

MINIPART

SPECIAL ISSUE NO. 88

PEOPLE POWER AND PLANNING

PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES IN MINING REGIONS



EDITED BY

Tamara Maričić • Marijana Pantić • Ana Perić

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Institute of Architecture and Urban & Spatial Planning of Serbia
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PREFACE

PREFACE

The initial impetus for composing this edited volume emerged from the continued prevalence of problematic practices in the extraction of natural resources – both minerals and energy resources – across the world. This has inspired our research conducted within the scientific project **MINIPART – Improving Participation in Spatial Planning of Mining Regions,** supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia, #7598. Despite major advances in international and national legislations, policy frameworks, and various voluntary guidelines intended to improve environmental governance and social responsibility in mining practice, local communities in extraction regions still bear the social, environmental, economic, and cultural burdens of extraction processes, while the majority of benefits remain concentrated within national governments and mining corporations. This imbalance continues to generate conflicts, mistrust, and long–term socio–spatial inequalities, particularly in regions heavily dependent on extractive industries. In the international literature and practice this has been recognised as the "natural resource curse" or the "paradox of plenty", where regions rich in resources (especially in oil, gas, or minerals) generally experience slower economic growth, weaker democracy, more severe environmental degradation and overall worse development outcomes than the resource–poor countries, while the macro–level financial windfalls concentrate with national and regional authorities and multinational corporations.

Against this backdrop, the book before you seeks to contribute to the growing international discussion on the necessity of meaningful citizen and community involvement in the planning, governance, and implementation of mining and energy transition processes. The accelerating global demand for critical raw materials – driven by decarbonisation agendas and the transition toward low–carbon economies – has further intensified the urgency of addressing questions of justice, legitimacy, transparency, and democratic participation in extraction regions. In such contexts, participation cannot remain merely procedural or symbolic; rather, it must become a substantive mechanism through which local communities can shape political and development decisions affecting their territories, livelihoods, identities, and futures.

The chapters gathered in this volume bring together invited experts, researchers, as well as practitioners from Bulgaria, Finland, Serbia, South Africa, and the United States of America. Coming from diverse institutional and professional backgrounds — including academia, governmental bodies, mining companies, civil society organisations, consultancies, and research institutes — the contributors examine participatory governance in mining regions from multiple perspectives and through a variety of methodological approaches. Together, they provide a broad comparative perspective on the challenges and possibilities of citizen engagement in resource–dependent regions across both developed and developing contexts.

The volume opens with a global perspective on participatory community engagement in mining, identifying systemic barriers to meaningful inclusion and proposing solutions grounded in procedural, distributive, and recognition justice. Subsequent chapters examine specific regional experiences and governance practices in diverse socio–political settings: the contested just transition process in Bulgaria's Stara Zagora coal region; innovative cultural planning approaches in the Finnish peat extraction region of Ilomantsi; and collaborative governance and partnership–building experiences in South African mining municipalities. The concluding chapter further deepens the discussion through empirical research conducted in Serbian mining regions, exploring the persistent gap between institutional participatory frameworks and citizens' actual perceptions, motivations, and experiences of participation.

A particular contribution of this edited volume lies in its interdisciplinary and comparative approach. Rather than treating participation solely as a formal planning requirement, the chapters collectively conceptualise it as a complex social, political, cultural, and institutional process shaped by power relations, trust, governance capacity, historical experiences, and local identities. The contributions, therefore, move beyond normative calls for participation and critically examine the conditions under which participatory processes become meaningful, legitimate, and transformative in extraction regions.

The analyses and recommendations presented throughout the book offer valuable insights for policymakers, planners, scholars, mining practitioners, civil society organisations, and local communities engaged in sustainability transitions and extractive governance. By highlighting both obstacles and innovative practices, this volume aims to support the development of more inclusive, transparent, and equitable models of governance capable of balancing resource development with social justice and long–term community wellbeing.

On this path toward fairer and more democratic governance of resource extraction, we extend our deepest gratitude to all contributors for generously sharing their knowledge, expertise, and experiences with us. Collaborating with them has been an enriching experience for us as editors, enabling deeper reflection on the diverse realities of participation in mining regions worldwide. We are equally grateful for their patience, professionalism, and commitment throughout the review and editing process.

We would also like to sincerely thank the peer reviewers whose engagement, dedication, and constructive feedback significantly enhanced the quality of this volume. Their careful and thoughtful reviews greatly contributed to strengthening the scholarly and practical value of the chapters presented here.

We hope that this book will encourage further research, dialogue, and policy innovation concerning citizen participation in mining and resource governance, while also contributing to broader debates on just transitions, democratic planning, and socio–environmental justice in extraction regions globally.

Belgrade/Dublin, September 2026

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WHAT ENABLES PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT? EXPERT INSIGHTS ON SOLUTIONS

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WHAT ENABLES PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT? EXPERT INSIGHTS ON SOLUTIONS

ABSTRACT

The global energy transition towards clean energy technologies depends on the successful development and deployment of technologies that require critical minerals such as lithium, copper, nickel, cobalt, graphite, and rare earth elements. The extraction of these minerals can have significant impacts on local communities, which, despite the potential to benefit from mining activities, often bear the greatest social and environmental costs, while much of the economic value generated flows elsewhere. Effective, equitable, and meaningful community engagement can help mitigate these adverse effects and ensure that the benefits of mineral extraction are shared more fairly with local populations. However, such engagement is rarely achieved in practice due to a range of barriers, including inadequate or misaligned incentives, limited governance capacity, and other institutional constraints. As a result, meaningful participation is often difficult to implement, ineffective in practice, or absent altogether, contributing to persistent conflicts in mining regions. Drawing on a literature review and expert interviews, this chapter examines participatory inclusion in the mining sector globally, identifies key barriers to the meaningful involvement of communities, and explores approaches that can help uphold three core dimensions of justice: recognition, distributive justice, and procedural justice. We propose systems–level solutions that can foster greater coordination both internationally and within host countries, creating conditions for more effective and meaningful community engagement. As global demand for critical minerals continues to grow, achieving equitable outcomes through participatory inclusion becomes increasingly important. This chapter outlines potential pathways for advancing this objective.

Keywords: critical minerals; participatory inclusion; community engagement; mining governance; environmental and social justice.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As renewable technologies have become increasingly prominent on the world stage, a spotlight has become ever more present on critical minerals – the building blocks for these technologies' batteries and magnets. These minerals are extracted in a variety of ways, depending on the mineral and its' location, and thus the environmental and social impacts of the extraction can vary widely. However, these impacts – whether large or small – will necessarily fall on local communities. This creates a disparity in which the benefits of the renewable technologies are spread globally, whereas the impacts of the extraction are localised. Ensuring that local communities are also able to benefit from the extraction – while being protected from negative environmental impacts – is therefore essential for achieving a just transition to clean energy.

A major keystone for achieving this goal is empowering local communities through participatory engagement in decision–making processes related to mining activities. In summary, this means providing the uncensored opportunity for communities to participate in decision–making on questions such as whether mining should take place in their community; mining approaches that will affect land use, water use, and emissions; benefit sharing; and infrastructure development. Without participatory engagement, the likelihood of companies achieving a social license to operate (SLO) is significantly decreased.

Unfortunately, companies rarely engage communities in participatory processes; as a result, conflict between communities and mining companies is common worldwide. There are over 36,000 conflicts across more than 4,200 locations worldwide, with the highest percentage being found in North America (Marin & Palazzo, 2024) (Figure 1). Though not all of these conflicts can be attributed to a lack of participatory community engagement, it is a known contributor (Conde, 2017).

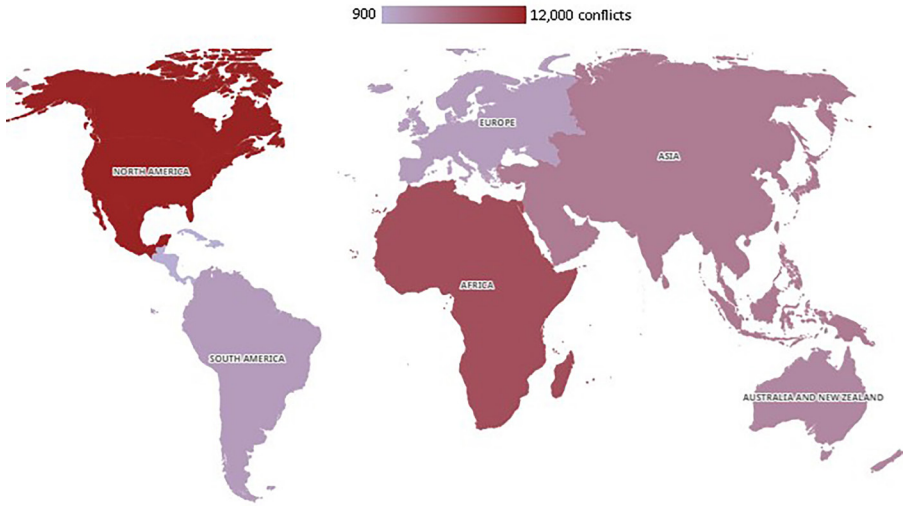

Figure 1. Number of mining conflicts by region (2015 – 2022)
*The map excludes 255 mining conflicts registered in the Pacific islands
Source: taken from Baptista (2025), adapted from Marin & Palazzo (2024).

2. EFFECTIVE AND EQUITABLE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Effective, equitable, and meaningful community engagement in mining can be defined as community–led engagement that takes place across all phases of mining, from the pre–exploration phase to the post–closure phase. This style of engagement requires companies to invest significant amounts of time, energy and money, and be non–transactional; specifically, communities must be brought in as partners to the development process (Fraser et al., 2019). The approaches and techniques that companies can take to do so have been well–documented, and many helpful resources exist (Natural Resources Canada, 2016).

At a minimum, effective and equitable community engagement requires that companies obtain consent from local communities before undertaking mining activities. In this regard, the United Nations adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007 to recognise and protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples and to strengthen their participation in decisions affecting their lands, territories, and resources (UNGA, 2007). UNDRIP has subsequently been promoted and implemented through various educational, advocacy, and policy initiatives (Davis, 2007; Côté et al., 2025). By affirming rights to self–determination, equality, property, culture, religious freedom, health, and economic well–being (Native American Rights Fund, n.d.), the Declaration has contributed to the broader recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights in mining governance worldwide. These principles require project proponents to consider Indigenous Peoples throughout the planning and development process, ensuring that affected communities receive appropriate recognition, information, and opportunities to participate in decision–making.

Another international legal tool that works in coherence with UNDRIP is Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), also adopted by the United Nations in 2007 as a requirement for companies to obtain consent before executing any project (EarthWorks, 2024). The International Finance Corporation (IFC) requires its clients to obtain FPIC from affected Indigenous Peoples under Performance Standard 7 (International Finance Corporation, 2012), while the World Bank requires FPIC for relevant projects under its Environmental and Social Framework, Environmental and Social Standard 7 (World Bank Group, 2016). FPIC can be defined as consent that is given freely without any coercion, manipulation or bribes, and is obtained before starting any operations, while informing the community of all positive and negative impacts of the project, with full disclosure (regarding all aspects) in a manner that is accessible and understandable to the community. Although these frameworks have the capacity to give power to the community and reduce the power parity that currently exists between mining companies and communities, these frameworks are voluntary and not a part of international law. For example, the United States does not endorse UNDRIP, whereas Sierra Leone requires community consent for the approval of any project in their legislation.

At its core, effective, equitable and meaningful community engagement upholds three core tenets of justice: recognition justice (understanding the historical and

cultural context of the communities affected by mining), distributive justice (ensuring equitable sharing of benefits and costs across communities), and procedural justice (ensuring that the community has a say in the actions that affect them and their lands).

With regard to **recognition justice**, implementing this implies that companies are actively working to understand the cultural and historical context of the communities where they will be mining. Often, mining occurs in locations of historical significance to tribal lands. Two clear examples demonstrate this. The first is the destruction of the Juukan Gorge in Australia in May 2020, a 46,000–year–old Aboriginal historical cultural heritage site destroyed by Rio Tinto in direct opposition to the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura peoples (Oliveri et al., 2024). The second is the ongoing clash over the potential destruction of Oak Flat, a Native American sacred site in the Tonto National Forest east of Phoenix, Arizona, due to Resolution Copper's proposed mine (Lovett, 2017).

Distributive justice in the setting of mining requires an equitable sharing of benefits and costs. On the benefits side, this implies seeking well–designed and transparent benefit–sharing agreements, developing appropriate mechanisms for tax/royalty funds to flow from central governments back to the community, and investing in the community's long–term economic development. Benefit–sharing agreements are often legally binding contracts between the company and the community, specifying how the company will provide benefits to the community, such as employment, direct payments, infrastructure investments, and so on.

Benefit–sharing agreements can be beneficial for the community, but it will depend on a variety of factors, for example: how the community participates in the creation of the agreement (such as the diversity of community stakeholder participation in the writing of the agreement), the strength of the language in the contract, governance structures within the country allowing for enforceability, and whether the agreement itself is confidential or publicly available. Confidential agreements in particular may be prone to corruption from the community side – for example, corrupt community stakeholders may transact with the company to capture more benefits for themselves. Confidentiality also reduces the ability for communities to hold companies publicly accountable for failure to uphold agreements, particularly when legal options are limited.

When it comes to sharing the costs, this requires cost mitigation – specifically, benefit–sharing agreements can also include impact mitigation agreements, whereby the environmental impacts of the mine are continuously monitored and mitigated through action.

Finally, **procedural justice** requires community members to have a voice in mining actions that affect them, and for companies to take actions that directly speak to this input. By doing so, companies allow communities to have participatory engagement in the mining process. An example of community–led consultation processes that demonstrate participatory engagement upholding procedural justice is in the Chirano mine in Ghana, where Chirano Gold Mine Ltd. held consultation meetings throughout the mining process and initiated conflict resolution when issues emerged surrounding community concerns related to the environmental and social impacts of mining (Devonshire Initiative, 2022).

Broadly speaking, although the mining sector includes institutional pathways for recognising community perspectives – such as environmental impact assessments, benefit–sharing arrangements, certification standards, and financing requirements – recognition through these mechanisms is often partial in practice. Community concerns about land, water, livelihoods, and cultural values are typically translated into technical assessments, legal categories, or performance indicators legible to regulators, firms, and financiers. Such translation can filter or simplify community perspectives, privileging claims that fit existing regulatory and auditing frameworks while marginalising relational, historical, or place–based concerns that resist codification. Consequently, communities may be formally included in consultation or governance processes while power asymmetries and misalignments between institutional definitions of impact and local lived experience persist. Institutional recognition, therefore, should not be equated with full integration or conflict resolution; participatory engagement may coexist with ongoing contestation and limits to institutional accommodation. Acknowledging these constraints clarifies that reforms to mining governance, while necessary, are not sufficient to ensure just and equitable outcomes for affected communities.

In sum, truly providing a space for communities to participate in decision–making processes is challenging for many reasons. There are systemic challenges and issues that communities, companies, and governments face that can block this engagement from moving forward, or that can result in performative engagement that does not truly allow for communities' wants and needs to emerge. In Spiller et al. (2025), these challenges are detailed by stakeholder groups, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Barriers and Challenges to Community Engagement by Stakeholder

COMPANY	COMMUNITY	GOVERNMENT
• Lack of market incentives to engage with communities. • Engagement extends timelines for development. • Engagement relinquishes control over decisions. • Engagement requires a holistic approach; training and skills are required internally. • Cultural barriers between the community and company hinder engagement. • Local history of environmental damage from mining can erode trust.	• Power imbalances relative to companies reduce their ability to advocate for themselves. Internal power imbalances can also lead to corruption within the community. • Differing objectives within the community can hinder alignment and, in turn, the power of negotiation. • Lack of negotiation training. • Limited funds to pay for technical and legal advice. • Limited technology can hinder the ability of communities to be aware of company decisions.	• Capacity constraints reduce the ability to enforce environmental laws or adequately distribute funds. • Interests in developing mining can undermine community needs. • Lack of transparency. • Corruption within government agencies. • Investor-State Dispute Settlements incentivise decisions against communities.

3. IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENT

Despite challenges in stakeholder engagement and coordination at the mine level, hurdles to effective community engagement should be addressed by both the company and the government sooner rather than later to avoid worsening existing relationships. Rushed engagement can result in misunderstandings amongst stakeholders. In addition to worsening grievances and the mistrust of mining companies, it can also lead to long–term consequences such as the reversal of SLO previously granted by the community in the form of mass violence, protests, roadblocks, and other social upheaval (Bose, 2023; Lindt, 2023). Peru's Las Bambas copper mine is an example of how long–standing protests caused existing projects to shut down and forced the declaration of a state of emergency in 2015 (BBC News, 2015; Reuters, 2023).

Because of their history with land ownership, local government, and mining companies, mining communities often have complicated relationships with the mining industry. Large–scale mining has been an established part of the culture in some regions of the world, such as the Salar de Atacama in Chile, and in some places, because mines have provided significant employment to local communities, Indigenous populations may associate extraction with economic opportunity (Carrasco, 2020).

Table 2. Systems-Level Solutions from Spiller et al. (2025)

SOLUTION	DESCRIPTION
Tackling Corruption and Improving Transparency	Targeted towards the government in an effort to improve governance; international solutions such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) play a role here.
Improving Revenue Transfers from Central Government to Local Communities	Ensuring that communities are able to receive the funds that would otherwise be socialised nationally.
Leveraging Multilateral Organisations to Improve Governance	Organisations such as the World Bank could help improve the regulatory power of governments; the Minerals Security Partnership can prioritise engagement; voluntary, multi-stakeholder international standards, such as the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance (IRMA), can also require community engagement.
Funding R&D and Technological Innovation to Reduce Mining Impacts	Reducing mining impacts goes a long way in improving outcomes for communities.
Eliminating or Improving Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS)	Eliminating pressures on the government to side with companies.
Tracking Information on Conflict and Community Engagement for End-Consumer Transparency	Providing information to consumers of end-products (such as electric vehicles) about whether the minerals in the batteries were sourced ethically can create market signals, aligning incentives.
Preparing Communities to Negotiate on Their Own Behalf	This would provide communities with greater bargaining power to achieve their objectives.

However, historical experience continues to shape community responses. Disputes and large–scale mobilisations can still occur, even in post–conflict contexts following a peace agreement, due to communities' experiences with colonialism, as was the case in the North Cauca region of Colombia (Arbeláez–Ruiz, 2022).

Achieving a just transition to clean energy worldwide requires more than just expecting companies to "do the right thing". Rather, it will be necessary to create an environment in which this type of engagement is supported and can emerge. To that end, in Spiller et al. (2025), based on an extensive literature review, seven systems–level solutions were identified that can help create this environment. Table 2 presents the solutions with a brief description; more information can be found in Spiller et al. (2025).

However, an open question remains as to whether these identified solutions are effective in practice in developing a conducive environment for effective and equitable community engagement, and whether additional approaches are needed. The research conducted in this chapter seeks to answer this question.

4. METHODOLOGY

To better understand whether the identified solutions could be effective in practice, we conducted virtual semi–structured interviews with nine experts from academia, international NGOs, and industry who are working on community engagement in the mining sector. The interviewees were identified through existing contacts and their work on community engagement, and then additional participants were selected using a snowballing method. Information on the interviewees can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. Information on Interviewees

INTERVIEWEE CODE	COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE	SECTOR	TRAINING/ BACKGROUND
N1	USA	International NGO focused on mining sustainability	Attorney
N2	Canada	International NGO focused on mining conflict resolution	Sustainability
A1	USA	An academic at a university	Political Science
A2	Canada	An academic at a university	Political Studies
A3	Canada	An academic at a university	Mining Engineering
R1	UK	Research institute	Economics
I1	USA	Industry (Mining)	Retired executive
I2	USA	Industry (Mining)	Engineer
I3	Canada	Industry (Consulting)	Sustainability services

In terms of global coverage, it is clear that our interviewees are heavily skewed toward North American residence; however, their research scope is global. For example, although the two NGO interviewees are based in North America, both organisations operate internationally, and the interviewees have broad expertise in mineral extraction and community engagement across countries worldwide, with a strong focus on the Global South. Similarly, although A1 is located in the USA and R1 in the UK, both academics have roots in South America and have studied issues related to mineral extraction in the region extensively. Although A2 and A3 both reside in Canada, their expertise in community engagement focuses on African countries and on Asian and South American countries, respectively.

Our human subjects research protocol was approved by Colorado School of Mines. The interviews were conducted virtually between September and November 2025 over Zoom. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed using Otterai software. In these virtual conversations, we had five questions, which we tailored depending on whether the individual worked for a mining company or not. We began by asking interviewees to provide examples of positive company–community relationships and to reflect on the factors that contributed to these outcomes. We then explored the seven proposed solutions, presenting each in detail and inviting participants to assess their potential effectiveness, offer critical reflections, and suggest alternative approaches. Finally, we asked interviewees to identify any additional strategies that had not been considered but could also prove useful.

Specifically, for the non–industry interviewees, we asked the following questions:

Q1. Can you share examples of mining projects where the company has successfully built strong, long–term relationships with host communities?

Q2. What specific factors or circumstances contributed to the success of these relationships?

Q3. In our past research, we identified seven systems–level solutions that we hypothesise would support effective and equitable community engagement:

- Tackling corruption and improving transparency
- Improving revenue transfers from central governments to local communities
- Leveraging multilateral organisations to improve governance
- Funding R&D and technological innovation to reduce mining impacts
- Eliminate or improve ISDS (Investor–state dispute settlement)
- Tracking information on conflict and community engagement for end–user transparency
- Prepare communities to negotiate for themselves

Q4. How would you rate those solutions? Are there other systems–level solutions you think would be as or more effective than the ones we have proposed?

Q5. Is there a different way to think about these systems–level solutions than we have identified?

For the industry interviewees, we asked the following:

Q1. How do you view your company's relationship with the local community?

If the answer was positive:

Q2. What tools, approaches, or frameworks have made this relationship successful?

If the answer was negative or not entirely positive:

Q3. What have been the main challenges and barriers to bringing about a positive relationship?

Q4. In our past research, we identified seven systems–level solutions that we hypothesise would support effective and equitable community engagement (see below).

- Tackling corruption and improving transparency;
- Improving revenue transfers from central governments to local communities;
- Leveraging multilateral organisations to improve governance;
- Funding R&D and technological innovation to reduce mining impacts;
- Eliminate or improve ISDS (Investor–state dispute settlement);
- Tracking information on conflict and community engagement for end–user transparency; and
- Prepare communities to negotiate for themselves.

Q5. *For those who responded positively to Q1*

- Have any of these solutions helped in facilitating a positive relationship?
- Do you see a role for companies like yourself in advocating for systems–level changes or affecting mine–level policymaking to support both local communities and consequently the social stability of your long–term projects?

Q6. *For those who responded negatively to Q1*

- Would any of these solutions have helped your company in facilitating a positive relationship?

Q7. How would you rate those solutions? Are there other systems–level solutions you think would be as or more effective than the ones we have proposed?

