiarity in EU just sustainability transition policies by strengthening the territorial dimension, fostering coordination across sectors and governance levels, and systematically supporting bottom-up community participation through mandatory participatory mechanisms, monitoring, and targeted capacity-building.



Visualisation of main policy message

RECOMMENDATIONS

The systematic use of a definition of ‘active subsidiarity’ agreed upon by all European Union institutions could help clarify whether strategic decisions—such as those concerning the scope of just transition pathways—have been made in an effective and inclusive manner, with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders at European, national, and regional levels.

A key finding from the DUST research is that active subsidiarity and citizen engagement are particularly supported when sustainable transition measures adopt place-based organising principles.

The following non-exhaustive list of recommendations aims to strengthen the application of active subsidiarity, foster opportunities to promote it, and support citizen engagement in just sustainability transitions.

CROSS-SECTORAL APPROACHES TO TRANSITION CHALLENGE



Adopt a cross-sectoral perspective towards transition challenges and potential, recognising the need to address complex linkages and interactions between different sectoral issues in a given territory.

- EU institutions must ensure sustainable transition measures integrate environmental, socioeconomic, and territorial objectives, including workforce reskilling, social rights, and citizen participation, to avoid worsening inequalities.
- EU funds and initiatives—such as the Just Transition Mechanism, Cohesion Policy (ERDF and ESF), Social Climate Fund, and Recovery and Resilience Fund—should be coordinated through a coherent EU-level platform to maximise synergies and address territorial impacts.



TARGET PLACE-SPECIFIC APPROACHES

Strengthen the Territorial Dimension in EU Sustainable Transition Policies. Active subsidiarity requires targeting the smallest viable spatial scale. The EU should support granular, place-specific approaches to reflect territorial variations in transition challenges and potential.

- EU sustainable transition measures should include an explicit territorial dimension that recognises and addresses the place-specific implications of transition processes.
- NUTS3-level, as opposed to NUTS2-level, data should be used in targeting territories, as this can capture territorial needs better and facilitate more functional territorial coverage of support (e.g. combining municipalities to target functional urban areas covering urban centres and regional hinterlands in transition processes).



EMBED BOTTOM-UP PARTICIPATION IN MLG SYSTEMS

EU sustainable transition measures should follow multilevel governance (MLG) systems with meaningful bottom-up input. Active subsidiarity and citizen participation depend on devolving roles to local authorities and communities, including traditionally underrepresented groups, while EU institutions provide guidance and support.

- **Establish KPIs.** Measure both the effectiveness of EU sustainable transition policies and the impact of community participation, covering (i) climate/environment, (ii) socioeconomic results, and (iii) stakeholder engagement, including marginalised groups
- **Facilitate stakeholder participation.** Ensure regulations include clearly defined groups, particularly less-engaged communities and vulnerable populations affected by transitions, such as coal industry workers' families and energy-poor households.
- **Simplify regulation.** Make it easier for marginalised groups to access EU programmes through targeted communication, tailored procedures, and promotion of inclusive governance at member state level.
- **Provide capacity-building.** Support local authorities and underrepresented communities with technical assistance, training, and knowledge-exchange platforms, ensuring resources reach those who need them most.



THE DUST PROJECT

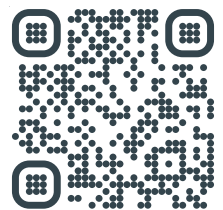
The DUST project develops new participatory instruments in sustainability transitions, focusing on structurally weak regions that are dependent on energy-intensive industries. It supports the development and implementation of place-based policies at a scale that enhances citizen participation and democratic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

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

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

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



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