From these conversations, two new solutions emerged: strengthening protection for human rights defenders and using financing tools as a lever for effective community engagement.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we will discuss each of these (now nine – including the two new ones listed above) systems–level solutions in light of what we learned from our interviews.

5.1 TACKLING CORRUPTION AND IMPROVING TRANSPARENCY

Across the interviews, experts consistently emphasised transparency as a key component of developing systems–level solutions. Many recognised progress made through international initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) (n.d.) and certification programmes and noted that the spread of transnational norms has reshaped expectations for governments, companies, and communities. For instance, EITI member countries saw a roughly 50% increase in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) between 1990 and 2019 (Dosmaganbetov & Nanovsky, 2025). In some countries, EITI adoption has changed expectations on decentralised governance, revenue allocation, and local oversight. EITI membership and compliance have also been linked to stronger tax revenue mobilisation across multiple tax categories (Kinda, 2025). As one interviewee said,

> *Just something like the EITI [being] in a country sort of changes the accountability culture – International NGO Interviewee N2.*

However, some interviewees[1] stressed that its implementation is uneven, and deeper structural and political–economic dynamics often constrain its effects.

Some interviewees[2] argued that "tackling corruption" and "improving transparency" should be separated conceptually, as these terms are often conflated. Although transparency standards have gained meaningful traction globally, not all countries or companies have adopted them, and their scope remains limited. For example, EITI can strengthen public information and accountability norms, but in situations with weak institutional capacity and low public salaries, it cannot eliminate the fundamental cause of corruption. Actors who intend to engage in corrupt behaviour may still find ways to do so even in a fully transparent system. As one interviewee put it,

> *Transparency can make corruption harder, but it does not eliminate it... if certain actors want to engage in corrupt behaviour, they'll find a way" – Academic Interviewee A2.*

Indeed, Kolstad & Wiig (2025) find that EITI exposure does not improve corporate conduct and may even facilitate greenwashing among companies with histories of misconduct.

One of the interviewees pointed out that the mining sector is particularly prone to corruption because mineral deposits are location–specific (Academic Interviewee A1). Unlike many other industries, mining companies must operate in a jurisdiction where the resource is found. When the governance and regulatory frameworks

[1] Academic Interviewee A1, Research Interviewee R1, International NGO Interviewee N2.

[2] Academic Interviewee A1 and International Academic Interviewee A2.

of that location are weak, the immobility of the resource can increase incentives to resort to corrupt practices in order to resolve regulatory delays or operational challenges to continue extracting the resource. Multiple risk points for corruption are created by the state's control over resources and permitting, and project immobility. Across national, provincial, and community levels, these corruption risk points create opportunities for informal payments or preferential treatment. Once a mining project is operating, corruption pressures may increase, as companies with high sunk costs try to avoid disruptions and delays. Such practices reflect not only individual behaviour but also structural relations between capital investments at the mine and the level of state involvement in ensuring continued legal compliance and reducing community conflicts. Therefore, the political and financial environment can potentially support corrupt practices if systemic and external changes are not made. Such an environment is unlikely to be addressed by anti–corruption measures that only depend on voluntary corporate commitments or disclosure mechanisms such as EITI.

Moreover, one interviewee warned that "transparency" has become conceptually stretched:

> *A lot of people think this is important, which is interesting in and of itself, because mining is very contentious and divisive at all levels and in all and in many ways. So, I actually hit pause when everyone says they agree, because if everyone agrees on what transparency means, they just cannot mean the same thing. It's not meaningful when actors that are otherwise in antagonism with one another all say they want this thing, what transparency means, what it entails – Academic Interviewee A1.*

Governments, companies, communities, and certification bodies frequently invoke the term, but its meaning varies, and the existence of disclosure rules does not guarantee meaningful oversight.

Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) illustrate this gap as they are meant to provide communities with information and a voice, yet are often technical, inaccessible, and difficult to contest without specialised expertise. Research shows that EIAs can be deeply embedded in unequal power relations, used to justify coercive enforcement and rent extraction (Spiegel, 2017). Existing sustainability frameworks also often overlook key social dimensions such as land use and demographic change (Mancini & Sala, 2018). In addition, project rejections in EIAs are extremely rare. The need for more transparent and stringent decision–making criteria in EIA processes is highlighted by the fact that when rejections do occur, government agencies that review such EIAs often justify their decision on the sensitivity of the location and community values instead of location–specific data which can underrepresent the true nature and context of environmental impacts such as air quality, health impacts, or water pollution for the local community (Fonseca & Gibson, 2021). EIAs may therefore satisfy procedural transparency requirements without facilitating informed participation or substantive accountability.

Another setting in which transparency was important was in relation to benefit–sharing agreements. As noted in the introduction, these are frequently confidential agreements, which can lead to corruption within the community. One interviewee stressed this point, stating that if the agreement is confidential,

> *Community members themselves can't make sure they're getting their fair share if they don't know what's in an agreement, and they don't know who to hold accountable for what – International NGO Interviewee N1.*

Finally, interviewees[3] agreed that while transparency is a necessary tool for tackling corruption, it alone is not sufficient because it runs the risk of becoming disclosure without accountability in the absence of institutional reform. Supplemental requirements should be included, such as improving public sector capacity, strengthening mining and environmental regulators, and addressing structural incentives that influence business–state relations, which are all necessary for long–lasting reform.

5.2 IMPROVING REVENUE TRANSFERS FROM THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Because central governments collect royalties and taxes from mining companies, one of the solutions to achieve distributive justice identified in Spiller et al. (2025) was to ensure that a meaningful portion of these funds is allocated to local communities. Our interviewees agreed that this solution was very important but raised concerns about its feasibility due to a variety of challenges. One of the largest challenges is that central governments often view the collected funds as revenues to be used for broad economic development; thus, reallocating funds back to the mining communities would defeat that purpose. Indeed, one of the interviewees pointed out the challenge that:

> *Revenues are often quite limited. Central governments may have difficulty collecting income or corporate taxes... So, you're looking for other sources of revenue ... the easiest way to gain access to regular flows is in natural resource sectors. If you're asked to divert some of that to local communities, that could be a big ask – Academic Interviewee A2.*

At times, the federal government may believe that allocating investments, rather than direct financing, is the appropriate way to compensate these communities; yet, the central government may not know exactly what the communities need the most:

> *There could be a disjuncture in terms of what local communities need, as perceived by the central government, versus those local communities or the local district government – Academic Interviewee A2.*

Furthermore, a lack of transparency and corruption issues can create even further challenges to sending funds to the community.

> *Whenever there's an economic downturn, and especially, you know, during COVID, the central government generally stops making those transfers, and no one says anything about it, because they don't really know – International NGO Interviewee N1.*

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[3] Academic Interviewee A1, International Academic Interviewee A2, International NGO Interviewee N1, International NGO Interviewee N2.

> *It doesn't work very well... the tax or royalty money goes into the central government, and it doesn't come back out... it stays there, or a little bit comes out. You send... 10% to a regional or state government, and then, hopefully, that gets dispersed within that region or state to the local communities, because it might not, it might stay in the regional capital – Industry Interviewee I1.*

In order to improve outcomes with regard to money flowing back to communities, interviewees were aligned with the need for two things: 1) having an established pathway through which the funds can flow; and 2) ensuring that the communities are ready to manage the funds that come their way.

> *It is much better if you already have some modicum of financial devolution or decentralisation, such that there are already institutional pathways for revenues to flow from the central government to local governments. And then on the flip side, that you already have the participatory institutions at the local level, where community members have a say in project development – Academic Interviewee A1.*

One interviewee (International NGO Interviewee N2) presented an example of where a pathway has been established – specifically, in Guyana, where the existing Low–Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS) provides a framework for communities to receive funds from sustainable development activities (Government of Guyana, 2024); 15% of carbon revenues are being directed to Indigenous communities who opt in to the programme, and they are organised to receive these funds through an existing planning mechanism. This provides not just a pathway for the communities to receive the funds, but also creates plans whereby the communities are ready to receive and invest the funds for their future benefit.

On the second point of ensuring that communities are ready to manage the funds that arrive, an interviewee said:

> *How are [communities] spending [funds] and to what ends... it really takes having an organised community, a good structure for understanding what our objectives are... How do we monitor, manage, and report on these funds? How are we investing for future generations? – International NGO Interviewee N1.*

5.3 LEVERAGE MULTILATERAL ORGANISATIONS TO IMPROVE GOVERNANCE

When we spoke with experts about multilateral organisations (MLOs) and their role in improving governance, they highlighted that funding organisations such as the World Bank, USAID, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) can improve outcomes in mining countries through regulations and standards tied to their operations. However, they also highlighted the role that international non–profits and multi–stakeholder international standards, such as IRMA, EITI and (now defunct[4]) The Minerals Security Partnership (a multilateral agreement) can play in creating regulations and standards not tied to funding.

[4] On 4 February 2026, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced the creation of the Forum on Resource Geostrategic Engagement as the organisation that will replace the Minerals Security Partnership (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, 2026).

Separating these two types of international organisations by whether they provided funding or not did seem to matter quite a bit. For example, funding from MLOs is often short–term, which makes it challenging for effective engagement and governance at the mine–level in the long–term. In one interviewee's experience (International Academic Interviewee A2), some communities in Africa and South Asia, especially those with a history of mining, could perceive the top–down nature of MLO funding projects as if they are talking to them in a "heavy–handed way", creating hurdles in establishing long–term engagement effectiveness.

Furthermore, during the neo–liberal era when large funding MLOs went into developing countries and prioritised development, the MLOs were not focused on improving governance locally, as one interviewee describes,

> *Given the reigning economic ideology at the time at the World Bank that governance focus was really not focused enough on state capacity, because the state was still seen as an impediment to development. When we look at the origins of the IMF and the World Bank... they were institutions designed to prevent market failures... during the neoliberal revolution... [they] became institutions that fetishise markets – Academic Interviewee A1.*

This doesn't mean, however, that these funding organisations cannot be changed to focus more on governance. In fact, some interviewees stated that these organisations have helped create a culture of responsibility and accountability, along with translating national and sub–national priorities at the local level. For example, one of the interviewees (International NGO Interviewee N2) mentioned that the World Bank funded US$ 41.1 million in Sierra Leone for the establishment of an accessible land administration system. This system is a core aspect of their National Land Tenure Policy from 2015 (FAO, n.d.), making it valuable funding for the implementation of this policy. Because a lot of conflict in Sierra Leone is about land rights, such multilateral funding can be immensely valuable to increase the effectiveness of community engagement at the local level.

On the other hand, international standards such as IRMA and EITI, and non–profit institutions such as Natural Resources Governance Institute (NRGI) and Responsible Minerals Initiative (RMI) were identified by interviewees[5] as international initiatives that work specifically on improving governance – either at the mine site or more broadly across government. An interviewee mentioned that such standards place pressure particularly on larger mining companies, leading to investments for sustainability and community engagement at the mine level (Industry Interviewee I2).

5.4 FUNDING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT (R&D) AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION TO REDUCE MINING IMPACTS

Our interviewees agreed that this was an important solution to improving outcomes and could pave the way to improved engagement by aligning incentives: innovation can reduce company costs, environmental impacts and safety concerns.

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[5] International NGO Interviewee N2, International Academic Interviewee A2, Industry Interviewee I1, Industry Interviewee I2, and International Researcher Interviewee R1.

> *There's business benefit there, from a safety perspective, and it's also been cost-effective for them too, right, shifting off diesel onto forms of green energy, whether that's hydrogen haul trucks, as Anglo America has implemented in one of its mines in South Africa. I think mining companies are highly motivated to do so. It's sort of doing well by doing good, right? It delivers a social benefit, but it saves them money too – Academic Interviewee A3.*

Universities can play a large role in helping companies push this forward – for example, Colorado School of Mines partnered with Caterpillar to provide hands–on training for students (Colorado School of Mines, 2018). This can help support R&D at the company level. For example, Industry Interviewee I1 described how mining companies work with manufacturers and universities to advance research and development:

> *You have large mining companies working with the large equipment suppliers or manufacturers working with the universities to create an environment where the universities can pose really innovative things and test things at the small scale. You get the equipment manufacturers involved early, so that if there's a change, they can be thinking and planning for how they might be able to incorporate that into their haul trucks or their underground shovels. And then you have the mining companies involved to also understand what's possible.*

The interviewee went on to give an example of how Caterpillar partnered with Rio Tinto to test out new electric vehicles on site in order to reduce the environmental impacts of their vehicles, while also ensuring that these vehicles improved efficiency:

> *We have too much fine particulate matter in the underground mines, because diesel engines are nasty, and when you put filters on them, it reduces efficiency, and they don't last very long, and it takes more maintenance. So, we need vehicles that are able to do really big jobs and emit no or very little particulate matter. So that's the need. And then you have the university and the manufacturers trying to figure out, okay, how do we meet that need in a way that's cost-effective, and that hopefully, then the mining companies will actually spend the money to buy that new equipment when they need to replace equipment. So, it works better when it's a collaborative effort – Industry Interviewee I1.*

5.5 REFORM INVESTOR-STATE DISPUTE SETTLEMENTS (ISDS)

ISDS is an international legal system for foreign investors to resolve claims against hosting governments. In the setting of mining companies, if a country decides to reverse a permit for a company due to the loss of SLO, the company can sue the country in the ISDS system. Generally, the company will win these cases, often resulting in multi–million–dollar settlements against the hosting country.

Though only some of the interviewees were aware of ISDS, those who were aware of it generally considered it to stand in the way of equitable and effective community engagement. One criticised ISDS because communities are unable to go to the ISDS for relief or to argue their case against the company.

> *I don't think highly of investor-state dispute settlement, because communities don't have a direct way to bring a claim. Where can communities go? If this isn't where they go, and it's definitely not, then what are the other avenues? – International NGO Interviewee N1.*

Similarly, another argued that ISDS is problematic due to *regulatory capture and insufficient public capacity and insufficient legal teams on the side of the government – Academic Interviewee A1.*

On the other hand, interviewees also suggested that ISDS does provide some stability for the firms and communities. For example, one academic interviewee said:

> *On the flip side, if [firms] don't have some of these provisions, they feel that they could be unfairly taken to court in a foreign jurisdiction, right? – Academic Interviewee A2.*

Even an NGO interviewee who generally was opposed to ISDS stated that,

> *Once the company's already been given a permit, pulling it later is going to have a negative outcome, and that costs taxpayers' money, and that can exacerbate the negative impact on the community – International NGO Interviewee N1.*

This statement reinforces the need for increased communication between companies, local and central government and communities prior to permitting in order to ensure that communities are not harmed by backtracking.

NGO Interviewee N1 also mentioned that the United Nations is actively trying to reform the ISDS. Indeed, this is a major effort, which has been ongoing since 2017, by the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law Working Group III (UNCITRAL, 2026). This reform process has focused on identifying systemic concerns within ISDS and developing options to address the regime's legitimacy (Bonnitcha et al., 2023; UNCITRAL, 2026). In particular, the working group identified six core concerns with the ISDS process: costs (ISDS cases are expensive for governments and investors), duration (the proceedings take a long time to resolve), consistency (different tribunals result in unpredictable outcomes), correctness (concerning issues with a limited or uneven review or appeal mechanism, and concern about flawed fact–finding in arbitration), lack of diversity of arbitrators, and arbitrator independence/impartiality (ibid.). For community engagement, these reforms matter because when governments fear expensive, prolonged, and unpredictable arbitration, they may face pressure to keep permits in place or avoid regulatory changes – even in response to community opposition – rather than investing in participatory processes that can surface conflict early and steer projects towards consent–based outcomes.

5.6 TRACKING INFORMATION ON CONFLICT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR END-CONSUMER TRANSPARENCY

With increasing consumer awareness about the social impacts and conflicted reality of mining for electric vehicles (EVs), a question we posed to our interviewees was: "Would consumer demand for battery traceability, specifically noting the use of conflicted minerals, make it imperative for companies to invest more in effective community engagement?" Overall, experts expressed limited support that this approach would likely make a large difference in consumer choice and company performance, even if some interviewees believed that it was an important piece of information that should be shared.

First, the tracking of the information can be difficult – for example, conditions at a mine change over time, and voluntary certifications and assessments only review or assess the situation at the mine at a specific point in time. And, while some standards, such as IRMA, were seen as reliable, others were not; as one interviewee said:

> *The challenge with these types of systems is a kind of garbage in, garbage out issue – we can make all kinds of information transparent, but the quality of that information and the timeliness of it really matter. So, for example, if we take data from an IRMA audit report, that is going to be information that is based on a third-party assessment, and that's really terrific, but if I'm critiquing that data, it may be based on an audit that was conducted a year ago. So, what does that say about what's happening at that mine site right now? – International NGO Interviewee N1.*

Second, one interviewee felt that it is difficult to accurately identify whether the provision of information actually leads to changes in demand. Rather, they suggested that governments could take a more active approach to reduce demand for products produced unethically:

> *We should leverage government procurement, government enforcement. Within Europe, we wouldn't allow a commodity to be sold that was made with child labour. So, we shouldn't let it be up to the end-user. Oh, your battery was made with child labour. Will you buy it or not? It shouldn't be a legal thing to be sold, right? – Academic Interviewee A1.*

Third, another interviewee even expressed doubt that the car manufacturers or consumers would be willing to pay more for ethically sourced minerals:

> *Most people don't want to pay more. The big car companies... squeeze every last dime out of their suppliers, and they will say they want to be green, but yet they don't want to reward somebody for having conflict-free cobalt, or having low energy emission lithium, or having green copper – Industry Interviewee I1.*

Here's the challenge: if consumers are not willing to pay more for batteries that have ethically–sourced minerals, mining companies will not have the incentive to invest time and energy (which in turn costs money) to ethically engage with the surrounding communities. Instead, they will have the incentive to produce their

minerals as quickly and as cheaply as possible. Certainly, there will still be an incentive to achieve some social license to operate; however, achieving effective and equitable community engagement will not be a fundamental priority for the company because they will be unable to recover their investment in the marketplace. Thus, even if the market is able to track the sourcing of minerals from the mine to the battery, and demonstrate whether the minerals were sourced from a mine that engaged in effective and equitable community engagement, *unless consumers are willing to pay a premium for these batteries, tracking alone will not align incentives for participatory engagement with communities*. Whether consumers are willing to pay, and by how much, is still an open question.

Finally, one interviewee (Academic Interviewee A2) discussed the inherent difficulty of tracking where minerals come from, even if they have the best intentions to purchase from mines which equitably engaged with local communities. The challenge is greatest when artisanal mining exists close to legal mining. In the case of cobalt, the interviewee discussed how specific automakers wanted to ensure that their supply chains were conflict–free, and so they focused on acquiring conflict–free cobalt from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Even when the companies intended to purchase from sustainable sources, cobalt is *often artisanally mined right around the large-scale mining concessions. And then often you'll have trucks from the large-scale mine. Can we come and buy their artisanal production nearby? It's not tracked, and then [the cobalt is] taken on to the large-scale mining concession [and] counted as their production*.

Given the human rights abuses present at artisanal cobalt mines, the challenges of tracking minerals as demonstrated here call into question the ability of auto manufacturers to be able to accurately identify whether or not their minerals come from mines where communities are equitably engaged.

5.7 PREPARE COMMUNITIES TO NEGOTIATE ON THEIR OWN BEHALF

Interviewees agreed that this solution is excellent but often overlooked in practice. In order to participate effectively in EIA processes, corporate social responsibility initiatives, or legally binding agreements such as community benefit agreements (CBAs), community members must be prepared technically, institutionally, and politically. Without such capacity, engagement may become symbolic rather than meaningful. However, a number of interviewees[6] cautioned that there are major barriers for communities to negotiate with mining companies, such as systemic power imbalances, lack of funding, and limited access to legal or technical expertise. For example, EIA documents are often very long and complex, requiring specialised expertise in hydrology, geochemistry, environmental law, and engineering to identify key risks, as Academic Interviewee A1 describes:

[6] Industry Interviewee I2, Academic Interviewee A1, Academic Interviewee A2, Academic Interviewee A3.

> *These [EIAs] are... 500 pages long... really long and really technical... you need an expert to say, 'Whoa, this is not a dry stack tailing space, and this is a wet stack...' ... you need... a really topical expert on hydrology, on the specific techniques that are being used.*

Furthermore, negotiating against teams of lawyers and technical consultants can increase feelings of powerlessness. Similarly, empirical studies in Ghana and Canada have shown that even formal benefit–sharing arrangements often fail to deliver intended outcomes when communities lack institutional capacity or technical knowledge (Kasimba & Lujala, 2022; Szoke–Burke & Werker, 2021; Hitch et al., 2025).

Moreover, an industry interviewee (I2) cautions that community development efforts reflect more of a corporate strategy to maintain a positive image where their operations generate the most value. The interviewee stated that resources allocated to community development and engagement in mining operations were closely tied to the productivity and profitability of individual mines rather than addressing impacts on communities or long–term development.

Some of the interviewees contend that NGOs and MLOs can play an important role in filling these gaps. By facilitating access to expert advice, NGOs can help ensure that community representatives are adequately prepared for meetings. In addition, other interviewees suggest that networking across communities and civil society organisations further improves preparedness, allowing communities to access information and develop strategies.

An interviewee suggested that preparing communities can leverage existing social structures, such as cooperatives, religious groups, or clan networks, and the principles of the UNDRIP (UNGA, 2007) to strengthen the negotiation process and outcomes.

> *Every community has its own leadership and communication structure... it may look like a church... a soccer team... but there's already some type of network, and it's figuring out where that already exists, and we can build on it, instead of creating something new and expecting the community to come... It's discussed in UNDRIP. It's reflected in the IRMA standard as well, this... But really looking at where those mechanisms exist already, and having respect for those and building on those structures that exist is important – International NGO Interviewee N1.*

However, the same interviewee cautioned that internal dynamics, local corruption, or elite capture can undermine negotiation processes and outcomes even when mining companies act responsibly.

Another idea emerging from our conversations is legal reforms, which can further institutionalise community preparedness. Jurisdictions such as Canada legally require mining companies to negotiate an impact benefit agreement – a legal contract between the company and an affected Indigenous community, founded on Indigenous rights and addressing a wide variety of impacts and benefits to the community (Cascadden et al., 2021). Embedding these resources into law ensures predictability, autonomy, and avoids reliance on voluntary contributions from companies (Kasimba & Lujala, 2022). As Academic Interviewee A1 states:

> *We should not just be requiring community benefit agreements (CBAS), whoever is initiating the CBA process, the government, the company, to provide resources for this and in ways that are truly objective and autonomous from the company, but we should pass laws to this effect.*

Overall, preparing communities to negotiate for themselves requires a multi–layered approach: technical capacity–building, legal and financial support. Only through these combined efforts can communities move from symbolic participation to empowered negotiation, addressing the structural inequalities that otherwise constrain their agency in mining development.

5.8 FINANCING TOOLS AS A LEVER FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

During our conversations with experts, a new systems–level solution that emerged was to link community engagement to financing through mechanisms such as sustainability–linked loans (SLLs). While SLLs require companies to meet certain sustainability thresholds or requirements as specified in the loan, and the borrower is measured in terms of the achievement of certain key performance indicators (KPIs) tied to sustainability outcomes (such as greenhouse gas emissions), the idea would be to structure this requirement around community engagement rather than sustainability. In this setting, the terms of the loan would thus be affected by the borrower's KPI. For example, the interest rate may be discounted if the borrower achieves the KPI (Auzepy et al., 2023), which in this case, would be some measure of effective community engagement – an organisation such as IRMA could provide an audit to identify whether the company is achieving appropriate levels of engagement.

Interviewees supported this idea due to the importance of financing in bringing forward new mining projects. This is apparently not new to mining, as Academic Interviewee A3 mentioned that there are already some efforts underway to include sustainability KPIs in mine financing. For example, in 2021, Newmont Corporation, an American gold mining company, implemented a $3 billion sustainability–linked revolving credit facility, meaning that the company faces positive or negative pricing adjustments on drawn balances depending on its performance on certain sustainability measures. However, it is not clear whether participatory community engagement is one of the measures.

Similarly, the International Finance Corporation established the Equator Principles, which are part of a framework for financing sustainability, that have been adopted by 130 global financial institutions. Principles 5 and 6 (out of 10) focus specifically on stakeholder engagement, detailing significant interaction with local communities and stakeholders throughout the mining process and requiring the creation of a grievance mechanism for affected communities and workers.

However, several interviewees showed caution about the use of these types of instruments, noting that enforcement and monitoring can be difficult, and financial institutions will often rely upon voluntary certifications or audits to ensure compliance with sustainability KPIs. As mentioned earlier, certifications can be problematic, given the

fluid and often changing nature of community relationship building and maintenance over time. With third–party auditing, the mine company can box check without ensuring sustained participatory engagement. Indeed, banks have been accused of using the Equator Principles to greenwash operations in developing countries (BankTrack, 2005), and the effectiveness of the programme remains an open question (Schepers, 2011; Weber & Acheta, 2014). For example, one interviewee stated:

> *The Equator Principles reflect the IFC performance standards to a broader set of financial institutions, and that's really important. But... community engagement is an ongoing process. Is it being done in an ongoing way? Are the procedures and mechanisms in place? What evidence [is there] of that? How can we do spot checks to ensure it's ongoing? – International NGO Interviewee N1.*

From a systems perspective, the voluntary nature of the Equator Principles limits its effectiveness (Scholtens & Dam, 2007; Weber, 2017), suggesting a role for broader policy to require these arrangements. For example, the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024), an EU–wide policy aimed at improving the sustainability of EU supply chains, originally included financial institutions in the regulated companies, which likely would have led to much wider adoption of these types of instruments; however, an Omnibus bill proposed in 2025 exempted financial institutions (Linklaters, 2025).

One interviewee (Academic Interviewee A1) suggested extending the focus of financing from banks and private project finance to other financial arrangements – including multilateral financing, community benefit agreement financing, and even monetary flows from the central government to local institutions. For example, the interviewee suggested that communities could be involved in participatory budgeting initiatives. Brazil was provided as a strong case study, with participatory budgeting initiatives being implemented in the 1980s at the municipal level: given the locally collected funds from mining, communities would vote on what projects to invest in, providing them with a voice as to how to use the collected funds.

5.9 IMPLEMENTING GREATER PROTECTIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

From our conversations with experts, another solution emerged: implementing greater protections for human rights defenders (HRDs), particularly those who are focused on the connection with the environment. Whistleblowers and HRDs play a key role in exposing bad actors, environmental damages, and failed promises. Their efforts can thus place a significant check on companies that fail to effectively and equitably engage with communities and can help place much–needed pressure on companies to continue to maintain positive and equitable relationships with surrounding communities. However, there has been a significant amount of violence directed towards these individuals. Global Witness (2025) identified 2,157 environmental and land defenders (ELD) killed and 96 disappeared globally between 2012 and 2024, with 374 due to mining and extractive industries (Figure 2). Although ELDs and HRDs are somewhat distinct, Global Witness (Global Witness, 2025) defines ELDs as "a

specific type of human rights defender–individuals or groups of people who act to promote, protect, or strive for the realisation of human rights through peaceful action", thereby aligning this definition with how our interviewees described HRDs. These attacks on HRDs (and ELDs) create an environment of fear of speaking out against mining company actions:

> *There's a lot of violence – anybody that goes against the mining project, for example, is pretty much immediately on some type of blacklist, and the company is very aware of who's against them, who's for them, and... the community development activities... where they investigate the community, it's supposed to reportedly only be for knowing how to invest community development funds, but it's also to get a good idea of who's against them and who's for them, and they very closely track those things – Industry Interviewee I2.*

> *If you don't protect human rights, among those the right to participation and the right to protest, really bad things happen... the most obvious impact is people are assaulted, killed, receive death threats... When you look at the specific cases ... the person that got a death threat literally just went to a meeting... the company tracked them (...) and eventually they were disappeared – Academic Interviewee A1.*[7]

Attacks on HRDs can also be non–violent – specifically, through judicial harassment (such as strategic lawsuits against public participation – SLAPP). According to Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (2025), this is the most frequent type of attack worldwide.

Several interviewees raised the role for grievance mechanisms – including ombudsmen and independent third parties that can receive complaints – and discussed their existence across multilateral organisations. For example, the World Bank has several outlets for HRDs and whistleblowers to express their grievances and concerns. However, these are targeted towards individuals affected solely by World Bank–financed projects, which limits their relevance across mining projects. The 2018 Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, also known as the Escazú Agreement, establishes a requirement for signatories to ensure the safety of HRDs; 18 states have ratified the agreement to date[8] (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2018). Whether this agreement has stemmed the attacks on HRDs in adopting countries remains an open research question; e.g., Asaba (2025) finds no evidence of it functioning to reduce attacks on HRDs in Mexico, in part due to a widespread lack of awareness of the Agreement by HRDs and implementation challenges.

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[7] International NGO Interviewee N1, Academic Interviewee A1, Industry Interviewee I3.

[8] Countries marked with an asterisk have signed but not ratified: Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil*, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica*, Dominica, Ecuador, Grenada, Guatemala*, Guyana, Haiti*, Jamaica*, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay*, Peru*, Dominican Republic*, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay. (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, n.d.).

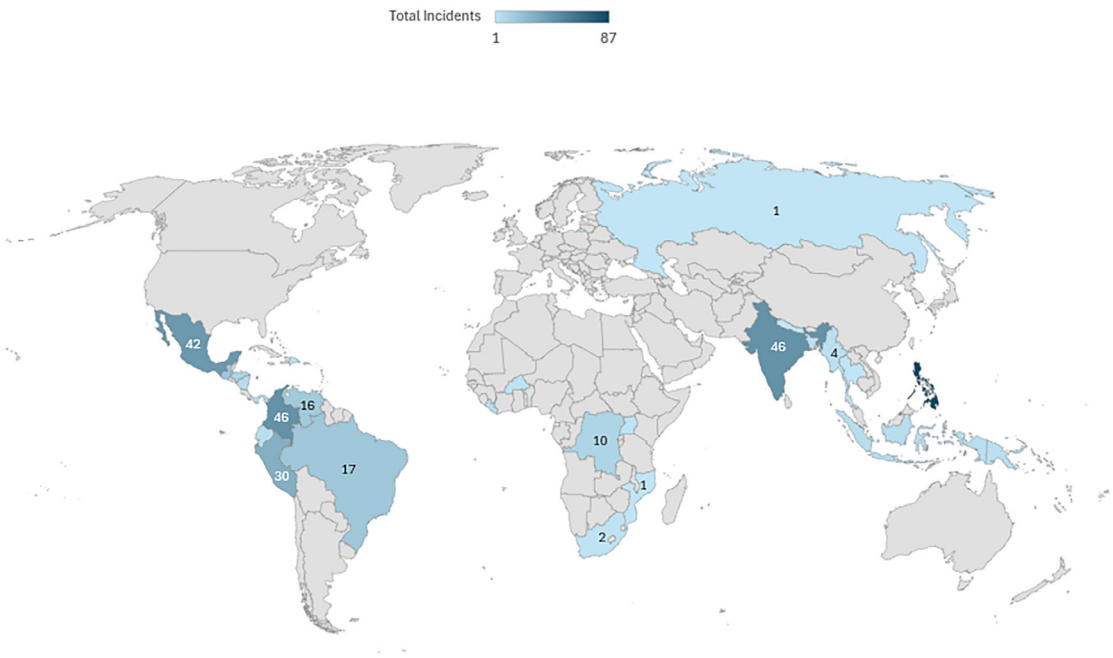

Figure 2. Land and environmental defenders killed or disappeared by country in the mining and extractives sector (2012–2024)
Source: Global Witness, 2025.

6. CONCLUSION

Our conversations with experts stressed the difficulties in achieving participatory engagement with local mining communities, and even systems–level solutions face their own challenges in being effective at achieving this goal. However, through these interviews, some common themes emerged:

- **Transparency** is an essential governance tool at the company, national and international levels. Transparency in corporate operations, ensuring consultation meeting records are publicly available, and keeping agreements with communities public and transparent, can reduce corruption and strengthen accountability. However, transparency alone will not eliminate corruption unless it is accompanied by institutional reforms, such as strengthening public sector capacity and addressing structural incentives that render the mining sector particularly vulnerable to corruption. Moreover, lack of transparency in ISDS decisions also hinders participatory engagement.
- **Funding is essential.** Money is key, not just for companies, but also for communities, and communities need to be ready to invest the money they receive from companies. Money flows need to be tracked from companies to the government and back to communities, and investment funds should be tied to engagement. Funding can help communities prepare to negotiate for themselves, leading

to improved community engagement. Attaching community engagement requirements to financing for mines can also improve outcomes.

- **The role of civil society is large.** NGOs can help communities in advocating for themselves; internationally, these organisations can boost governance, and research organisations can work with mining companies on innovation. Universities can work with companies to improve research and development, leading to reduced environmental impacts at mines and improved outcomes for communities, helping to facilitate positive engagement.
- **Implementation details matter.** Even when solutions exist, companies and governments can still treat them as compliance exercises – producing policies, reports, or one–off consultations that "check the box" without shifting decision–making power, addressing grievances, or sustaining engagement over time. Solutions will require consistent and ongoing enforcement, monitoring and implementation, and education and outreach to relevant stakeholders to ensure intended outcomes are achieved.

Participatory engagement, thus, is not an unreachable goal, but will require coordinated and ongoing action by governments worldwide, international institutions, financing agencies and civil society worldwide.

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CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE JUST TRANSITION OF STARA ZAGORA COAL REGION

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CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE JUST TRANSITION OF STARA ZAGORA COAL REGION

ABSTRACT

This study examines the extent and forms of citizen participation in the planning and implementation of Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs) in Bulgaria during 2022–2025. It applies the concepts of just transition and citizen participation to the contested process of the EU–driven decarbonisation in Bulgaria's main coal mining region. The analysis focuses on the case of Stara Zagora, a region recognised by the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) and marked by public backlash and limited consensus on transition strategies. The research is based on a desk review of the EU and national policy documents, scholarly literature, and reports from NGOs and the media. An adapted analytical framework, grounded in good governance criteria for stakeholder engagement, is used to assess participation levels. Findings show that although formal structures for citizen involvement exist, their effectiveness and substantive influence remain limited. Civil society engagement scores low, indicating that consultation mechanisms are present but have minimal impact on decision–making. While a permanent consultation body – the Just Transition Subcommittee (JTS) – is established, its role remains advisory, limiting direct influence on implementation. Participation during both planning and implementation phases is largely formalised but restricted, with concerns about transparency and limited adherence to the partnership principle. The study concludes that participation in Stara Zagora falls short of the EU procedural justice standards, particularly regarding equal power and inclusive implementation. It recommends strengthening citizen participation through co–decisional rights, improved transparency, and more balanced institutional arrangements.

Keywords: just transition; citizen participation; Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs); coal regions; governance and stakeholder engagement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The European Green Deal (EGD) (European Commission, 2019a) represents the European Union's (EU) overarching strategy to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, outlining an ambitious roadmap for transforming the EU's economy into a sustainable, resource–efficient, and competitive system. Central to this vision is the principle of just transition, which seeks to ensure that the social, economic, and regional implications of decarbonisation are addressed in an equitable manner.

Recognising that the shift towards a low–carbon economy will not affect all regions and sectors equally, the EU established the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) (European Commission, 2019b) as a key financial instrument to support territories and workers most exposed to structural change from a fossil–fuel–based energy production to a more sustainable economy. This mechanism provides targeted investments to diversify regional economies, promote reskilling and upskilling, and strengthen social cohesion based on their Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs) (European Commission, 2021), taking into account regional characteristics, strategies and needs.

These strategic documents have set important priorities for regions in transition, however, there remains considerable ambiguity regarding which specific socio–economic and environmental impacts these plans are intended to address, as well as the extent to which they can effectively promote a genuinely just and inclusive transition. The engagement of citizens and relevant stakeholders is essential throughout all phases of planning and implementing transition strategies (World Bank, 2020). Such engagement should be maintained consistently over time and underpinned by effective leadership and facilitation mechanisms to ensure continuity and legitimacy. Accordingly, social dialogue and active stakeholder participation constitute fundamental components of governance frameworks in coal–dependent regions undergoing structural transformation, as they foster trust, inclusivity, and shared ownership of the transition process.

The Stara Zagora region is recognised as one of the most coal–intensive regions in the EU and is eligible for support under the JTM. It is known as the energy heart of Bulgaria, with the Maritsa area hosting the largest coal mining and coal–fired power plants in the country. The Maritsa Iztok (Maritsa–East) energy complex encompasses three lignite pit mines as well as three coal power plants and one briquette plant, which employ more than 13,000 people (European Commission, 2024).

The chapter is structured as follows. The present section introduces the topic. Section 2 reviews the literature on just transition, citizen participation, and the legal and methodological frameworks that support it. Section 3 explains the research approach, methodology, and case study selection. Section 4 presents and discusses the findings on the planning and implementation of the Territorial Just Transition Plan for the Stara Zagora region. Section 5 assesses the findings against the research framework, while Section 6 presents the conclusions and policy recommendations for strengthening citizen participation in the just transition. Finally, Section 7 discusses the broader implications of the research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Two key concepts primarily inform this research journey – the conceptualisation of just transition, on the one hand, and of citizen participation expanded by the notion of public participation, on the other. Citizen engagement and public consultation that enhance the active and systemic inclusion of all relevant stakeholders and the wide representation of the general public are crucial conditions for the procedural justice of the just energy transition. Therefore, participation is not just an ancillary component but the vehicle that delivers justice and a fair governance process. Without the instrumental benefits of citizen knowledge and the normative benefits of inclusiveness, the just aspect of the transition fails in practice. The literature warns that restricted participation ("tokenism") leads to disempowerment and moral resistance, whereas meaningful participation fosters inclusiveness, shared ownership and trust (Arnstein, 1969).

2.1 THE CONCEPT OF JUST TRANSITION

The notion of transition can be conceptualised as a fundamental transformation within the structures and functions of a societal system (Frantzeskaki & de Haan, 2009). Given that such transitions entail profound, long–term, and systemic changes across social, economic, and environmental domains, the active engagement of citizens is indispensable when addressing the complexity inherent in these processes. According to García–García et al. (2020), a just energy transition constitutes a long–term technological and socio–economic transformation that reshapes the generation, distribution, storage, and consumption of energy, while ensuring that essential societal functions are achieved through decarbonised and renewable systems that uphold social justice, equity, and welfare. This conceptualisation underscores the holistic character of transition processes, which extend far beyond the technical reconfiguration of the energy infrastructure (McCauley & Heffron, 2018). Within this framework, just transitions serve as catalysts for transformative change in coal–dependent regions, supported by diverse governance capacities. The shift towards green energy is thus conceptualised as a multilevel, multidimensional, and long–term process, producing wide–ranging economic, environmental, and social implications (Loorbach et al., 2017).

The EU has applied an open–ended definition of what constitutes a just transition, calling for the transition to be conducted fairly and inclusively in order to ensure that no person or region is left behind (European Commission, 2019b). At the centre of this transition lies the phase–out of fossil–fuel–based energy production – an important component of the EU's aim to become a climate–neutral economy by 2050, reflected in the EGD and JTM.

2.2 CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The concept of citizen participation has been widely discussed in the literature, reflecting differing perspectives on its meaning and purpose. Arnstein (1969) conceptualises participation as a redistribution of power, enabling previously excluded citizens to engage meaningfully in decision–making processes. Similarly, Roberts (2004) defines it as the sharing of power between government and society in shaping decisions that affect communities. Callahan (2007) interprets citizen participation as the interaction between citizens and public administrators, while the OECD (2022) offers a broader definition, describing it as encompassing all forms of stakeholder involvement – citizens and affected parties alike – across all stages of public service design and delivery. Despite differences in emphasis, these definitions converge on the notion that citizen participation directly influences both policy formulation and implementation, prioritising direct over indirect participation and emphasising active citizen engagement in decision–making processes.

Scholars have identified multiple dimensions of citizen involvement in policymaking, including instrumental, normative, and transformative benefits (Moodie et al., 2022). Instrumental benefits arise when citizens contribute knowledge and ideas that enhance policy quality; normative benefits relate to inclusiveness and fairness; and transformative benefits concern learning, awareness, and attitudinal change. These benefits correspond to four primary purposes of citizen engagement: knowledge generation, improved policy efficiency, empowerment and capacity building, and strengthened legitimacy and democracy. From an administrative standpoint, participation can facilitate conflict resolution and build institutional trust (Callahan, 2007), while practitioners often emphasise its capacity to yield locally tailored solutions (Bryson et al., 2013). Within co–creation and co–production contexts, participation is further linked to social innovation (Voorberg et al., 2015). In the field of environmental governance, Beierle (2005) highlights additional outcomes such as enhanced environmental literacy, evolving public values, and conflict management. Likewise, Bickerstaff & Walker (2005) distinguish between the developmental, educative, therapeutic, and integrative outcomes of direct participation and the communicative and power–balancing aims of deliberative approaches.

The outcomes of participatory policymaking, however, are not universally positive. Studies note that participatory processes can often fall short of expectations (Denwood et al., 2023) and may even produce adverse effects. Potential drawbacks include the overreliance on intermediaries, the disempowerment or tokenisation of participants, the reinforcement of existing social hierarchies, and the emergence of horizontal conflicts (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). Broader dilemmas also persist, such as issues of scale, inclusivity, expertise asymmetries, time constraints, and the tension between individual participation and collective welfare. Bussu et al. (2022) emphasise the difficulty of reconciling the often–divergent expectations of citizens, civil society organisations, political parties, and public officials, suggesting that participatory attitudes and behaviours are as critical as institutional mechanisms. Embedding participation sustainably, therefore, requires coalition–building across institutional and

activist domains, ongoing political commitment, adaptive decision–making practices, capacity building, and incentives for experimentation and leadership (Escobar, 2011). Notably, research on participation has tended to privilege methodological innovation over an analysis of its long–term institutional effects, leaving significant gaps in understanding how participatory practices reshape democratic governance structures (Bickerstaff & Walker, 2005).

Citizen participation in environmental matters has been reinforced in the last 30 years by the notion of public participation in various international and national legal instruments. The 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (United Nations, 1992) promoted it in its Principle 10. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision–Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (1998) defines it as one of the pillars of environmental democracy. The Convention links environmental rights and human rights and emphasises the interactions between the public and public authorities to integrate environmental protection into decision–making. All EU Member States and the EU as a supranational entity are parties to the Aarhus Convention that applies to public participation concerning plans, programmes and policies relating to the environment, including plans such as the TJTPs. According to the Convention's Article 7, each Party shall make appropriate practical and/or other provisions for the public to participate during the preparation of plans and programmes relating to the environment, within a transparent and fair framework, having provided the necessary information to the public.

Within the context of the energy transition, broad–based and sustained citizen/public participation constitutes a prerequisite for the successful governance of this multifaceted transformation. The empowerment of citizens to steer government environmental decision–making provides a critical legal structure for advancing progress in addressing climate change (Akerboom & Craig, 2022). The multi–layered nature of energy governance necessitates the inclusion of diverse actors to ensure that transition processes are perceived as legitimate and socially acceptable (Matern et al., 2025). Consequently, citizens' engagement should be understood not merely as an ancillary component of governance but as an iterative and adaptive process that evolves alongside the transition itself. Continuous involvement throughout the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of transition strategies is essential and must be supported by strong leadership and effective facilitation mechanisms. In this regard, social dialogue and stakeholder participation emerge as integral elements of governance frameworks in coal–dependent regions undergoing structural transformation.

Citizen participation mechanisms in the environmental field in Bulgaria have been the subject of an analysis of the involvement of citizens and NGOs in the state and local consultative bodies. The research identified some prevailing negative features of existing mechanisms, such as the restriction of voting rights and a predominant number of representatives of state institutions compared to those of citizens, businesses, and academia, which renders citizen participation meaningless in voting by majority vote (Belev & Antonov, 2016).

Recent research has addressed the modalities of citizen participation in the just energy transition in Bulgaria and found them limited (Topaloglou et al., 2024). The diffusion of information appears to be minimal, and the stakeholders are not regularly consulted, leading to missed opportunities for gathering diverse perspectives and feedback. The level of involvement in decision–making processes also indicates possible barriers to a more active role of civil society in the decision–making process.

2.3 FRAMEWORK FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

This research framework on citizen participation in just transition in the Stara Zagora region has been informed first by its legal and governance aspects: the EU and national legal requirements for citizen participation and the EU methodological recommendations. The relevant provisions and guidance for citizen participation are reviewed with references to the role of civil society and its organisations (NGOs) in mind.

EU and national legal requirements for citizen participation

The Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 (EPCEU, 2021b) lays down the common provisions for coordinated and harmonised implementation of Union Funds implemented under shared management, e.g., the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund and the Just Transition Fund. Already in the Preamble (Recital 14), it introduces the principle of partnership as a key feature in the implementation of the Funds, building on a multi–level governance approach and ensuring the involvement of regional, local, urban and other public authorities, civil society, economic and social partners and, where appropriate, research organisations and universities. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs[1]) are recognised by the Regulation as an equal partner in the implementation of territorial just transition plans supported by the Just Transition Fund (JTF). According to Article 8 Partnership and Multi–level Governance for each programme, each Member State is required to organise and implement a comprehensive partnership, and that partnership shall include as partners relevant bodies representing civil society, such as environmental partners and non–governmental organisations.

The principle of partnership is reinforced in the Regulation (EU) 2021/1056 (EPCEU, 2021a) establishing the Just Transition Fund, where it is identified in Annex II as one of the governance mechanisms of the TJTP. A partnership should be operationalised by arrangements for the involvement of partners in the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of TJTP and by the outcome of public consultation.

In Bulgaria, the legal framework for citizen participation in governance is first and foremost established by the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria (1991, 2024). The Bulgarian Constitution provides the fundamental principles governing citizens' involvement in public decision–making. The right of citizens to obtain information is

[1] Some sources use the term CSO, others – NGO – to refer to organisations of civil society. In this study, we use them interchangeably.

also guaranteed by Article 41 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria (2024). While the Constitution establishes the general constitutional framework, the specific modalities and procedures for citizen participation in local governance are further elaborated in a range of legislative acts.

Issues of local significance may be addressed through mechanisms regulated by the Law on the Direct Participation of Citizens in State Power and Local Self–Government (2009/2022) and the Election Code (2014/2024). The Law on the Direct Participation of Citizens in State Power and Local Self–Government (2009/2022) regulates the conditions, organisation, and procedures for the direct involvement of Bulgarian citizens in the exercise of state and local authority. According to this law, direct participation may take several forms, including referendums, citizens' initiatives, general assemblies of the population, and the European Citizens' Initiative as defined in Article 2(1) of Regulation (EU) No. 211/2011 (EPCEU, 2011). In addition, the Law on Normative Acts (1973, amended 2024) aims to improve the process of drafting, adopting, and implementing normative acts, including local regulations that govern aspects of citizen participation in local governance. Furthermore, transparency and access to information constitute an important prerequisite for effective civic participation, including in climate and energy policy matters. The Access to Public Information Act (2000, amended 2023) regulates the conditions and procedures under which public information is provided.

In terms of European policies, the national Law on the Management of European Funds (Republic of Bulgaria, 2015, amended 2026) sets out in Articles 14 and 15 the conditions for monitoring the implementation of EU funding programmes, including that of the JTF. Among these conditions is the representation of various stakeholders in relation to the just transition. The implementation of the programmes is monitored by designated regional committees. The committees consist of a chairperson, members and observers with the right to an advisory vote. The committees adopt internal rules of procedure and a code of conduct. NGOs as representatives of civil society may be members of the monitoring committees. Some of the key responsibilities of the monitoring committee include approving the methodology and criteria used for the selection of projects; endorsing indicative annual work programmes; reviewing the implementation and monitoring the progress in the implementation of the programme and the progress towards achieving the intermediate goals and target values; and approving the final report on the quality of the implementation of the programmes financed by the JTF. Other relevant national acts related to participation in environmental policies include the Law on the Protection of the Environment (2002, amended 2026), Law on Spatial Planning (2001, amended 2025), and the Ordinance on the Conditions and Procedures for Conducting an Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes (2004, amended 2020).

EU methodological recommendations for citizen participation

With respect to just and green transition, two methodological toolkits: the Governance of Transitions Toolkit (European Commission, Directorate–General for Energy, 2025a) and the Transition Strategies Toolkit (European Commission,

Directorate–General for Energy, 2025b) developed by the European Commission embed citizen participation throughout transition governance strategies, both explicitly and through implied design principles related to inclusivity, ownership and legitimacy, transparency, engagement and feedback.

The Governance of Transitions Toolkit (European Commission, Directorate–General for Energy, 2025a) in particular emphasises that coal+ transitions require the representation of a broad range of stakeholders, including CSOs, that can amplify citizen voices. It explicitly supports open citizen invitations without limiting criteria on number or expertise, illustrated by a regional example where 60 citizens volunteered to participate in repeated consultation meetings. Participatory processes are framed as essential for building the ownership of transition strategies and for strengthening legitimacy. Governance structures are expected to reflect the views of different actors, with representatives recognised as legitimate by broader communities.

Stakeholder and citizen engagement must be understood as a continuous process, starting early and extending beyond strategy launch into implementation and evaluation (Stefańczyk et al., 2023). Long–term engagement requires leadership and active facilitation. As defined in the toolkit, effective participation depends on all stakeholders, including citizens, receiving the same information, on time, and concurrently to prevent epistemic and procedural power imbalances. The toolkit echoes deliberative–democratic criteria for equal access to decision inputs.

From the Governance of Transitions Toolkit (European Commission, Directorate–General for Energy, 2025a), we can extrapolate seven operational principles designed to secure effective participation in the phases of identifying, selecting, and implementing just transition projects (Table 1).

Table 1. Core principles for effective participation in the phases of identifying, selecting and implementing just transition projects, as per the Governance of Transitions Toolkit

Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Energy, 2025a.

PRINCIPLE	EXPLANATION
Invite openly	Publicise your intention to start planning early, and in multiple, accessible locations.
Ensure inclusiveness	Ensure all partners are included in teams implementing the just transition.
Give equal status	Give all partners equal status and equal voting rights at all stages of the transition process.
Share information	Provide all partners with the same information, on time and at the same time.
Allow feedback	Establish clear and transparent routes for feedback.
Go public	Ensure the minutes of all meetings are made public within two weeks.
Engage the community	Facilitate public engagement in the transition process and ensure the public is fully informed about it.

The Governance of Transitions Toolkit (European Commission, Directorate–General for Energy, 2025a) further reflects a strong awareness of procedural justice challenges. It recognises persistent power and knowledge asymmetries, cautioning against incumbent dominance by political–economic insiders. To mitigate these distortions, it recommends professionally facilitated deliberation and the participation of non–traditional external actors – such as artists and experts from neighbouring regions – to rebalance discursive influence and foster creative, non–path–dependent deliberation. This approach is consistent with deliberative–democratic frameworks that emphasise the intentional redistribution of communicative power to enable equitable agenda negotiation and diversify epistemic inputs.

Transparency is articulated as a foundational democratic standard. The document stipulates the public disclosure of selection criteria and decision rationales to permit the external scrutiny of strategic congruence. It also endorses publishing monitoring and evaluation outcomes to strengthen citizen ownership, enhance institutional reflexivity, and promote iterative learning. Collectively, these design principles signal a normative commitment to inclusive agenda construction, procedural fairness, and transparent implementation as prerequisites for legitimate and adaptive transition governance.

The EU Delegated Regulation 240/2014 on the European Code of Conduct on Partnership in the Framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds (European Commission, 2014) sets rules for applying the partnership principle in programmes funded by the European Structural and Investment Funds. It implements Article 5 of Regulation 1303/2013 (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2013) by defining how stakeholders must be involved (Table 2).

Table 2. Relevant partners for the Partnership Agreement as per Regulation 240/2014
Source: Authors' contribution.

STAKEHOLDER CATEGORY	RELEVANT PARTNERS AS PER THE REGULATION	STATUS
Public authorities	National ministries, regional/local governments, urban authorities, and bodies responsible for relevant policy areas.	Minimum mandatory inclusion
Economic & social partners	Employer organisations, trade unions, Chambers of Commerce, SME associations, sectoral bodies, and social economy actors.	Minimum mandatory inclusion
Civil society organisations (CSO)	NGOs, environmental organisations, social inclusion bodies, equality and non-discrimination advocates, and accessibility rights groups.	Mandatory when relevant
Representatives of affected populations	Organisations representing migrants, minorities, disabled persons, and marginalised or vulnerable communities.	Explicitly prioritised

Public participation is not open to individuals, but structured through official partner organisations representing collective interests. This creates a multi–actor governance model balancing public authorities, economic and social actors, and civil society. Member States must ensure partner involvement at all key stages of fund programmes, guided by representativeness, transparency, inclusiveness, timely engagement, and accountability.

Table 3. Main principles and good practices concerning the involvement of relevant partners in the preparation, reporting and monitoring of programmes

Source: Authors' contribution.

MAIN TYPE OF INVOLVEMENT	STAGE OF THE PROCESS	RELEVANT ARTICLE
Awareness of legal compliance duties for participation	Pre-engagement condition applies across the whole cycle	"Member States shall ensure that partners involved (…) are aware of their obligations related to data protection, confidentiality and conflict of interest". (Article 12)
Design and assessment of calls for proposals	Programme preparation and call evaluation	"Managing authorities shall take appropriate measures to avoid potential conflict of interest involving relevant partners in the preparation of calls for proposals or in their assessment". (Article 13)
Progress reporting, overview of partner opinions	Preparation of progress reports on the Partnership Agreement	"Member States shall involve relevant partners in the preparation of the progress reports on implementation of the Partnership Agreement (…) in particular concerning (…) the overview of the opinions given by the partners during the consultation". (Article 14)
Monitoring of programme performance	Programme implementation	"Managing authorities shall involve the partners, within the framework of the monitoring committee and their working groups, in assessing performance of the programme, including the conclusions of the performance review (…)". (Article 15)
Preparation of annual implementation reports	Programme implementation - reporting	"and in the preparation of the annual implementation reports on the programmes". (Article 15)
Evaluation governance for programmes	Evaluation stage within programme cycle	"Managing authorities shall involve relevant partners in the evaluation of programmes within the framework of monitoring committees and, where appropriate, specific working groups established (…) for this purpose". (Article 16(1))

Partners must come from defined categories, including public authorities, economic and social partners, CSOs, and organisations representing persons with disabilities. The Regulation does not set criteria for individual comments, but does set criteria for partner legitimacy and participation quality, requiring organisations to be highly representative, relevant, or significantly affected. Member States must proactively support the inclusion of groups facing barriers by providing timely information, allowing sufficient review time, offering communication channels, ensuring accessibility, and enabling the participation of vulnerable or low–capacity partners.

Chapter V of Regulation 240/2014 (European Commission, 2014) sets out binding principles regarding how Member States and Managing Authorities[2] must enable the involvement of relevant partners – the institutional channel through which the public participates, specifically during proposal calls, progress reporting, and the monitoring and evaluation of funded programmes (Table 3).

3. RESEARCH APPROACH

3.1 RESEARCH GAP, SCOPE AND AIM OF THE PRESENT CHAPTER

Despite an extensive body of scholarship on the concept and practice of just transition, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the role of citizen participation within these processes. In particular, there remains a lack of understanding regarding how and by whom public interest, priorities, and demands are articulated, negotiated, and translated into action. It is therefore useful to distinguish between general forms of public engagement with climate change, often focused on awareness, education, or consultation, and more proactive forms of civic engagement in which citizens are involved inclusively, can invoke their rights and demand accountability from other actors, especially national and local governing bodies, to act upon their responsibilities. Addressing this gap in the research requires learning from the just transition process in different coal regions, with particular governing regimes, social, environmental and economic characteristics.

This chapter contributes to narrowing the research gap by analysing the level and forms of citizen participation in just transition–related processes in the coal region of Stara Zagora, Bulgaria. The unique contribution of the study beyond prior research lies in applying a particular assessment framework to analyse the most relevant case of just transition in Bulgaria and fill the empirical gap regarding the mechanics of national decision–making bodies that govern the just transition funding. The authors specifically address one key research question: What is the extent of citizen participation in the just transition in the process of planning and implementing the TJTP in Stara Zagora?

[2] The Managing Authority (MA) for the programme is the Directorate–General for Strategic Planning and Regional Development Programmes within the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works (MRDPW). The JTF is integrated into the Regional Development Programme (RDP) 2021–2027 as a dedicated priority (Priority 4). The primary role of the MA is to oversee the socio–economic transformation of Bulgaria's three most coal–dependent regions: Stara Zagora, Kyustendil, and Pernik (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2018).

In order to answer this main question, the research employed a desk–based literature and policy analysis of normative and strategic documents related to the just transition planning and implementation in Stara Zagora, as well as civil society organisations, governmental and media reports, as explained further in the methodology section below.

3.2 METHODOLOGY

The data collection for this study of citizen participation in the just transition is based on desktop research of the normative, strategic and institutional documents at the EU and national level, and the review and evaluation of existing scholarly literature, expert studies, projects, CSO and media reports. Our research has also been informed by the methodology applied in similar research (Niewitała–Rej, 2025) that evaluated the territorial and distributional aspects of just transition in National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs). The methodology constituted a comprehensive checklist of good governance criteria, which should be fulfilled to properly integrate just transition policies and measures into NECPs. The methodology was used to assess four draft NECPs of Italy, Germany, Poland and Bulgaria. The most relevant aspect of this methodology is stakeholder engagement and public consultation, which assesses the level of active and systemic inclusion of all relevant stakeholders and a wide representation of the general public as a crucial condition for procedural justice of the energy transition. The conclusions from studying the level of public consultation of the NECP with social partners, civil society actors and the general public in the discussion of just transition have informed the current research.

This study employs data triangulation by systematically cross–referencing three distinct streams of evidence to ensure the validity of the findings and mitigate the potential biases inherent in desk–based research. First, we analyse official normative and strategic documents (such as the TJTP, internal rules of procedure, and meeting minutes) to establish the formal parameters of participation. Second, these official narratives are juxtaposed against critical reports from CSOs and media coverage, which provide qualitative evidence of the practical constraints and stakeholder sentiment regarding the process. Finally, the findings are robustness–checked against external academic studies on transition governance in Bulgaria (e.g., Trifonova et al., 2022; Topaloglou et al., 2024) to verify that the identified patterns of limited engagement are consistent with broader scholarly observations. This triangulation ensures that the assessment of the extent of citizen participation reflects a balanced synthesis of government intent and civil society reality.

The analysis operationalises a four–point evaluation scale (0–3), adapted from Stefańczyk et al., 2023, to assess citizen participation across two dimensions: breadth and depth. Breadth refers to the extent to which participation is formally provided for and institutionally organised, including the existence of consultation mechanisms, standing bodies, stakeholder representation, and the regularity of meetings. Depth refers to the substantive influence that citizens and civil society actors can exercise over planning and implementation, including the extent to which their input is considered and incorporated into decisions and whether they have meaningful decision–making

powers. These dimensions are assessed through two distinct criteria in Table 4: (1) effective participation in the planning and implementation phase, and (2) participation in formal structures for implementation. Each criterion is scored separately against its own descriptors. The scores indicate the level of participation demonstrated by the available evidence, rather than constituting a single, undifferentiated scale.

The scoring criteria are operationalised as follows:

- Score 0 (non–existent participation): indicates a complete absence of participation mechanisms; no public consultations are organised, or relevant issues are entirely excluded from the agenda;
- Score 1 (limited extent of participation – tokenism): represents formalistic participation with operational indicators that include the existence of a legal framework or public consultation periods, but where evidence (such as lack of responses to NGOs' comments or disregarded feedback) demonstrates that citizen input does not alter the final planning documents;
- Score 2 (significant extent of participation – consultative): represents structured consultation with operational indicators that include the establishment of permanent bodies (such as the Just Transition Subcommittee) that meet regularly and include diverse stakeholders. However, the extent of participation is capped at this level if voting rules or advisory status prevent these stakeholders from exercising binding decision–making power; and
- Score 3 (exemplary extent of participation – co–decisional): represents empowerment, and the operational indicators would include early inclusion, full information symmetry, and voting structures where citizen and NGO representatives possess equal weight to public authorities, resulting in a demonstrable impact on implementation.

The two criteria in Table 4 capture breadth and depth in complementary ways. The first assesses the inclusiveness and substantive scope of participation in planning and implementation; the second examines participation in formal implementation structures, including stakeholder representation and influence on decisions. Scores must therefore be interpreted against the specific descriptors for each criterion.

Table 4. Selected criteria for stakeholder engagement and public consultation
Source: Adapted from Stefańczyk et al. (2023) by the authors.

Effective participation in the planning and implementation phase	Engagement of civil society actors and the general public in the planning and implementation of the TJTP of the Stara Zagora region.	0 - Public consultations were not organised, nor were any of the issues related to the just transition discussed during the course. 1 - A formal framework for public consultations has been established, but the extent of the impact on the discussed issues related to the just transition has been limited. 2 - Effective consultations were organised, and most of the crucial issues related to the just transition were discussed, but not all of them. 3 - Early and inclusive public consultations were organised, and all of the important issues related to the just transition were discussed in sufficient detail.

Participation in formal structures for implementation	Establishment of a permanent body of consultation with stakeholders for the implementation of the TJTP of the Stara Zagora region.	0 - Does not provide a permanent body of public consultation, or the one proposed is one-time only. 1 - Provides some outline of a permanent consultation body, but lacks fundamental details. 2 - Provides the consistent set-up of a permanent consultation body where representatives of citizens and NGOs can participate but do not impact the implementation of the TJTP. 3 - Provides a highly detailed and consistent plan set-up of a permanent consultation body where representatives of citizens and NGOs can meaningfully impact the implementation of the TJTP.

3.3 CASE STUDY SELECTION

The region of Stara Zagora has been selected for several reasons. Firstly, it is the largest coal and mining region in Bulgaria, and along with Poland and Czechia, contributes to over 95% of the EU's planned coal–fired electricity generation in 2030 (Ember, 2021). Secondly, it has been noted by previous research that the region is lagging in terms of stakeholder and citizen participation with respect to just transition–related processes, and has high risks of severe material and social deprivation, poverty and social exclusion (Peretto et al., 2025). This makes the region an intriguing case study and can provide important implications for policy improvements in coal regions with similar demographic, social, political and economic characteristics (Topaloglou et al., 2024).

The magnitude of the transition challenge is unique within Bulgaria. The local economy is deeply dependent on fossil fuel industries, employing over 13,000 people directly in mines and power plants. Projections indicate that the coal phase–out will affect approximately 35,000 direct and indirect jobs. Consequently, the region faces high risks of severe material deprivation, poverty, and social exclusion, making the transition process politically sensitive and highly contested (Centre for the Study of Democracy, 2023). This high concentration of economic risk makes Stara Zagora the most significant testbed for the Just Transition Mechanism in Bulgaria.

Analytically, Stara Zagora represents a critical case for procedural justice and for examining the gap between the theory of just transition and the practice of citizen participation. Topaloglou et al. (2024) indicates that, compared to previous research, compared to similar regions in Greece and Poland, Bulgaria — and specifically Stara Zagora — displays the lowest levels of stakeholder inclusion, characterised by insufficient communication channels and a lack of access to detailed transition information.

Public discourse regarding the future of coal mining has been delayed, and political deliberations over the TJTP of Stara Zagora have largely remained confined to the national level (Topaloglou et al., 2023). In September 2023, the Bulgarian Council of Ministers formally announced the country's commitment to phase out coal by 2038. Under this decision, coal–fired power plants and mining operations are to be gradually decommissioned, with provisions for affected workers to receive either

financial compensation or targeted support through a newly established state–owned enterprise dedicated to facilitating the coal transition. This enterprise, named State Enterprise 'Conversion of Coal Regions', is intended to be created in the near term to coordinate measures supporting economic restructuring and workforce adaptation (European Commission, 2024).

This lagging status regarding participation makes the region analytically appropriate for investigating barriers to procedural justice. It allows for an examination of how governance structures function in a context where the need for social dialogue is acute, yet the mechanisms for it are reportedly weak. Furthermore, addressing the lack of understanding regarding how public demands are articulated and negotiated requires learning from specific governing regimes with distinct characteristics. By focusing on a region where stakeholders have emphasised risks of moral resistance and non–acceptance, this case study offers high–value implications for policy improvements in other coal regions facing similar demographic and political challenges.

Few scholars have analysed citizen and stakeholder participation in Stara Zagora's just transition. Topaloglou et al. (2024) note that stakeholder engagement has not been sufficient in the just transition of Stara Zagora. Findings show that stakeholder engagement in Stara Zagora is limited, particularly at the consultation and involvement levels. Information dissemination occurs, but systematic dialogue and participation in decision–making remain weak. Compared with Greece and Poland, Bulgaria had the lowest stakeholder inclusion, with insufficient communication channels and a lack of access to detailed transition information. Stakeholders face greater risks from inadequate engagement, including increased uncertainty, loss of trust, and non–acceptance of transition outcomes.

3.4 LIMITATIONS

The primary limitation of this study is its reliance on desk–based research within a relatively short timeframe (2022–2025). Because the implementation of the TJTP is in its early stages, having only recently established key governance bodies such as the Just Transition Subcommittees, it is too early to fully assess the long–term impact of citizen participation on governance outcomes. Additionally, when analysing secondary sources, the research lacks control over the original data collection and analysis methods, which may introduce unknown variables.

Specific limitations arise from the highly contested nature of the transition in Stara Zagora. The political sensitivity of the coal phase–out has historically led to delays in public discourse and decision–making. Consequently, data accessed from governmental institutions may be incomplete or biased, as official policy documents might downplay conflicts or exclude critical feedback to present a narrative of consensus.

Conversely, reports from NGOs and the media often highlight a lack of transparency (Aleksieva et al., 2024) and disregard for the partnership principle. While these provide critical counter–narratives, relying on them without access to internal government deliberations (due to the lack of primary interviews) limits the ability to fully verify the reasoning behind the rejection of citizen feedback.

Finally, desktop research inherently focuses on formal mechanisms of participation (e.g., written opinions, committee membership). It may fail to capture informal dynamics, such as hallway conversations or unrecorded political pressure, which are often significant in politically charged environments. As such, this study sets the stage for further exploration but does not produce primary data on new, rapidly emerging issues on the ground.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1 CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE PLANNING OF THE TJTP

Our study has analysed citizen participation at two key stages of the just transition process in Bulgaria and more specifically at the planning and implementation stage of the TJTP for the Stara Zagora region in the period 2022–2025. At the planning stage, when the draft document was discussed, the TJTP was published for public consultations in the period 2 August to 23 August 2022. During the 3 weeks of consultations on the draft TJTPs, feedback was received from 37 stakeholders, including representatives of the local authorities, electricity producers, social partners, industry, NGOs, and academia (Ministry of Energy, 2023). The stakeholders raised the following concerns:

- the target of 40% CO_2 emissions reductions by 2026 in comparison to 2019 is very high, especially in view of the current geopolitical context (energy security, high energy prices, etc.);
- a clearer governance mechanism is needed in the programming and implementation of the projects under the JTF;
- large enterprises should be included in the scope of the TJTP of Stara Zagora due to their importance for the local economy and positive feedback about the creation of the state–owned company 'Conversion of Coal Regions';
- TJTPs should include measures for support of the released workers, including options for accepting compensation packages in the form of reimbursements or shares in future new industries in the region; and
- the need was stressed for the development of and public discussion on a new Energy Strategy of Bulgaria, presenting a vision of the sector's development.

The TJTP was further published for public consultation in the period 4 November 2022 – 5 December 2022 as part of the strategic environmental assessment (SEA) of the amendments and supplements to the Regional Development Programme 2021–2027 (RDP 2021–2027), including new priorities under the Just Transition Fund, developed through Territorial Just Transition Plans of the Republic of Bulgaria for the regions at NUTS 3 level – Stara Zagora (and adjacent municipalities), Kyustendil and Pernik.

The SEA provides procedural opportunities for citizens and NGOs to submit comments to the strategic document. According to the consultation plan published by the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works (MRDPW) and the Ministry of Energy[3] during the development of the SEA report, consultations were to be

[3] Schedule for consultations with the public, interested bodies and third parties likely to be affected by the amendments and supplements to the Regional Development Programme 2021–2027 (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works & Ministry of Energy, Republic of Bulgaria, 2022).

held with the competent environmental authority – the Ministry of Environment and Water, various institutions, non–governmental organisations, individuals and legal entities that may be interested in the implementation of the updated programme. The consultations could be formal and informal, and include:

- Formal consultations – conducted through official letters, publications in the mass media and/or on the website of the Contracting Authority – MRDPW and the website of the RDP 2021–2027 – www.bgregio.eu, as well as on the website of the Ministry of Energy (ME) – www.me.government.bg. Method of implementation: sending written information with an invitation to submit opinions and proposals; and
- Informal consultations – carried out through informal meetings between experts on the environmental assessment with representatives of the Contracting Authority – MRDPW, ME and other interested parties.

Based on publicly available information about the comments and suggestions submitted by the stakeholders, the research could not identify any feedback from citizens and NGOs. A positive SEA Decision 3–2/2023 authorising the amendments to the RDP was issued (Ministry of Energy, 2023).

The final draft of the TJTP of Stara Zagora (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2024) was submitted for public consultation in the period 14 August 2023 – 13 September 2023. Among the submitted comments were two detailed opinions coming from established environmental NGOs, which criticised the draft TJTP, including the process of its preparation. According to Za Zemiata NGO, during the process of preparing the TJTP, the principles of partnership and transparency were not respected and stakeholder participation was lacking, especially in the development of the draft plans after the initial public consultation. It is important for stakeholders to be involved throughout the process because it has been noted that they did not see any responses to their comments or other submissions following the public consultation of August 2022. In order for the public consultation not to be perceived as a mere formality required by the European Commission, but to be a truly useful process, the NGOs called for feedback on the views from the Ministry of Energy and dialogue during the implementation of the plan.

4.2 CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TJTP

Formal participatory mechanisms for the just transition in Bulgaria

Citizens may participate in the just transition through formal and informal participatory mechanisms. Due to limited data on the existence and forms of informal mechanisms, the focus of this research has been mostly on formal mechanisms. The implementation of the TJTP is strategically positioned within the hierarchy of Bulgaria's regional development planning, and it is directly related to the Regional Development Programme (RDP) 2021–2027. The RDP is part of a broader, multi–level hierarchy of strategic planning in Bulgaria. It serves as the operational mechanism for financing and implementing the TJTPs, utilising significant funding from the European Union's

Just Transition Fund (JTF), totalling approximately €1.2 billion for Bulgaria. The TJTPs fit into this structure as strategic territorial instruments for the three designated coal regions — Stara Zagora, Kyustendil, and Pernik.

Stakeholder involvement at these two tiers of planning (RDP 2021–2027 and TJTP) has been realised through two management structures – the Monitoring Committee (MC) at the level of RDP 2021–2027 and Just Transition Subcommittees (JTSs) for the three coal regions in Bulgaria. The Internal Rules of Procedure of the MC (MRDPW, Republic of Bulgaria, 2024) provide for setting up and operating the MC and the JTSs for the three coal regions. The MC oversees overall implementation, approves methodologies and selection criteria for various support measures, and manages the indicative annual work programme. It is composed of representatives of various state administrations (e.g., Ministry of Finance), the National Statistical Institute, local government bodies, academia, social partners and NGOs, including those working in the environmental field.

The tasks of the JTS, on the other hand, include: participation in the preparation of criteria for the selection of projects and guidelines for the provision of financing under the JTF; participation in the monitoring of progress in the implementation of investments supported under the JTF; development of motivated positions for consideration by the MC related to the implementation of the JTF; and not least, participation in active communication with and the engagement of civil society through information events organised by the JTS secretariat. The 2038 phase–out commitment has been closely aligned with Stara Zagora's TJTP, which was approved by the European Commission in December 2023. In 2024, a JTS was created in the Stara Zagora region to provide ongoing expert support at the territorial and regional level to the implementation, monitoring, and achievement of the objectives set out in the TJTP. More specifically, the tasks of the JTS with national and local policy–makers, and civil society representatives, include: (1) participating in the preparation of criteria for the selection of projects and guidelines for the provision of funding under the JTF; (2) monitoring the progress of investments supported by the JTF and reports on the achievement of the set indicators and specific objectives; (3) identifying potential risks in the implementation of activities at the regional level; (4) developing positions/opinions/reports/proposals for consideration by the MC of the RDP, related to the implementation of the JTF; (5) discussions and debates, and preparing positions and opinions on policies related to the region's transition to climate neutrality and the achievement of decarbonisation targets; (6) preparing annual reports on the implementation and progress of investments and the achievement of the set objectives under the just transition priority; (7) participating in active communication and engagement with civil society, raising awareness of the objectives of the TJTP and the Just Transition Fund through information events organised by the subcommittee's secretariat. The effectiveness of the JTS has not been examined in prior research, while it has been highlighted with its role to develop and discuss criteria for the selection of projects and guidelines for the provision of funding under the JTF, the main mechanism which implements the TJTP.

The Territorial Just Transition Plan (TJTP) for Stara Zagora also envisages specific measures to engage young people during implementation. The Development of Regions Programme 2021–2027, version 2.2, provides for periodic seminars, roundtables and site visits for secondary–school pupils, university students and young graduates, aiming to encourage them to remain in the region and contribute to local economic diversification (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, Development of Regions Programme 2021–2027, version 2.2, p. 124).

Role of citizens and NGOs in the work of the decision-making bodies

Bulgaria has implemented the partnership principle in the Stara Zagora region by establishing a JTS as a sub–committee of the MC of the RDP 2021–2027. This institutional arrangement aims to ensure the involvement of local stakeholders and the alignment of the TJTP with the local context and implementation specifics of the region. The JTS has been designed as an intermediary and facilitator between competent authorities at national, regional, and local levels, as well as representatives of the private sector, NGOs, and citizens.

The extent of citizen participation in the work of the Monitoring Committee as a decision–making body for just transition implementation has direct relevance to the setup and operation of the JTS in the Stara Zagora region. For example, the 4th meeting of the MC approved the establishment of JTSs in the three mining regions of Pernik, Kyustendil, and Stara Zagora. These sub–committees were charged with the task of assisting in the preparation, implementation, monitoring, and reporting of activities under Priority 4 Just Transition of the RDP, co–financed by the Just Transition Fund.

A review of the minutes of eight meetings of the MC in the period 18 August 2023 – 25 February 2025 shows that citizen participation was expressed primarily through the submission of written opinions, comments, and remarks on draft documents, leading to corrections and the refinement of decisions. The participation of civil society and stakeholders was carried out mainly through membership and representation in the MC. The members of the MC, representing NGOs, trade unions and other interested institutions, have the right to vote or observer status, which allows them to submit official opinions and comments. During the written decision–making procedures, members and other stakeholders could express formal opinions on the documents submitted for approval (e.g., draft amendments, methodologies and selection criteria). For example, Habitat Bulgaria, as a representative of NGOs in the field of social inclusion, submitted a statement on the amendments to the JTF.

It should be noted, however, that according to the Internal Rules of Procedure, a draft decision shall be deemed to have been adopted when it is agreed by more than two–thirds of the members with a right to vote; in the absence of a written response from a member of the Committee, it is deemed that they had agreed to the draft decision without comments. This decision–making rule means that any opinion and comment by NGOs, especially raising objections, cannot substantially influence the decisions of the MC, which consists of 64 members, out of which only 6 are NGOs

from different sectors (e.g. fundamental rights, education, sustainable development). Moreover, in the decision–making process, the role of the chairperson and the secretariat, which prepares the drafts of the decisions, is critical.

An analysis of the minutes from the meetings of the JTS under the MC of the RDP 2021–2027 for the Stara Zagora region (first, third, fourth, and fifth meetings[4]) indicates that citizen participation is institutionalised and formal, carried out primarily through representation in official structures and written opinions, but with limited direct influence on the final decision–making of the Managing Authority (MA). The participation of citizens and relevant stakeholders is mainly realised through representation in the JTS and the presentation and discussion of opinions from the NGO representatives in the JTS.

The JTS includes a wide range of representatives, which is consistent with the partnership principle established in Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 (EPCEU, 2021b). The primary form of participation is through expressing opinions and submitting written positions on draft documents. There have not been many instances where the representatives of an NGO expressed an opinion. One of them was when a representative of the NGO Green Balkans put forward a specific proposal to include the Law on Biological Diversity in the justification for the procedure on the socio–economic transformation of mining territories.

Our study of the work of the JTS between May 2024 and October 2025 shows that, although NGO representatives participate regularly in the process, their contributions appear to have limited substantive influence: while some input may have led to corrections and refinements of decisions, documented instances of NGO input are few and their overall influence remains negligible. The mandate of the JTS is consultative, not decisive, in nature: the JTS is an advisory body to the Monitoring Committee. The final decisions on the methodologies and selection criteria are made by the MC. Citizen participation is institutionalised and expressed mainly through submitting written statements and comments during meetings. The MA undertakes the commitment to consider and reflect the opinions, but does not guarantee their full acceptance. During the discussion of procedures, tension often arises between the national regulatory frameworks (state aid, eligible beneficiaries) and local needs and proposals. For example, the proposals to change the criteria for energy efficiency require approval from the MC. In addition, it is not always clearly tracked in the minutes exactly how each opinion is reflected in the final documents, which complicates the assessment of the actual impact of citizen participation.

The overall assessment is that stakeholder participation in the JTS for Stara Zagora is regular and comprehensive in terms of representation, but remains consultative in nature, with its effectiveness determined by the ability and willingness of the MA to integrate proposals into the decision–making process, which remains centralised at the Monitoring Committee level.

[4] The second meeting is excluded since its minutes are publicly unavailable.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study contributes to understanding the participation of civil society in the government's strategic planning of EU–driven decarbonisation in Bulgaria's main coal mining region, Stara Zagora, by analysing the level and specific forms of citizen participation in the planning and implementation of the Territorial Just Transition Plan (TJTP) for the region during the period 2022–2025. Although it is early to assess the full extent of citizen participation in the implementation phase, some key conclusions may be drawn. Our analysis, informed by an adapted methodological framework for stakeholder engagement, indicates that while a formal structure for citizen involvement exists, its effectiveness remains limited.

The research addressed the extent of citizen participation in the TJTP planning and implementation process in Stara Zagora. The evaluation of citizen and civil society engagement based on the adapted criteria yields the results presented in Table 5. At the level of engagement in planning and implementation of the TJTP, a score of 1 was assigned for the level of effective engagement of civil society actors and the general public in the planning and implementation of the TJTP. This signifies that a formal framework for public consultations was established, but the actual impact on the discussed issues related to the just transition was limited. At the level of implementation through the establishment of a permanent consultation body for the TJTP, a score of 2 was assigned. This signifies the fact that a permanent consultation body (the JTS) has been consistently set up in which representatives of citizens and NGOs participate, though they do not appear to directly impact the implementation of the TJTP. The score is in line with the assessment criteria for the level of participation in formal structures for implementation as presented in Table 4.

Table 5. Extent of engagement of civil society actors and the general public in the planning and implementation of the TJTP of the Stara Zagora region

Source: Authors' contribution.

Effective participation in the planning and implementation phase	Engagement of civil society actors and the general public in the planning and implementation of the TJTP of the Stara Zagora region.	1 – A formal framework for public consultations has been established, but the extent of the impact on the discussed issues related to the just transition has been limited.
Participation in formal structures for implementation	Establishment of a permanent body of consultation with stakeholders for the implementation of the TJTP of the Stara Zagora region.	2 – Provides the consistent set-up of a permanent consultation body where representatives of citizens and NGOs can participate, but do not impact the implementation of the TJTP (emphasis ours).

The planning and implementation of the TJTP provided distinct formal avenues for citizen engagement. During the planning phase (2022–2023), the government organised three separate public consultation periods to draft the TJTP and its associated SEA. Procedurally, these opportunities were structured through official publications and invitations to submit written opinions. In the implementation phase, opportunities were institutionalised through the establishment of the MC and the regional JTS. The JTSs, explicitly designed to reflect local specifics, serve as a territorial link between national institutions and local stakeholders. Additionally, the framework includes specific provisions for engaging youth through workshops and roundtables.

Despite the formal opportunities, significant structural and procedural constraints limit the extent of citizen participation and influence. The JTS is strictly an advisory body; it cannot make binding decisions, which are reserved for the central Monitoring Committee. Within the Monitoring Committee, decision–making rules require a two–thirds majority, and the absence of a written response is counted as agreement. With NGOs holding only a small fraction of the seats (e.g., 6 out of 64 members), their ability to block or alter decisions is mathematically negligible. The NGOs reported a "lack of transparency" and noted that they did not receive responses to their comments, leading to a perception that consultations were a "mere formality". Moreover, the Managing Authority retains the discretion to accept or reject opinions without guaranteeing their reflection in final documents.

The observed practices diverge significantly from the good governance criteria outlined in EU methodological toolkits. While the EU guidelines advocate equal status and co–decisional rights (e.g. giving citizens equal voting power), the Stara Zagora model restricts citizens and NGOs to a consultative status. The system fulfils the requirement for partner inclusiveness by embedding stakeholders in the JTS, but it fails to meet the standards for transparent feedback channels and information symmetry, as evidenced by the lack of responses to NGO submissions. Consequently, the substance of participation falls short of the procedural justice standards required for a genuinely inclusive transition.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen citizen participation in the just transition of Stara Zagora and align the process more closely with the EU's methodological recommendations for effective governance, the following policy recommendations are offered:

- *Mandate equal status and co-decisional rights.* The analysis revealed that the JTS functions strictly as an advisory body. Furthermore, within the decision–making Monitoring Committee (MC), NGOs hold only a small fraction of seats. The current voting rules, which require a two–thirds majority and tacit agreement, effectively render civil society powerless to block or alter decisions, reducing participation to a mere formality. The principle of giving equal status, which includes explicit calls for equal voting rights among all participating actors, must be institutionalised. This is necessary to move beyond consultation and establish

formalised mechanisms for power–sharing, thereby avoiding the democratic dilution that occurs when citizens are excluded from binding decision authority. The Just Transition Subcommittee should transition from an advisory body to one with substantive decision–making authority;

- *Ensure information symmetry and transparent feedback channels*. The study found that it is currently difficult to track how specific opinions are reflected in final documents, which NGOs cited as a disregard for the partnership principle. Authorities must commit to providing identical information to all stakeholders, especially to the NGOs and the general public, simultaneously and without delay, to establish deliberative conditions and prevent epistemic power imbalances. Furthermore, institutionalised routes for clear, visible, and actionable input exchange are critical for maintaining participation legitimacy and enabling iterative accountability;
- *Implement continuous and accessible community engagement*. Current participation is confined primarily to institutionalised representation in committees and written opinions. While the TJTP envisages youth engagement through workshops and roundtables, the available evidence does not establish the extent to which these activities have been implemented, and as a whole, the general public remains largely disconnected from the technical decision–making process. Engagement must extend beyond formal NGO representatives, requiring systematic public outreach through conferences, online fora, or facilitated community deliberation to ensure the affected public has channels to contribute meaningfully throughout the policy cycle. The existing initiative to engage youth through workshops and roundtables is a good practice that should be expanded; and
- *Institutionalise public transparency and timeliness*. Public auditability should be embedded into the process by publishing meeting minutes and decision rationales within a short timeframe, such as two weeks, allowing citizens external to formal governance bodies to track deliberations and scrutinise strategic congruence.

The current findings indicate that while Bulgaria has established the formal structures for citizen participation, the substance of that participation falls short of the procedural justice standards advocated by the EU methodological toolkits, particularly concerning equal power and inclusive implementation. Addressing these procedural deficiencies is paramount to building the necessary legitimacy, trust, and shared ownership required for a genuinely just and successful transition in Stara Zagora and other coal regions in Bulgaria.

7. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The case of the just transition of Stara Zagora TJTP reveals a significant implementation gap between EU normative standards and national administrative realities. While EU toolkits explicitly advocate equal status and co–decisional rights to ensure procedural justice, the actual governance model in Stara Zagora TJTP remains centralised and top–down. The dominance of the Monitoring Committee,

where civil society voices are diluted by majority voting rules, implies that without strict EU conditionality regarding how partnership is operationalised, just transition risks becoming a rhetorical device rather than a governance practice. This suggests that EU funding mechanisms may need to enforce qualitative participation metrics — such as voting parity — rather than merely checking for the existence of consultative bodies.

As the Stara Zagora region, alongside regions in Poland and Czechia, contributes to over 95% of the EU's planned coal–fired electricity generation in 2030, its governance trajectory serves as a bellwether for the hardest–to–abate territories. The study illustrates that in regions with high economic dependence and political sensitivity, formal consultation without substantive influence fails to build trust. If the limited stakeholder engagement observed here persists, it risks generating the moral resistance and non–acceptance warned of in the literature. This case implies that for other coal heartlands, successful decarbonisation requires governance structures that can absorb and act on local dissent, rather than merely channelling it into advisory dead–ends.

For local stakeholders, the study highlights the risks of participation fatigue. The evidence shows that while NGOs actively provided detailed technical feedback — such as on biodiversity law — the lack of transparency and feedback loops created a perception of the process as a mere formality. This implies that if the transition governance continues to extract legitimacy from civil society participation without returning substantive influence, stakeholders may disengage, eroding the shared ownership essential for long–term stability.

Finally, this research underscores the analytical necessity of distinguishing between the breadth and depth of participation. By utilising a scoring system that differentiates between formal frameworks (Score 1) and co–decisional participation (Score 3), the study demonstrates that the presence of institutions such as the Just Transition Subcommittee does not automatically equate to procedural justice. Future research on just transition should therefore move beyond mapping stakeholders to auditing decision trails — tracking specifically how citizen inputs travel from consultation rooms to final policy documents.

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CULTURAL PLANNING AS A PARTICIPATORY METHOD FOR RESOURCE PERIPHERIES: THE CASE OF PEAT EXTRACTION IN ILOMANTSI, FINLAND

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CULTURAL PLANNING AS A PARTICIPATORY METHOD FOR RESOURCE PERIPHERIES: THE CASE OF PEAT EXTRACTION IN ILOMANTSI, FINLAND

ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates public participation in spatial planning in Ilomantsi, a peripheral mining region in Finland facing both underground gold mining and peat extraction. While peat extraction has a significant environmental impact and is targeted for phase–out under EU sustainability and Just Transition policies, local opinions are divided: some see resource extraction as an economic lifeline, others prioritise ecological restoration. The research draws on the Bog 2.0 project, which implements comprehensive sustainability by integrating ecological, socio–economic, political, and cultural dimensions. Empirical data were collected through action research and interviews in order to explore perceptions of environmental impact and participatory processes. Findings show that, despite Finland's strong democratic traditions, formal participation is often dominated by a few active voices, leaving many residents uncertain and underrepresented. To address this, the study examines cultural empowerment, an action research approach combining historical mapping, interviews, and participatory cultural activities – such as theatre, a short film, and cultural branding – to broaden dialogue and co–create shared understanding. Early applications suggest that this method enhances residents' sense of belonging, legitimises them as stakeholders, and fosters more inclusive, context–sensitive planning. The chapter highlights both the challenges and potential of integrating innovative participatory approaches into sustainability transitions in peripheral resource–dependent communities.

Keywords: cultural empowerment; public participation; action research; resource extraction; Finland; Ilomantsi.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates the challenges and promises of public participation in spatial planning in a peripheral mining region in Finland, where, in addition to underground gold mining, there are also plans and debates concerning extensive peat extraction[1]. Peat is considered a non–renewable resource in EU policy, thereby to be scaled down, yet the extraction of peat is being discussed locally and in relation to a state–owned company operating in the case study region. We focus on the municipality of Ilomantsi, where the use of natural resources has sparked conflicts. While formal processes for public participation in spatial planning and resource extraction are considered to be well–developed, participating in public hearings has been regarded as difficult. To overcome such challenges, there are innovative schemes to improve participatory approaches in the planning phase. We focus on the approach of cultural planning, by which we mean empowerment of the local population through the reconstruction of community representation and identity. The research implements the idea of comprehensive sustainability with a cultural materialist approach according to which even the most everyday activity has a cultural dimension (e.g. Thompson, et al., 2016). This means that culture, rather than being a separate pillar, creates a link between different technological, economic and social elements of sustainability. Our research focus is twofold: How do citizens view their possibilities for participation when plans are being made for resource extraction in the Finnish peripheral context, and what does this say about the cultural variety of the community? We proceed by exploring the situation and the challenges of public participation in spatial and resource use planning in Finland, after which we examine the notion of cultural planning, present the case study locality and the research methods, and move to our findings, discussion and conclusions.

2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN SPATIAL PLANNING IN FINLAND AND ITS CRITICISMS

The possibilities of public participation in decision–making generally depend on and are driven by the performance of local government, the degree of democracy and freedom of speech, and the traditions of civic engagement (e.g. Ringov & Zollo, 2007), and they vary across Europe (Kotilainen et al., 2011). Formal participation in spatial planning has emerged over several decades in Finland and has been extended to cover the environmental impact of development projects. It can be said that behind the models for participation lies a Nordic and European idea of democracy with citizens' strong role in decision–making. Citizens should not be seen merely as the targets of public administration, rather the ultimate decision–making power should lie with them. Individual activity and voluntarism are cherished in Nordic societies relatively more than traditional community and family values, something considered

[1] This chapter draws on the results of the research project Bog 2.0, funded by the EU's Just Transition Fund, which aims to phase out local peat production and peat–based energy use so that no one suffers more from the transition than others.

to be more typical in southern Europe (de Broms, 2005). According to the European Value Survey (EVS), there is an established national tradition in Finland regarding citizens' political rights and democratic processes, with a high level of trust in public institutions amongst the citizens (Galland & Lamel, 2017). Nevertheless, the purpose of people's participation in spatial planning has varied according to different theoretical planning models (Arnstein, 1969; Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2009).

The guidelines for participation in spatial planning and environmental impact assessments have been formalised in several laws in Finland. Finnish legislation partly follows the directives and decrees set at the level of the European Union, especially concerning environmental impact. In short, when a local or regional administration prepares a plan for the development of urban space, they have to allow the citizens to have their say. This applies to a lesser degree in rural spaces, such as waterfronts, where a physical plan also needs to be prepared. Participation has to be incorporated at certain stages in the preparation of spatial plans. The authority responsible for elaborating the plan needs to inform the local residents of the ideas for the plan, and the same authority has to arrange hearings in the neighbourhood in which the development is to take place. These hearings are open events, and anyone participating is allowed to comment on the plan. Moreover, those concerned are able to make a written complaint regarding the plan. The pertinent law in this regard is the Land Use and Construction Law (1999), which is currently in the governmental and parliamentary process of being transformed into the Law on the Use of Regions with the introduction of the Building Law (2023) that came into force in 2025. Despite these formal guidelines, the role of citizens' participation compared to the role of experts is complex (Bäcklund et al., 2017).

The Law on Environmental Impact Assessment Procedure (2017) and the above mentioned legislations on planning are important for the mining of minerals. After a lengthy exploration procedure by a mining company, once it has been estimated that a mineral deposit will most likely be profitable for the company to start mining operations, under current legislation, the municipality needs to start the process of preparing a physical plan. Here come all the phases of participation by the citizens and anyone concerned with the project. The situation is different for peat extraction, however, because even though it is the extraction of a non–renewable resource, it is not formally considered mining. This can be conceived as one of the challenging aspects to citizens' participation in the planning of peat extraction projects.

In Finland, people's generally high level of trust in institutions and authorities creates a foundation for formal participation and consultation methods during spatial and resource use planning. In principle, the participatory system is well–organised, and the processes are smooth. However, relations between citizens may become unnecessarily formalised with a formal system for participation that does not guarantee people are genuinely listened to, with their voices influencing the planning process or the construction of extractive infrastructures (Arnstein, 1969; Pettersson et al., 2017). Furthermore, the role assigned to a region as an administrative unit in relation to a natural resource industry can be very narrow and also limit people's agency, since

regional administrations in regions with natural resources to be exploited, but with fewer opportunities to develop other industries, tend to align with industrial actors and favour resource extraction (Kotilainen, 2021a). Moreover, peripheral regions with natural resource extraction have a tendency to follow longer–term industry life cycles (Halonen et al., 2015), which contributes to the local culture being industry–related. In addition, peripheral industrial companies have a history of practising paternalistic welfare policies and taking care of cultural activities, education, and healthcare for employees and their families (Häyrynen et al., 2012). This has strengthened the industries' social license to operate as well as their position as an opinion leader locally and regionally, which is still seen today in local cultures, even if the height of paternalism may have passed with more neo–liberal policies in place in natural resource industries.

This legacy is part of the historical context in our case study locality, impacting the inhabitants' willingness to express their opinions publicly. Many locals may feel that while there are plenty of formal hearings, there are fewer real possibilities to influence decision–making on the use of natural resources. Therefore, a limited number of active members of the local community may hold sway, causing a power asymmetry. Hence, the European Union's formal Just Transition mechanism for sustainability (European Commission, 2021) is often dominated by one institutionalised idea of nature that also determines whose justice is at stake and which voices are marginalised. From the residents' perspective, the question of the impact of participation in planning is the central problem. The core of the criticism is that residents' opinions do not influence the content of plans – especially in contradictory cases. This is a kind of paradox of inclusion where the participation of the same people repeatedly becomes a problem. The most active and loudest people participate and, as a result, the representativeness of opinions can be questioned (Arola, 2002). The institutionalised division of roles in the public sphere polarises the image of the community, while, in contrast, the community itself is usually much more diverse, with people ready to change their positions on issues related to natural resources. In order to explore how to overcome this challenge in public participation, i.e. the difficulty of having all the voices heard and counted, we next discuss the concepts of cultural planning and cultural empowerment.

3. CULTURAL PLANNING AND CULTURAL EMPOWERMENT

Cultural planning is an action research method that aims to broaden the scope of participatory dialogues and facilitate the co–creation of a common understanding in the context of community transformations within global transformations (O'Connor, 2013; Koskinen–Koivisto & Kumpulainen, 2024). The method has been applied especially to urban environments in Western countries (Stevenson, 2005; Bianchini, 2013) on the one hand, and to the rights and empowerment of indigenous people and ethnic groups (Mercer, 2006; Hamilton et al., 2025), on the other hand. Cultural planning has been adopted in a range of localities with the purpose of empowering the whole community during transformative change (Häyrynen & Hankonen, 2024). It is our aim to explore how the method of cultural planning might be used to improve

the recognition of local people as credible stakeholders in the larger institutional framework, thereby empowering them in the planning process.

According to Bianchini (2013), local cultural resources include the arts, media, leisure, entertainment, religious activities, spiritual sites, local meeting places, landscapes, and value chains of creative production. More dynamically, cultures have been understood as collective cognitive processes, as well as relevance structures that individual members of a group use to assess collective values and be identified by other individuals (Thompson et al., 2016). Cultural resources are regarded as tools for representing individual connections to larger cultures. In the case of transformative changes, culture determines the different reactions of a community to previously unknown phenomena, and how diversified the community gets in such a situation.

Cultural planning begins with cultural mapping in a locality. The core issue is twofold: How is cultural stratification in a locality recognised as a basis for decision–making (cultural stakeholder recognition), and how is stratification taken into account in creating a situational review in the locality (cultural stakeholder consultation)? Empowerment in planning means managing cultural impacts in a balanced way so that everyone in the community feels included in the processes during which decisions are made. Attention should be paid to three aspects in particular: the rigidities of the established cultural perception, the inclusiveness of cultural mapping and barriers to participation, and the continuity of cultural planning and especially its long–term organisation. In cases of a community in transition[2], institutionally established perceptions of culture have proven to be exploitable for various commercial and political interests (Häyrynen, 2017). An institutionally dominant notion of community culture may emphasise a nostalgic and selective view of the past and narrow the community's interpretation of the meaning of nature accordingly. In mining communities, for example, the external image of a local culture is usually dominated by a single, strongly institutionalised interpretation of mining history with strict gender, generational and other functional roles conditioned by mining activities (e.g. Pattison, 1999). Institutional representations of culture tend to reproduce prevailing structures and diminish multicultural dynamics in the community. Thus, a community's cultural image may become unnecessarily unanimous, preventing people from recognising their own personal cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, cultural planning is needed to reconstruct the local cultural image to reflect its true diversity and reveal hidden aspects of the inhabitants' inclusion. Such an approach is based herein on the materialist concept of culture represented by British cultural researchers Raymond Williams (e.g. 1981) and Paul Willis (e.g. 2000), among others. According to the cultural materialist view, everyone has culture, so the concept of culture itself would not be a quality criterion. It provides a cultural perspective that expands beyond the institutional framework and characterises a

[2] By a community in transition, we mean a local community that is going through a process of shifting its economic base, which is impacted by local, national and global economic processes alike, and which further impacts on the social and gradually cultural aspects in the community (Vatanen & Kotilainen, 2016; Kotilainen, 2018; Kotilainen, 2021b).

community as diverse, with different values and relationships with nature overlapping with working life, everyday life, and various relations to the world outside. However, it may become a problem if an analysis that focuses on such an extensive scope of culture leads to an unstable foundation for planning (Stevenson, 2005). Thus, a balance should be found between culture conceived as institutionalised, on the one hand, and as based on the ways of life, on the other hand.

In order to capture the diversity of a community in a transformative phase, cultural planning involves the cultural reconstruction of the community and locality (Stevenson, 2005; Häyrynen & Hankonen, 2024). Mercer (2006) has emphasised that cultural planning should be interdisciplinary and cross–administrative from the outset. The core task of cultural reconstruction is enabling all people to see themselves as full members of the community, and to reach a common understanding of how culture should be negotiated together.

4. THE CASE OF ILOMANTSI WITHIN THE FINNISH INDUSTRIAL AND PARTICIPATORY CONTEXT

The empirical research location for our study is the municipality of Ilomantsi, a community of 4,500 inhabitants located in Finland's North Karelia region, bordering the Russian Federation. For centuries, industries in Ilomantsi have been based on natural resource extraction – originally lake iron ore extraction and forestry, peat extraction from the 1970s onwards, and in recent decades gold mining. While underground gold mining has not caused considerable public discussion thus far, it is largely agreed that peat extraction operated by a state–owned company has severe impacts on local biodiversity and water systems, and adds to global climate change. Regarding the local natural resource industries, extraction of the non–renewable peat has been a target for heated debates and activism locally and on a wider scale. We have therefore chosen to focus on how cultural planning as an approach might help bring the multiplicity of local voices better into discussions on the future of the industry, hence improving the participatory process when planning for future activities in this line of industry.

Despite the controversial nature of mining projects in Europe (Kivinen et al., 2020) and in Finland, not all mines cause conflicts or disputes. Ilomantsi has two relatively new gold mines, both underground and open pit. The underground gold mine has not been a target for public protests on any significant scale, and did not involve much public participation during its establishment and operation; this may change, however, with the expansion of new mining activities. We do not have empirical evidence at this stage to analyse this transformation in local debates. Peat extraction is more significant in terms of protests locally in Ilomantsi and on a wider scale. Today, it is largely agreed that peat extraction concerns the utilisation of a non–renewable resource, and the extraction of peat from bogs (Figure 1) has huge impacts on the landscape, ruling out any other, overlapping, land use. Therefore, peat extraction could be compared to open–pit mining. The impact on the local community from

peat extraction is significant in the form of environmental impacts and impacts on the use of nature for other, competing purposes, and to a lesser extent, on providing employment and income. This traditional economy/ecology distinction has been a source of disagreement on the desirability of peat extraction in Ilomantsi. In public debates, two different "natural environments" are being socially constructed based on different notions of ecological and socio–economic sustainability. In a more material sense, the exploitation of natural resources closes routes and changes soundscapes but on the other hand, industrial activities bring new technologies and wealth to the locality, new roads, water pipes and other public services.



Figure 1. Piitsonsuo, Ilomantsi, 15 April 2025
Source: Nina Tokola, Bog 2.0.

5. METHODS

Cultural reconstruction requires: first, a mapping of cultural margins (in this case, people's individual relation to the peat bogs); second, intervention based on that mapping (collective planning with the cultural producers); and third, an assessment of the impact of that intervention. The study was conducted as an action research project, following cyclical logic (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The process consisted of a single research cycle, which can be summarised in four phases:

- data collection and the development of understanding,
- planning and implementing actions based on that understanding,
- observing the effects of the actions, and
- reflecting to determine guidelines for the next phase.

In order to identify the cultural layers present in the community and to reach hidden voices, we saw all members of the local community as potential respondents, provided they had some connection to peatlands, whether through their livelihood, residence, leisure or any other form of engagement. A total of 19 in–depth semi–structured interviews and 16 short interviews were conducted during the spring and summer of 2025. Table 1 (in the Appendix) presents the demographic characteristics of the interviewed participants by gender and age group. To ensure anonymity, participant codes were used, and age was reported in age groups. We employed semi–structured interviews to combine a systematic inquiry with openness, and thus examine complex cultural phenomena in which meanings are constructed contextually and dialogically (Galletta & Cross, 2013). The interviews explored respondents' personal relationships with bogs, their views on bog use, and their perspectives on bog–related decision–making and its perceived fairness. The thematically organised framework examined these themes from historical, present–day, and future–oriented perspectives, with a condensed version applied in the short interviews (see the interview guide in the Appendix).

The in–depth interviews were carried out at locations chosen in advance by the interviewees, such as their homes, yards, workplaces, cafés or in a separate room at the municipal library. The aim was to capture the cultural layering of the community by assembling a diverse group of respondents. Interview contacts were formed during the fieldwork, which supported the principles of cultural inclusion. This approach allowed respondents to be selected based on the local context rather than predefined categories. Of the interviewees with long–term residence, returnees, and recent incomers, 12 were men and seven women, with years of birth spanning from 1945 to 1996, and educational backgrounds from secondary education to university degrees. All the respondents had a relationship with the peatlands through their leisure activities. A few owned peatland plots. There were respondents with professional experience in peat extraction and those who otherwise accessed the peatlands as part of their work, such as border guards. The respondents also included volunteers engaged in wetland restoration projects in peatlands. Recordings of the in–depth interviews were transcribed and analysed for qualitative content. In the

first phase, the entire dataset was read as a whole, after which recurring and significant contents, themes, and perspectives were identified. Thematic categorisation was guided both by the interview framework and by data–driven insights. Secondly, the short interviews conducted during a local summer festival also included summer residents; eight respondents were men and eight women. Notes were taken manually. The material from the short interviews was analysed according to the same principles as the in–depth interviews.

For the cultural reconstruction, we practised cultural interference through various kinds of participatory cultural events and productions, including integrated theatre, a short film, and information cards on the diverse local history in order to make the bog–related local cultural history a more visible part of local self–understanding and thus create a more diverse historical image. Information cards are commonly used to convey various types of information, research results, and instructions. The creation of the information cards began by examining how the bog and its cultural history are presented in written local histories and in exhibitions in local museums.

Participatory observations and supplementary short interviews were employed to examine the empowering effects of cultural productions on the research participants' cultural self–image. Participant observation, combined with the short interviews, was conducted during screenings of the short film created during the project, as well as at various cultural events where local cultural heritage was present, such as art exhibitions and local festivals. The interviews focused on participants' impressions of the events and on whether they perceived local culture as authentically represented. Participants were selected through random sampling. Field notes from the participatory observations were coded and analysed using content analysis (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

We combined our own active local participation with observations, enabling an immersive understanding of the studied social and physical environments. Participatory observation is well–suited for the examination of cultural empowerment, as it enables the observation of experiences, social interactions, and nonverbal expressions (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Ethnographic observation was applied to museums and events (Kallinen & Kinnunen, 2021), where all the bog–related content on display in the exhibitions was photographed for later analysis. As action research, the ultimate purpose of the research was to improve the inhabitants' possibilities to participate in the debates and planning phases of local peat extraction projects. Elucidating the diversity of local culture played an important role in this attempt, intending to encourage the residents to express their views more openly. Next, we present the results under three major themes in order to illustrate the importance of cultural planning in providing a platform to enable a better and more empowering participatory process for the people in a locality when planning the utilisation of local natural resources.

6. RESULTS

6.1 CULTURAL MAPPING

The two official histories that have been written about Ilomantsi (Björn, 1991; Björn, 2006) briefly present the local bogs as a source of livelihood through peat extraction, but also as protected areas. However, the multi–dimensionalities and local significance of the history of the bogs are lost in the extensive histories. Based on one author's observations made in local museums in the summer of 2024, the bog is presented above all as a natural environment and hiking destination, without showing much as a cultural environment. The bog is often featured as a backdrop, such as a habitat for bears or a growing place for herbs, but not as an independent cultural environment. Based on a review of the literature and observations, local military history and established mythological cultural history have been commercialised as tourist attractions. This strong emphasis on certain aspects of history has meant that other histories and their interpretations have been marginalised in the local cultural self–understanding.

At the same time, according to the findings from the interviews, people's relationships with bogs are diverse and multidimensional. An individual may have various kinds of relationships with bogs and different cultural identities formed through different contexts, which may also be partly contradictory. Based on the interviews, in a polarised situation, the majority had not formed a clear opinion on the use of peatlands, wishing for more information about different options. Many emphasised the importance of context–specific, long–term, and moderate use, where economic needs would be balanced with environmental and ecological values.

> *Using common sense, one should consider, on a bog-by-bog basis, which bogs should be left undisturbed. Some of them still inevitably need to be used for peat extraction, even though it is being restricted and prohibited — but still. The key is moderation. (R3)*

Some interviewees expressed uncertainty about their roles as participants in the peatland–related discussions, particularly regarding their perceived epistemic competence. This uncertainty became more pronounced in situations where the conversation shifted from personal relationships with bogs to broader perspectives, and was manifested as hesitation to respond to the interview questions. Such hesitation by individual persons illustrates the pervasiveness of the institutionalised view on how the natural environment should be "correctly" dealt with. Women were in the majority among those who expressed uncertainty:

> *Well, maybe I have the wrong view on this, but... I know this might be a wrong answer from me... (R6)*

6.2 CULTURAL INTERVENTION

Everyone is heard, but does it make a difference?

The majority of respondents perceive that, formally, everyone has the opportunity to participate in decision–making and to be heard, but at the same time, the actual possibilities to influence decision–making are limited. Although public hearings are organised, they are often seen as mere formalities without real impact. Decision–making power is perceived to rest with those who hold economic and political influence:

> *Well, yes, surely there is a possibility to be heard, but whether one can actually influence a decision – that's a questionable matter. Information events and hearings are organised, but the voice of the small person doesn't really carry in big issues. They're often just formalities that nowadays have to be held. (R18)*

In practice, many choose not to participate in public discussions or consultation events, and several factors contribute to this non–participation, including a perceived toxic atmosphere, lack of interest, and feelings of insufficient expertise or verbal confidence, along with the experience that participation has no impact on final decisions. Moreover, the debate concerning the peatlands and peat extraction is perceived by the interviewees as highly polarised and conflict–laden. In public forums and consultation events, the interaction often takes place between a narrow group of participants, where the most vocal contributors represent opposing extremes, either strongly supporting peat extraction or firmly opposing it. The interviewees experience the atmosphere of the discussion as harsh and unconstructive, which in turn reduces their willingness to participate and hinders the building of mutual understanding:

> *When you observe the situation from the sidelines, it's almost laughable — both sides are really going at it... It's like each side has only one truth, and they don't listen to each other at all. (R1)*

The perceived hostility of the discussion climate and the straightforward nature of the decision–making processes were seen to undermine the willingness to engage. Many individuals opted for silence due to fear of stigmatisation. Remaining silent was considered an easier and safer option, as expressing one's opinion was thought to have potentially negative consequences, for example, for one's livelihood or economic security:

> *No one should ever be silenced – and yet, people are [laughter]. There is a kind of social pressure to remain silent about certain issues, especially when a loud group defending one particular side dominates the conversation. This group neither sees nor hears other perspectives and is unable to engage in a constructive dialogue... I would really like to be part of that discussion, but as an entrepreneur, I can't. If I were to publicly address these matters, I'd end up burning bridges with everyone. (R1)*

Non–participation is also linked to a lack of interest. Not everyone perceives bogs and peat–related topics as relevant to their own lives. Discussions are left to those considered more active or to individuals perceived to have greater expertise in the subject matter:

> *It's not really everyone's concern... it's just those certain people who are interested in it or who feel they benefit from it. Maybe it's just not interesting, and maybe people don't really have an opinion on it. (R2)*

Limited expertise and lack of verbal confidence were also identified as barriers to participation. Many informants expressed the desire for more information to support the formation of their own opinions. The complexity and multidimensionality of peat–related issues were perceived as making it difficult to form an opinion and engage in the public discussion:

> *Someone who's, let's say, a forest man or woman, or someone living a bit more remotely, doing basic physical work [laughter], we don't really have the skills to make ourselves heard. We lack the ability to produce any kind of written response. (R1)*

Distrust due to a lack of transparency in decision-making

The interviews also revealed a lack of trust in the transparency of decision–making. Informants described situations where no consultation events had been organised at all and decisions were made by influential individuals behind closed doors, without transparency regarding agendas or procedures. These experiences reinforce the perception that participation is neither genuinely possible nor impactful:

> *I've heard that the decision-making culture is such that there are these unnamed gentlemen who push their ideas through. They have their own backup circles that make it all happen. (R12)*

This lack of trust extended to broader concerns about the functioning of democracy. Several informants questioned the significance of participation and voting, expressing doubts about whether an individual citizen can truly influence decision–making. Such experiences weaken the motivation to participate and reinforce a culture of silence:

> *In principle, we have no say in what happens in these municipalities. That's just the unfortunate truth [...] In the end, democracy is just a scam for the poor... They make you think that by voting, you have a voice and can make a difference. But I've seen it over the years — it doesn't matter at all. Still, I vote. (R11)*

At the same time, the interviews also highlighted that sometimes collective civic action can enhance the possibilities to have an influence:

> *The voice of a layperson is heard when there's civic mobilisation... (R7)*

The polarisation between opposing sides is perceived by the interviewees as stark. However, the interview data highlights that the majority of local residents position themselves somewhere between these extremes, considering various options and perspectives. Many are uncertain about their stance or opinion in the current situation. Several informants felt that they lacked sufficient background knowledge to form a clear opinion on the complex and multidimensional issues related to peatlands:

I don't think in black-and-white terms, like that peatlands couldn't be used at all — but it should be done reasonably and in moderation, depending on the purpose. And surely it would be good to have some untouched peatlands as well. (R2)

Tourism and cloudberries

Let us consider two examples from the extensive interview materials on how the respondents saw alternatives to peat extraction: the potentials of tourism and berries as a source of livelihood. Many interviewees felt that bogs should be utilised more effectively for tourism, provided that it was done in an ecologically sustainable manner. Tourism was seen as offering opportunities to strengthen the local economy and increase the region's attractiveness. At the same time, concerns were raised about whether significant growth in the tourism sector could occur in a way that remained ecologically sustainable:

The tourism aspect is, of course, a good thing, but it should be done in a controlled way — not in a way where people would trample the peatland and ruin it, such as if mass tourism were introduced. (R14)

From the perspective of tourism development, the key attractions of peatlands were identified as silence, cleanliness, natural and scenic values, their untouched character, and the maintenance of infrastructure such as boardwalks for hikers. Their exotic nature and the possibilities offered by public access rights – including berry picking – were also seen as strengths:

I think that if we have functioning peatlands where people can go, enjoy themselves, pick berries and all that, it's already an important thing for tourism. Definitely... But if something is done to them [...] — it's such short-sighted thinking. (R19)

However, some interviewees were sceptical about whether peatland tourism could attract enough visitors to become a significant source of municipal revenue. While most saw tourism as a way to strengthen regional vitality, some emphasised that the local economy cannot rely solely on tourism and must be supported by a more diverse economic base:

We need to live here, pay our electricity bills and mortgages, and sometimes even build something new... Roads need to be repaired. But tourism doesn't generate the kind of tax revenue that would allow our infrastructure to be maintained solely through it. (R1)

The cloudberry is a wild berry that grows in bog ecosystems. These berries are considered valuable with both cultural and economic significance. The interviews revealed that cloudberries are picked extensively for personal use, but for some locals, cloudberries are an important source of income:

You can make a lot of money from cloudberries. If they disappeared, I would be in tears. I have relatives who earn several thousand euros every summer just from cloudberries. (R9)

Nearly all the respondents reported picking cloudberries, but it was noted that berry picking has declined, especially among the younger generations. Harvests have also decreased compared to earlier decades due to peatland drying:

> *I have to say, our cloudberry bogs have almost disappeared — you find small ones now. This area used to be famous for its cloudberry bogs in Eastern Finland. Back in the late 1950s, busloads [...] of people came here to pick cloudberries. (R5)*

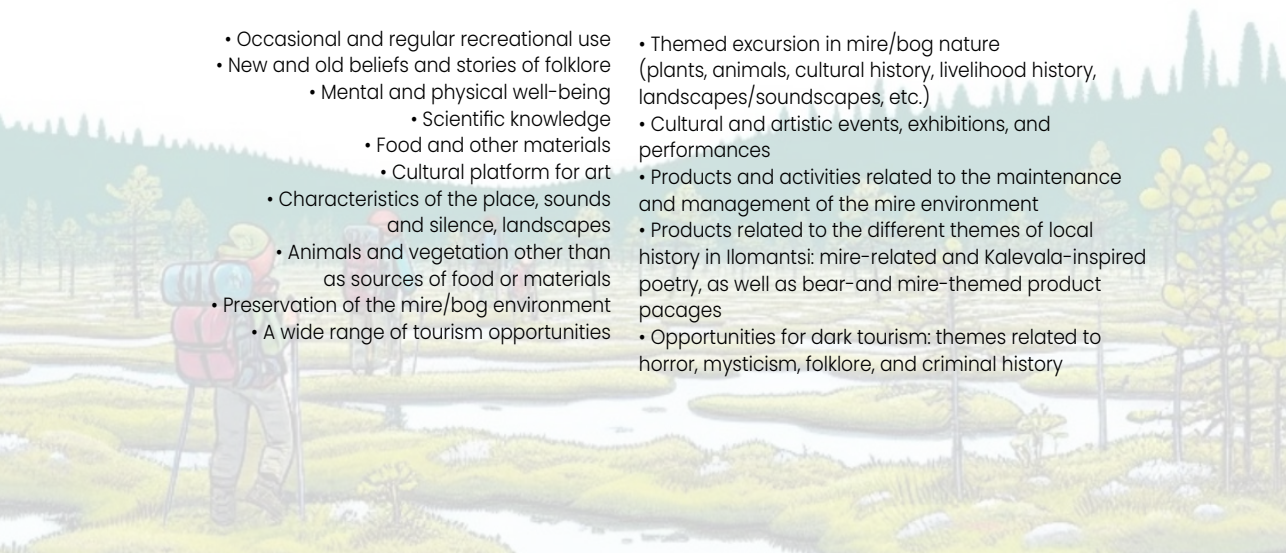

Figure 2. Information card no. 9/11. Translated from Finnish into English by the authors (Source: Jani Karhu, Bog 2.0).

6.3 CULTURAL RECEPTION

Based on participant observations and the short interviews, culture may strengthen cultural identity and serve as a source of empowerment. Cultural products and activities were observed to provide event attendees with both personal and shared joy, a sense of community, reflections on their own culture, and experiences of cultural pride. Culture was also found to serve as a means of conveying information and stimulating discussion. However, the impact appears to be individual and context–dependent. While some attendees displayed clear positive emotional responses and even strong impressions, others seemed less affected.

At the premiere of the bog–themed short film, outwardly visible audience reactions were moderate. However, based on comments heard, the film experience appeared to have been positive. The bog landscape depicted on–screen was experienced as

familiar. Based on observations, for those involved in the film production, the project was significant, empowering, and community–enhancing. They reported that it had been rewarding to create the film with local natural resources for a local audience, and they had learned new skills both in filmmaking and in understanding the bog.

At the art exhibition, clear differences were observed among exhibition visitors in terms of the time and intensity with which they engaged with the exhibition, as well as which works captured their attention. Outwardly visible reactions were generally moderate, although more distinct reactions were observed, for example, in the form of smiles. Verbal expressions of admiration were also observed, with participants commenting, *These are wonderful!*

According to the short interviews conducted at the art exhibition, the nature–related themes of the exhibition were perceived as authentic and integral elements of the local cultural identity. Some respondents emphasised that the bog–themed artworks reflected the local cultural self–image in particular. Some visitors reported feeling empowered and experiencing the exhibition as impactful. As one participant commented, *Impressive images!* Others, however, were unable to articulate their experience afterwards, suggesting that the exhibition did not evoke strong responses in them or that expressing those responses proved difficult. The observations and interviews took place on the opening day of the exhibition. The opening event was multisensory and included elements of local cultural heritage such as folk music and poetry. Many interviewees described the opening event as an impactful overall experience, mentioning feelings of community, Karelian identity, and nostalgia. One participant commented, *A holistic experience!*

Our observations indicate that differences appear to exist between individuals in terms of which cultural products and forms of expression resonate with them, and how actively and intensely they are willing to participate. This observation was repeated across different events. For example, at a local festival, the dance workshop attracted only a small number of participants. The majority of attendees preferred to watch from the side or chose not to stay and observe the dancing. Among both active participants and those observing from the sidelines, smiles, laughter, and shared enjoyment were noted. Similarly, in a school theatre workshop built around the short film, it was observed that theatrical expression was not equally inviting to all, and not everyone wished to participate.

The young people who took part in the participatory bog experiment had not previously been able to connect the bog with, for example, iron production, and the information cards we described above provided many ideas for utilising the bog's cultural history, e.g. from the perspective of tourism entrepreneurship (Figure 2). The strong presence of the bogs in the old poetry collected from the area was new to many. The cards also sparked interesting discussions about people's relationships with the bog and its cultural history, and thus proved to be a handy tool for concretising the theme. The cards were also shared with local entrepreneurs involved in the project to support their opportunities to utilise local history and culture in their operations, but at the same time, it became clear that they had limited capacities to utilise such materials immediately.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter discloses the challenges of public participation in a situation that concerns spatial planning and planning the exploitation of natural resources. As we have observed, Finland has institutionalised practices for executing participatory processes, but as the analysis of our research materials reveals, such a highly institutionalised approach to public participation does not necessarily lead to a balanced outcome regarding people's participation. Clearly, many of the residents who should be eligible participants in the administrative participatory procedures either lack the capacity to truly participate by voicing their views on an issue or feel that even if they do so, their opinions are not counted when the decisions are taken by those in power regarding spatial and natural resource use planning.

To overcome such obstacles to public participation, we have tested the method of cultural planning in order to see whether such an approach could bring about a more balanced outcome from public participation. At a minimum, our experiment has revealed that there are plenty of muted voices and hidden views on how to use space and resources. A further challenge, however, that we have not yet been able to solve through our method here, is how to make use of the cultural aspects disclosed through the cultural planning action research method. Further steps need to be taken in order to have an impact on and against vested interests and prevailing power structures. Nevertheless, we see that the method utilised here can be a necessary step towards improving the quality of participatory processes in planning.

We have focused specifically on a locality with the extensive exploitation of natural resources, providing us a glimpse of the hidden views of those who do not find a place in the highly polarised local debates. While democracy in Finland is commonly regarded as well–established, many respondents suggest that democratic participation is, in practice, limited. Paradoxically, some people do not consider themselves experts in their own community's everyday life, and local issues are outsourced to formal experts or representatives of civic organisations, which leads to public debates being placed in rigid frameworks. This emphasis on trust in expertise as part of societal institutions can be seen as an explanation why, despite high levels of trust in institutions, citizens perceive participation largely as a formality. In other words, their trust in institutional expertise overrides their perceptions of themselves as everyday experts in their own living environments. Nevertheless, cultural projects have proven to be good conversation starters, and they reinforce people's sense of belonging and pride in their unique identities. Culture is a powerful tool through which the hopes, expectations, fears and frustrations of the locals regarding new economic activities, for example, come to the fore.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

The Meaning of the Bog

1. How are you connected to the bog?
   a) I live near a bog
   b) It is important for my livelihood
   c) It is important for my studies
   d) It is important for my leisure time
   e) Other?
2. Do you own any bog areas?
3. What is your relationship with the bog? What does the bog mean to you?
4. Share a memory related to a bog.

Bog Nature

5. Do you think bog nature has changed?
6. If bog nature has changed, has it been for the better or worse?
7. What does the change concern in particular?
8. How could the change be limited?

Bog Natural Resources

9. What do you think is the significance of the bog for the people of Ilomantsi?
10. How do you think bogs should be used?

Bogs: Past, Present, and Future

11. What kind of feelings does the historical use of bogs evoke in you? Why?
12. What kind of feelings does the current use of bogs evoke in you? Why?
13. What kind of feelings does the current public discussion about bogs evoke in you? Why?
14. Do you think bogs are threatened in the future?
15. How do Ilomantsi residents think bogs have changed?
16. Do you think bog–related matters were better or worse in the past? In what sense?

Justice and Decision-Making

17. Do all people have an equal opportunity to be heard in decision–making concerning bogs?
18. Whose perspective should be considered in decision–making about Ilomantsi's bogs?
19. How could participation opportunities be promoted?
20. How could negotiation situations be balanced?
21. What would you hope from local decision–makers?
22. What do you consider unfair or unjust in relation to bogs?

Bog Story

23. If a story were told about the bog, what kind of role would you have in it?

Background Information

- Gender?
- Year of birth?
- Educational and professional background/occupational group?
- Place of residence?
- Physical connection to Ilomantsi?

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the interviewed participants
Source: Authors' contribution.

PARTICIPANT	GENDER	AGE
R1	male	35–44
R2	female	25–34
R3	female	55–64
R4	male	55–64
R5	male	75+
R6	female	55–64
R7	male	75+
R8	male	65–74
R9	male	25–34
R10	female	65–74
R11	male	65–74
R12	male	25–34
R13	male	45–54
R14	male	65–74
R15	female	35–44
R16	female	55–64
R17	female	45–54
R18	male	65–74
R19	male	35–44

INTROSPECTIVE REFLECTIONS ON ATTEMPTS AT DEEPENING COLLABORATION, STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS AND CO-CONSTRUCTING SHARED FUTURES IN MINING REGIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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INTROSPECTIVE REFLECTIONS ON ATTEMPTS AT DEEPENING COLLABORATION, STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS AND CO-CONSTRUCTING SHARED FUTURES IN MINING REGIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, an overview of the MCPP, a municipal capacity–building and partnership–support programme initiated by a large mining company in South Africa early in 2020, is provided. The overview includes the roll–out and experiences of the programme in three of its key focus areas: (1) breaking down disrespect, mistrust, distrust and suspicion between stakeholders, (2) deepening collaboration and strengthening partnerships, and (3) co–constructing shared future visions and aligning state and non–state actors' plans, budgets and actions in accordance with these futures. This exposition covers the favourable observations made about the programme, along with the concerns raised and the questions asked during its implementation. The chapter concludes with a set of tentative reflections on the possibility for municipalities to undertake the kind of tasks that the programme undertook, as well as the need for the programme. It is argued that, should there be a need for such tasks, a body/structure should be established to undertake them, with careful consideration of the location, funding, staffing, oversight and performance management of such a body/structure – possibly also making use of some of the observations made, insights gained and lessons learnt in the execution of the MCPP. In addition to this, broader connections and possible contributions to the literature base are drawn on collaborative planning, with a specific focus on mining regions, mining–municipality–community relations and capacity building, and governance–actor support by mining companies in mining regions.

Keywords: collaboration; regional planning; partnerships; shared futures; South Africa.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Save for the petrostates, there can be few other countries in the world in which minerals and mining have played such an outsized role in their establishment and transition into modern states as South Africa. It was the richest diamond and gold finds the planet had ever seen that drew the British Empire into the brutal conquest of what were otherwise dry and dusty plains at the southern end of Africa in the late 19th century. It was mining that brought unsurpassed inflows of global capital and the establishment of banks at the southern end of the continent (Bremner, 2024) and created the largest African stock exchange alongside one of the most highly regarded financial sectors in the world (IMF, 2022). It was a sprawling mining camp built on the Witwatersrand, the richest gold reef ever to be found on the globe, far away from the coast or any major rivers, that would become the prime metropolis of Johannesburg – incidentally named after the two officials who were instrumental in the proclamation of the area as a "diggings" for the extraction of gold in 1886. The wealth that mining generated spawned the manufacturing sector and turned South Africa into the most industrialised country on the continent, leading to the establishment of the first university in the country and providing much of the capital required to build the transport, trade, transmission and basic services infrastructure network that is still unsurpassed on the continent.

Yet, it was also this same enormous mineral wealth and gargantuan mining industry that (1) trampled on the lives, lands and livelihoods of the country's Indigenous inhabitants; (2) created a brutal migrant labour system, causing enormous suffering and lasting damage to traditional community and family systems; (3) played a huge part in the introduction of the "concentration camp" as a weapon of war against civilians in the pursuit of economic goals; and (4) was a key driver in the creation of a caste–like system of "work reservation" for "Whites/Europeans", Africans and "Coloureds" – "persons of mixed racial descent" (Van der Schyff, 2012; Davenport, 2013). In short, in many ways it was both a key driver and sustainer of the British Empire–focused extractive colonial system and later the all–encompassing, globally despised Apartheid state – from its national–scale macro–constructs of ethnically–based homelands for Africans, to its more local manifestations in sub–national settlement segregation, marginalisation, suppression and exploitation (Innes, 1984; Cawood & Minnitt, 1998).

It is little wonder then that with the advent of democracy in 1994, the newly elected African National Congress (ANC) government found itself in a conundrum – firstly, how to retain and expand on the functioning of this machine of wealth creation, while at the same time ensuring that its benefits were more equally spread amongst all South Africans; and secondly, how to put it to use in the building of a very different kind of country, society and economy. In addition to this, it had to establish working relationships with mining companies that had, for close to a century, benefited from a legislative framework that paid scant regard to workers' rights or those of the environment. Less than a decade earlier, ANC had literally fought these

same companies in the mining trenches on a daily basis, with labour unions being the only legal avenue for dissent for the disenfranchised African majority.

Mining companies, on their side, had to go through a similar catharsis – remaking and repositioning themselves without the extensive, exploitative legal support of the colonial and Apartheid systems in a twofold manner. Firstly, as responsible and caring corporate citizens, actively engaged in reconstructing and transforming the deeply fractured former Apartheid state into the non–racial, "new South African society" promised by the long sought–after advent of democracy. And secondly, as progressive builders of not only all the "host communities" on whose doorsteps they operated, but also those located in the far–away places that large segments of their labour force were drawn from.

This chapter is squarely located in this omnidimensional and multi–layered process of (1) building a new country and nation, including its many mining regions and towns; (2) redress and healing; and (3) transformation of a mining industry into a force for common and collective good in the service of the country at large. It tells the ongoing story of tensions and successes experienced in an endeavour to improve collaboration, partnering and co–construction of a shared future between government, industry partners and other stakeholders in mining regions in South Africa through introspective reflections on the experiences gained by participants in a programmatic initiative called the Municipal Capability and Partnership Programme (MCPP).

In terms of structure, the next section provides a high–level overview of the literature on extractive–sector collaboration and governance. This is followed by a brief engagement with collaborative planning as a theoretical framework, then a section on the past and present of planning, settlement development and governance in mining regions in South Africa. Against this contextual backdrop, the MCPP is introduced as a specific programmatic intervention aimed, among other things, at addressing municipal development planning challenges and strengthening mine–municipal collaboration. Then the research methodology is presented, including a note on the positionality of the authors as key participants in the MCPP. The findings are presented in relation to three distinct focal areas, followed by the authors' tentative reflections on the insights gained and lessons learned during programme implementation.

2. A HIGH-LEVEL OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON EXTRACTIVE-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND GOVERNANCE

A key theme in the literature in this field is the marked evolution from ad hoc corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects towards structured, partnership–based capacity–building programmes in mining regions (Hilson, 2012; Kemp & Owen, 2013). This shift reflects growing expectations that mining companies contribute to institutional strengthening, local economic diversification and participatory governance, rather than limiting interventions to philanthropic infrastructure delivery (Esteves et al., 2012). Several prominent examples illustrate this transition towards more systemic approaches.

One frequently cited African example is the Newmont Corporation–supported Newmont Ahafo Development Foundation (NADeF) in Ghana. Established through negotiated agreements with host communities, NADeF channels a portion of mine revenues into a legally constituted foundation governed by the representatives of communities, local authorities and the company (Ahafo Social Responsibility Forum, 2008; Aubynn, 2009). The foundation's structure aims to institutionalise benefit sharing and enhance transparency in project selection and oversight. Empirical analyses of NADeF highlight its emphasis on education, health, infrastructure and livelihoods, while also noting the importance of governance design in mediating power asymmetries between corporate and community actors (Owen & Kemp, 2014; Andrews, 2016).

In Australia, major diversified miners such as BHP and Rio Tinto have implemented Indigenous partnership and supplier–development programmes that integrate local enterprises into corporate procurement systems (Brereton & Parmenter, 2008; O'Faircheallaigh, 2013). These initiatives typically combine enterprise mentoring, preferential contracting, training pathways and long–term agreement frameworks with Indigenous organisations. The literature frames such programmes as efforts to embed economic participation within core business processes, thereby linking regional development objectives to the company's value chain, rather than to peripheral CSR budgets (Esteves & Barclay, 2011; Fleming & Measham, 2015).

A further strand of practice involves collaboration with multilateral and specialist development institutions. For example, Anglo American partnered with the Inter–American Development Bank and TechnoServe in Latin America under the "Beyond Extraction" initiative, which sought to strengthen small– and medium–sized enterprises in mining regions through market–oriented technical assistance and value–chain integration (Inter–American Development Bank, 2019; Anglo American, 2020). Such models leverage external expertise to enhance programme credibility, introduce rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems, and also align company investments with broader regional development strategies (World Bank, 2017).

Across the cases, three common strands can be identified in the literature:

1) institutionalisation through foundations or formal partnership agreements;
2) integration of community development with economic inclusion mechanisms; particularly local procurement; and
3) multi–stakeholder governance arrangements designed to enhance accountability and legitimacy (Kemp & Owen, 2013; Vanclay, 2017).

Importantly, scholars in the field caution that sustainability beyond mine closure, genuine local ownership and alignment with public planning frameworks remain persistent challenges (Hilson, 2012; Owen & Kemp, 2014). Overall, international experience suggests that capacity–building programmes are most effective when they operate as embedded, long–term institutional partnerships, rather than as loose–standing, one–off, project–driven CSR interventions.

2.1 COLLABORATIVE PLANNING AS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Collaborative planning emerged in the 1990s as a normative and analytical response to (1) technocratic and rational–comprehensive planning models that were criticised for marginalising affected stakeholders and underappreciating the political and communicative dimensions of planning practice; and (2) a growing postmodern "anything goes" and nihilist tendency in planning thought. Drawing heavily on Jurgen Habermas' theory of "communicative rationality", the collaborative planning paradigm emphasised dialogue, consensus–building and inclusive governance as central to legitimate and effective spatial decision–making (Healey, 1997; Innes, 1995).

One of the foundational contributions to this field is Patsy Healey's articulation of planning as a communicative process embedded in institutional contexts (Healey, 1997). Rather than treating planning as "technical problem–solving", Healey conceptualised it as a socially constructed practice in which stakeholders, through meaningful and truthful deliberation, co–produce shared understandings of place, people and their shared possible future development trajectories. As such, collaborative planning seeks to create "arenas for dialogue" in which diverse actors – public authorities, private sector interests, civil society members and communities – deliberate and negotiate mutually agreed outcomes.

In parallel, Judith Innes (Innes, 1995; 2004) developed the theory of "collaborative rationality", arguing that authentic dialogue under conditions of diversity and interdependence can generate consensus–based outcomes that are both innovative and implementable. Innes & Booher (2010) further elaborate that collaboration works when participation is inclusive, communication is authentic, and engagement/participation processes are consequential. They emphasise that collaborative processes not only produce agreements, but also build and strengthen social capital, mutual learning and adaptive capacity.

Collaborative planning is closely associated with a broader "communicative turn" in planning theory in the 1990s, by which planning was reframed from a technocratic exercise to a deliberative democratic practice (Fischer & Forester, 1993). Scholars active in this field argue that collaboration can enhance legitimacy, reduce conflict and improve policy coherence, particularly in complex, multi–actor environments, such as city/municipal governance and environmental management (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

While the idea of communicative planning was welcomed by many in the field, the literature also contains substantial critiques against this paradigm. Tewdwr–Jones and Allmendinger (1998), for instance, question whether consensus–oriented planning underestimates structural power asymmetries. Flyvbjerg (1998) argues that power relations fundamentally shape planning outcomes, suggesting that communicative ideals may obscure strategic behaviour and domination. Similarly, Purcell (2009) critiques collaborative and deliberative approaches for potentially depoliticising planning by privileging consensus over contestation.

Empirical studies have revealed mixed outcomes. While collaborative approaches improved stakeholder trust and produced durable agreements in certain contexts, they are time–consuming, resource–intensive and vulnerable to elite capture (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Success appears contingent on institutional design, facilitative leadership, stakeholder capacity and alignment with statutory decision–making frameworks (Innes & Booher, 2010).

Collaborative planning has particular salience in mining regions where land–use conflicts, environmental risk, labour migration and fiscal asymmetries generate complex governance environments. Extractive contexts are characterised by high economic stakes, corporate concentration of resources, and uneven institutional capacity at the local level (Kemp & Owen, 2013). As a result, collaboration and collaborative planning approaches are frequently invoked to manage stakeholder conflicts, negotiate benefit–sharing arrangements, and integrate mining development with local and regional planning frameworks.

Community development agreements (CDAs) and impact and benefit agreements (IBAs) generated in such regions are often interpreted as institutionalised forms of collaborative planning (O'Faircheallaigh, 2013). These negotiated instruments create structured forums for dialogue between companies, local communities and, in some cases, subnational governments. Empirical research demonstrates that where agreements incorporate inclusive representation, independent facilitation and transparent monitoring, they can enhance procedural legitimacy and produce durable development commitments (Owen & Kemp, 2014). However, power asymmetries and technical capacity gaps frequently constrain meaningful participation.

In resource–dependent municipalities, collaborative planning has also been linked to capacity–building interventions aimed at strengthening local government systems so that they can engage mining companies on more equal footing. Studies of mining governance in the Global South show that collaboration is most effective when embedded in statutory planning frameworks and supported by institutional reform, rather than operating as ad hoc engagement processes (Hilson, 2012; Vanclay, 2017). Thus, in mining regions, collaborative planning intersects closely with institutional development and fiscal governance.

Over the course of the last decade, collaborative planning scholarship has increasingly engaged with questions of power, inequality and political economy. Parker and Street (2018) argue that collaborative governance must be analysed within neoliberal restructuring contexts, where decentralisation and austerity may shift responsibilities to local actors without adequate resources. Legacy (2017) similarly critiques the "post–political" tendency of consensus–oriented planning to marginalise dissent.

In environmental and resource governance, scholars have explored adaptive co–management and polycentric governance as refinements of collaborative theory (Morrison, 2017). These approaches emphasise learning, networked institutions and multi–level coordination – features particularly relevant in extractive regions where national regulation, local government and corporate actors intersect.

Recent planning theory has also moved towards "agonistic" interpretations that accept conflict as inherent and potentially productive (Metzger, 2017). Rather than seeking full consensus, collaborative processes are increasingly framed as arenas for structured contestation. This strand is especially relevant in mining contexts marked by resource nationalisation, environmental justice claims and mobilisation by local communities and traditional leaders. At the same time, growing attention to implementation gaps has led to a renewed emphasis on institutional design, monitoring systems, and enforceability mechanisms (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Innes & Booher, 2010). The contemporary literature, therefore, situates collaboration not merely as dialogue, but as a governance architecture requiring durable institutional support.

While collaborative planning clearly represents a significant normative shift towards collaboration and participatory, deliberative governance in planning, and focuses on shared learning and negotiated outcomes, it remains subject to critiques regarding power, representation and implementation. In response to this, proponents of collaborative planning have sought to integrate their ideals around deliberation and consensus with a more explicit recognition of power, institutional constraints and political economy dynamics.

3. PLANNING, SETTLEMENT DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE IN MINING REGIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA: PAST AND PRESENT

The history of the involvement of mining companies in town and local community building has a somewhat, and not unfamiliar, Janus–faced feature. In the Global North, where the introduction and gradual strengthening of workers' rights from the early 1800s onwards shifted the balance of power between capital and labour, mining companies – especially where they were responsible for the establishment of mining towns – became active participants in the provision of housing and municipal services and even the daily running and overall management of such towns (Oranje, 2013). In countries outside of the Global North where human rights were not observed, civil dissent was punished, and workers' rights were not recognised, the picture was very different.

In pre–1994 South Africa, with its dualistic nature, the situation was squarely between these two poles. In the "former white parts" of mining towns, mining companies took on a caring, paternalistic role, providing housing, bursaries, and sports and cultural facilities, as well as extensive support to municipalities in the execution of their service–provision and maintenance duties. In the "former African parts", the situation was very different. Even though conditions were generally better in these parts of mining towns than in other non–mining towns, they were still far removed from those in the "former white parts". Importantly, this lopsided model established not only a practice, but also an expectation, very much along the lines of the mining towns developed elsewhere in the Global North, of the mine as the benevolent provider of housing, parks, sporting grounds, libraries, bursaries, etc.

Accordingly, and based on this experience of investment in the white part of mining towns – especially during the Apartheid years – nothing less than this was expected for every part of these towns after the advent of democracy in 1994.

In the 1996 South African Constitution's aspiration to transform the spatial, social, and economic legacies of colonialism and Apartheid, it created three distinct, but interdependent spheres of government – national, provincial and local – that must cooperate and support one another, and align their plans, programmes and investments. Municipalities were assigned a powerful developmental mandate to (1) drive local economic development; (2) provide equitable services; (3) restructure the skewed settlement patterns; and (4) facilitate participatory governance. However, despite this ambitious governance architecture and set of arrangements, most municipalities remained under–capacitated, under–funded, institutionally fragile and not able to reverse historical backlogs, while facing rising demands from a highly expectant citizenry. Given the retention of law–making powers regarding the mining sector, as well as the allocation of mining licences and the establishment of government–industry protocols and structures at the centre, i.e., in the national sphere of government, municipalities and their local constituents had no say in these matters and had to live with decisions that they were not party to.

Key amongst the transitions in the mining sector, managed as it was at the centre, was the establishment of the Mining Charter, which sought to (1) transform ownership of the industry; (2) direct it towards the pursuit of national development objectives; and (3) ensure a deepening and a broadening of the wealth it created (RSA, 2002). A central component of this pursuit was the introduction of the Social and Labour Plan (SLP), which all mining companies had to prepare as part of their application for mining rights. The SLPs were envisioned to address historical exploitation and neglect by mining companies, and compel them to invest in local economic development, community infrastructure and worker welfare, both within their immediate areas of operation, their so–called "doorstep/host communities", as well as the so–called "labour–sending areas", i.e., municipalities where large percentages of migrant workers came from. In terms of the law, SLPs had to be developed in consultation with municipalities and affected communities, and their priorities had to align with the priorities in the municipal Integrated Development Plan (IDPs)[1].

Unfortunately, the envisaged collaborative arrangements regarding municipal planning and the provincial and national spheres of government and the preparation of SLPs were based on highly optimistic assumptions about institutional capability and multiple actors' sustained appetites for collaboration. It expected mines, municipalities, communities and provincial and national sector departments to share data, integrate planning, align budgets and co–produce long–term strategies. In practice, siloed legislation, fragmented institutions and uneven capacities resulted in weak intergovernmental relations and inconsistent participation by both state and non–state stakeholders. To make matters worse, many municipalities struggled to

[1] A municipal Integrated Development Plan (IDP) is a five–year strategic plan that guides a municipality's development priorities, budgeting and service delivery. It seeks to align community needs with available resources and government policies.

produce credible IDPs and sector plans, while mining companies often planned in isolation, guided more by compliance requirements than systemic local development strategies. This misalignment made joint planning very difficult and undermined the transformational intentions of both (1) the local sphere of government and (2) the mining sector's legal and policy frameworks.

By the early 2000s, the South African system reflected both the promise and contradictions of its post–Apartheid reconstruction ideals, with a series of structural and capacity dynamics across the system at the heart of current challenges, notably (1) fragmented planning; (2) nationally directed fiscal arrangements; (3) mistrust and distrust amongst stakeholders; (4) unaligned mandates; (5) persisting inequality; and (6) limited resources in the municipal space to address developmental challenges, provide the constitutionally–mandated free levels of basic municipal services and impact meaningfully on the inherited inequalities.

At the same time, and in the wider international area, due to growing concerns about brand reputation and litigation in an ever–more information–rich world – notably online streaming and social media – coupled with growing threats about resource nationalisation and legal requirements tied to the licence to mine, mining companies active in the Global South have taken on a far more active role in the regions and towns where they are active. These actions have typically been undertaken by the larger, more global mining companies with international head offices in countries such as Australia, Canada, and the UK, where the risks of litigation are substantially greater than in countries in the Global South.

While not every company and context is the same, typical areas of support provided by mining companies have included (1) the provision of social, health, water and sanitation, and education services, and the building and maintenance of the necessary facilities and infrastructure networks required to do so; (2) the establishment and strengthening of local/indigenous SMEs and the procurement of services from these enterprises; (3) the making available of bursaries, apprenticeships and vocational training, with a specific emphasis on youth, women, underrepresented ethnic or racial groups and persons with disabilities; and (4) the establishment of forums and/or platforms for engagement, including the raising of grievances and concerns.

While these measures/actions in the international domain were enabled and supplemented by a sizeable share of royalties and taxes going to the sub–national areas where mines were active, in the South African case, these all went to the National Treasury. Only a small segment was "channelled" through the SLPs and discretionary corporate social investments back into regional and local communities and places.

Key understandings about "what works (best)" from these experiences have been that (1) respect, trust and co–design are fundamental in ensuring the initial and sustained buy–in and longevity of the programme, especially after the closure/departure of the mine; (2) transparency in planning, procurement, monitoring and reporting on the performance of the mine's programmes mediates expectations, reduces rumours and uncertainty and strengthens a sense of solidarity and togetherness; (3) integration

of the mine's programmes with the priorities, plans, programmes and budgets of state and non–state actors increases impacts and reduces conflicts; and (4) doing full life–cycle programme planning, especially with regards to entry and exit, and continuously communicating this to all involved, increases the chance of a successful hand–over of key tasks to regional and local champions, and reduces the chance of the legacy of the mine being tarnished.

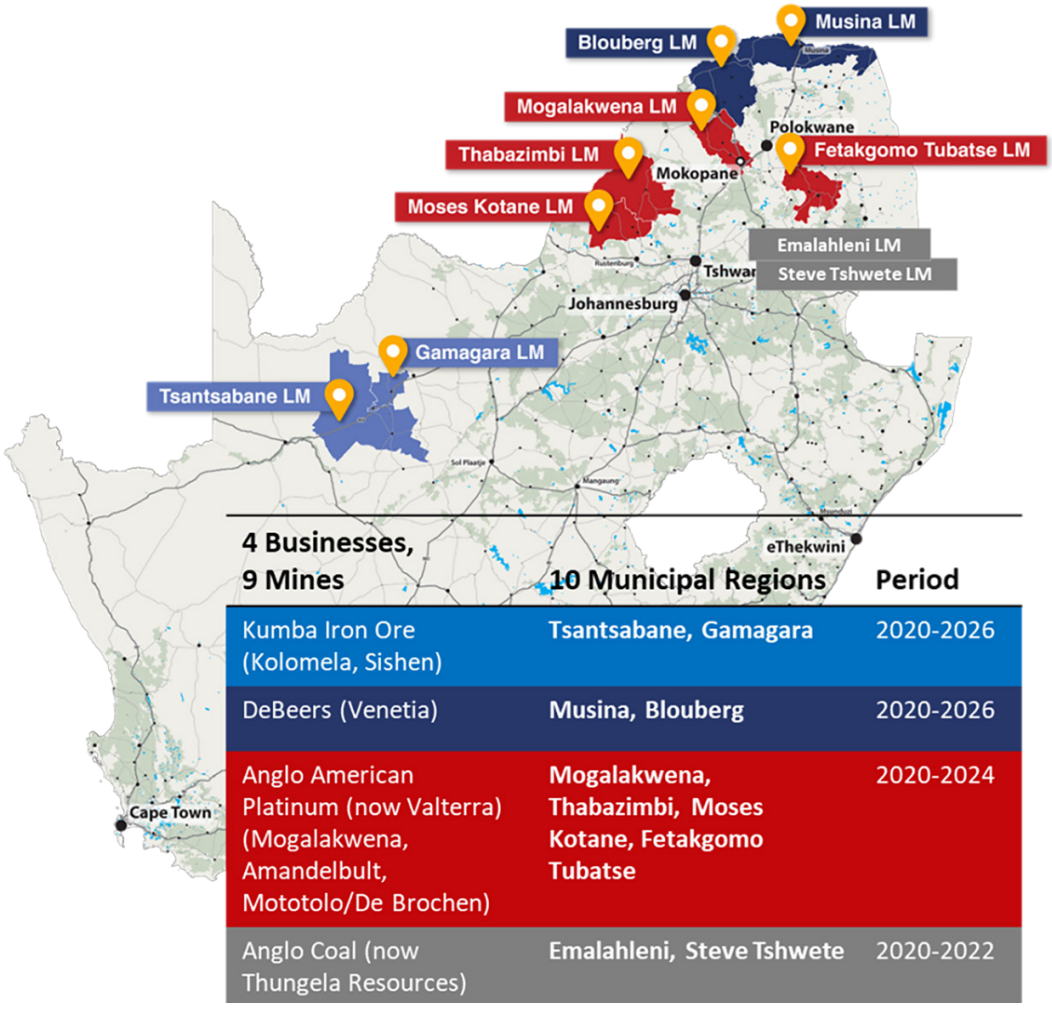
4. THE MUNICIPAL CAPABILITY AND PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMME (MCPP)

In the context of increasing service delivery failures, huge pressures on settlements largely due to rapid in–migration, and the intertwined evolution and capacity challenges in effectuating local government and mineral governance in South Africa, the need for (1) more credible municipal planning and governance and (2) mines and municipalities to work together in a more deliberate, coordinated way, was identified by both government and industry partners as crucial in addressing development challenges and mitigating operational risks in mining areas. Accordingly, the MCPP was launched early in 2020 by a large multi–national mining company, Anglo American – one of the oldest and largest mining companies in South Africa – in collaboration with a group of Government partners, i.e., the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (DCoGTA), Provincial Departments of Cooperative Governance, Human Settlements and Traditional Affairs (CoGHSTA) and the South African Local Government Association (SALGA).

While being a standalone initiative covering all the sites where the company was active in the country, the MCPP did not replace any of Anglo American's voluntary corporate social investment programmes or mandated social, economic and environmental activities that all mining companies in the country have to comply with in terms of the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act, Act No. 28 of 2002 (MPRDA) to obtain and retain their licence to mine. In order to ensure a common purpose, it was, however, closely aligned with the company's "Social Way 3.0"[2] and the capacity building support provided by DCoGTA, SALGA and other local government support programmes in the country.

The MCPP was gradually introduced in the ten municipalities in which Anglo American was active at the time (Figure 1). Over the course of the following five years, its area of operation shrank due to the company selling its coal and platinum group metals assets. This left the programme with only two areas of focus: the company's iron ore mines in the Gamagara and Tsantsabane Local Municipalities (LMs) in the Northern Cape Province, and the DeBeers diamond mining operations in the Musina and Blouberg LMs in Limpopo Province.

[2] A comprehensive corporate management system that provides (1) a high–level framework and overarching set of principles regarding the company's social policy, (2) a toolkit, providing practical guidance, processes, procedures and tools for mining operations to implement the policy where they are active, and (3) an assurance framework, providing a set of mechanisms for monitoring, assessment and compliance in relation to the policy.



4 Businesses, 9 Mines	10 Municipal Regions	Period
Kumba Iron Ore (Kolomela, Sishen)	Tsantsabane, Gamagara	2020-2026
DeBeers (Venetia)	Musina, Blouberg	2020-2026
Anglo American Platinum (now Valterra) (Mogalakwena, Amandelbult, Mototolo/De Brochen)	Mogalakwena, Thabazimbi, Moses Kotane, Fetakgomo Tubatse	2020-2024
Anglo Coal (now Thungela Resources)	Emalahleni, Steve Tshwete	2020-2022

Figure 1. MCPP Implementation Areas and Timeframes

Drawing on the understandings gained from the international literature on mine–municipality collaboration and support, as well as local experiences in this regard, the MCPP adopted a collaborative approach, working closely with municipalities and mining companies to identify priorities, gaps, underlying constraints and context–appropriate interventions. In accordance with this approach, the programme undertook to (1) build institutions' capabilities and not just individual capacities; (2) complement and strengthen capacities and capabilities, and not take the short–cut route of simply replacing them; and (3) establish and cement lasting, wide–ranging intra–municipal, state and non–state partner relationships built on trust, respect, co–ownership and a shared responsibility to not only each other, but also to the town and all its people and to its and their collective futures.

5. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used in preparing this chapter was qualitative in nature, i.e. narrative analysis of a rich body of documented evidence and experiences as recorded/captured in:

- Three series of programme–wide semi–structured in–person and online interviews conducted between September 2023 and August 2025 with key stakeholders in the MCPP municipalities, including 21 municipal officials directly involved in the programme (interviewed between September and November 2023), 25 MCPP team members (interviewed during 2024), and ten town planning service providers (interviewed in August 2025);
- Self–signified micro–narratives shared by municipal participants (and collaborators) on their perceptions of significant change emanating from being involved in the programme, as captured via the Sensemaker[3] tool (287 respondents) and annual reflection sessions with development planning teams from nine municipalities (83 planning practitioners);
- Quarterly and annual programme monitoring and evaluation reports aimed at documenting progress, evaluating progress against set targets, and informing the adaptation of initiatives (five municipalities between 2020 and 2025, two municipalities between 2021 and 2025, two municipalities between 2020 and 2022 and one municipality between 2023 and 2025);
- Evidence from results documented in close–out evaluations by officials and MCPP team members in four municipalities (2025);
- Interviews with six MCPP–appointed practitioners in the Mogalakwena local municipality were conducted as part of a case study to document learning during September and October 2024; and
- The documented observations and experiences of the four authors over the course of the last five years of their involvement in the programme.

All interview participants were anonymised and cited as Municipal Official 1 to 21, MCPP Team Member 1 to 25, Planning Service Provider 1 to 10, and Mogalakwena Stakeholder 1 to 6.

It is important to note that the team of authors includes the Anglo–American Programme Manager, the CSIR MCPP Implementation Team Programme and Planning Workstream leads, as well as the lead from the University of Pretoria and CSIR "Collaboration Compact for Regional Development Planning in Mining Regions". While the closeness of the authors to the programme carries a definite risk of bias, it needs to be noted that the bulk of the findings reported in this chapter are derived from the documented responses and experiences of a myriad of diverse stakeholders, as listed above. The chapter includes not only positive outcomes, but also concerns and cautions about the programme's impacts, notably the longevity of its gains.

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[3] The MCPP used SenseMaker®, a narrative–based monitoring, evaluation, and learning tool developed by The Cynefin Co, to capture brief, first–person stories based on a prompt that participants then "selfsignified" using triads, dyads, and multiplechoice questions. Data entry was available via a web/app "collector" and paper forms. This approach is designed to surface patterns across many micronarratives rather than to produce single authoritative case accounts, aligning with complexityaware evaluation practice.

6. FINDINGS

The next three sub–sections present findings related to three key focal areas of the programme aimed at improving collaborative planning and development in the case study areas, i.e., initiatives aimed at (1) breaking down disrespect, mistrust, distrust and suspicion between stakeholders; (2) deepening collaboration and strengthening partnerships; and (3) co–constructing shared future visions and aligning stakeholders' plans, budgets and actions in accordance with these futures.

6.1 BREAKING DOWN DISRESPECT, MISTRUST, DISTRUST AND SUSPICION BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS

The colonial and Apartheid histories played a significant role in all the municipalities. The legacy of the past, and its persistence into present–day living conditions and access to opportunities and future life chances, including the difference in the ability of workers from different racial groups to leave and make a life elsewhere when mines close, has remained an area of division and deep and bitter anger. In addition, municipal officials highlighted several structural and behavioural examples that illustrate persistent trust deficits.

A recurring accusation from municipal officials was that mining companies bypass or exclude municipalities from key planning and consultation processes with mining doorstep communities which fall within their areas of municipal jurisdiction (Municipal Official 6, Personal Interview, 2023). Such parallel processes leave municipalities feeling marginalised and undermined, and create the perception that mining companies are opaque or deliberately evasive, thereby weakening the foundations for state and non–state–based collaborative governance.

Misaligned planning priorities were another contributor to, and/or result of trust deficits (Municipal Official 18, Personal Interview, 2023). Sometimes this misalignment was perceived to be driven by internal municipal and mining company deadlines – often required in terms of mining and municipal legislation – rather than community needs (Municipal Official 3, Personal Interview, 2023). In several municipalities, these misalignments led to (1) municipal administrations appearing corrupt and incompetent to community members (Municipal Official 17, Personal Interview, 2023); (2) standalone infrastructure being developed without proper integration into local networks/systems; and (3) mining companies being accused of prioritising their own business agendas rather than the needs of communities.

A lack of transparency and information sharing deepened mistrust, with mines withholding information they believe "could pose risks" to them or their operations (see Nel & Oranje, 2021). These practices made decisions appear secretive or manipulative, hindering effective municipal planning and fuelling mutual suspicions of corruption or stakeholders acting in bad faith.

A further source of mistrust was the perception that mining companies engage with municipalities only to satisfy regulatory requirements. Mine–municipal relations

often function as "reluctant partnerships", resembling a "tick–box exercise" rather than genuine collaboration (see Van der Watt & Marais, 2021). This leaves municipalities feeling that mines are insincere, while mines feel burdened by compliance, leading to joint planning being reduced to a performative, transactional exercise rather than a meaningful, collaborative and trust–building process.

From the mines' perspective, weak municipal capacity also undermines trust. Poor record–keeping, outdated documentation, non–functional ward committees and slow implementation indicate institutional unreliability. In this context, mines lose confidence in the municipalities' ability to fulfil their governance roles and increasingly "work around" local structures rather than with them. This facilitates parallel planning processes that further entrench exclusion and exacerbate often already high levels of mistrust.

Political instability and weak intergovernmental coordination further undermine trust–building between mines and municipalities. One of the MCPP town planning service providers observed that political and administrative challenges have repeatedly disturbed existing structures and forums, resulting in inconsistent engagement and disrupted decision–making (Planning Service Provider 3, Personal Interview, 2025). Compounding this, many national and provincial government departments fail to attend coordination meetings, leaving municipal officials feeling unsupported by their counterparts in the other two spheres of government. In such an unstable governance environment, mining companies cannot rely on their government partners being consistent in their approach and commitment, reinforcing uncertainty and weakening the foundations for state– and non–state–based collaborative planning.

Various attempts were made by the MCPP to counter these long–held negative perceptions. While it is nearly impossible to measure the levels of trust (and changes in this regard) between parties, there is some evidence of improved relationships. One such example is in the Mogalakwena LM in Limpopo Province, where the MCPP assisted in building trust between the municipality and the mining houses by strengthening the credibility, transparency and inclusiveness of local planning processes. One of the key trust interventions introduced in this municipality was the hosting of joint, multi–stakeholder consultations in the development of the municipality's Spatial Development Framework (SDF)[4]. With support from the MCPP, municipal officials had multiple consultations with mines, traditional authorities and local businesses. These consultations brought the municipality and mining companies together as "equal partners in planning". Mines and the municipality also engaged openly about their needs, concerns and experiences. The MCPP intentionally designed the engagements to be interactive and constructive, unlike past compliance–driven processes. Workshops became platforms for dialogue rather than stale one–way information–sharing sessions. Trust was built by improving the mutual understanding, budget and capacity challenges. The workshops also provided participants with a shared vocabulary for engagement and resulted in "normalising transparency" (Mogalakwena Stakeholder 3, Personal Interview, 2024).

[4] A municipal Spatial Development Framework (SDF) is a long–term plan that guides how land in a municipality should be used, managed, and developed. It indicates where settlement growth, infrastructure, housing and environmental protection should occur.

Through the development of shared planning instruments, notably a Local Economic Development (LED) Strategy and a suite of precinct spatial development plans, a common evidence base was created that both the municipality and mines could access and use. Trust was also built through the use of the same data, thereby removing contests about whose information was better/correct. The municipality also gained legitimacy in the eyes of the mines through planning that made use of this shared database.

Another important way in which trust was built was through bridging knowledge gaps. The MCPP prompted Anglo American to host internal sessions to explain local government mandates, processes and planning needs to their own staff. From the Mogalakwena Municipality's side, knowledge gaps were also identified and addressed (Mogalakwena Stakeholder 7, Personal Interview, 2024). Role–players on both sides claimed an improved understanding of the regulatory processes that each is subject to.

Municipal officials also reported a shift in addressing their concerns regarding parallel consultations. Mines and the Mogalakwena LM agreed to invite each other to community meetings to avoid duplication and the sending out of conflicting messages. A final piece of evidence of small steps taken to rebuild trust in Mogalakwena is the way in which the mining company's SLP process was run. In the past, municipal officials just had to sign off on the SLP without engaging in project selection. In 2023, as a result of the MCPP, the municipality was directly involved for the first time in SLP project identification and budgeting together with the mines (Mogalakwena Stakeholder 7, Personal Interview, 2024).

While the MCPP made significant gains in (1) reducing levels of disrespect, mistrust and distrust; and (2) assisting in the process of building trust during its time as an interlocutor in the municipalities where it was active, a question can be raised about what would transpire without the active support of such an intermediary and additional capacity support to municipal teams that are under tremendous regulatory compliance pressure and resource constraints. This was vividly demonstrated during the closure meeting of the programme in one of the municipalities when a manager in the municipality remonstrated very angrily that "all of the good work of the MCPP will be lost in a flash when it leaves the municipality" (Municipal Official 18, observation during workshop on 18 October 2024). Disconcerting as this view is, and the prospect this raises of many of the gains being lost with the departure of the programme, in a "learning–and–reflection session" in May 2025, post–programme evaluations in four of six municipalities that are no longer part of the programme illustrated that embedding and institutionalisation of some of the practices in intra–municipal and industry–municipal collaboration has taken place (van Huyssteen et al., 2025).

6.2 DEEPENING COLLABORATION AND STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS

Respect and trust are fundamental elements in pursuing collaboration and establishing and strengthening partnerships between stakeholders. While attempts were made at breaking down disrespect, mistrust and distrust in all of the participating municipalities, the ultimate aim was the pursuit of active and constructive collaboration and its institutionalisation in practice in order to improve development outcomes and the investment impact of the respective partners. Improved collaboration practices were regarded as key to enhancing the impact of existing municipal planning processes and investment instruments, including the municipal (1) medium–to–long–term SDFs, multi–term LED strategies, and medium–term IDPs; as well as (2) the legally required medium–term SLPs and annual socio–economic development investments by mines.

The challenge is not merely alignment, but inherently the prioritisation of limited resources in municipal regions. While SLPs can and must (by law) play a key role in the development and strengthening of regions, they cannot fill endemic voids and gaps in the areas of (1) basic municipal service delivery; (2) the provision of health, education and housing; (3) safety and security; or (4) the creation of opportunities and conditions for economic growth and job creation. Tied to this is the reality that the demands in relation to infrastructure and public services in municipalities and provinces with strong mining economies far outstrip their financial, technical, administrative and managerial capabilities.

One of the key contributions by the MCPP has been the support it provided in re–establishing and improving the credibility of stakeholder communication channels and processes. Through support to municipal teams, municipal forums and processes were strengthened and, in some cases, re–established (see Table 1) (van Huyssteen et al., 2025).

Table 1. Improved collaboration through improved local planning processes and instruments

Source: van Huyssteen et al., 2025.

MUNICIPALITIES	MUNICIPAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING PROCESSES SUPPORTED AND STRENGTHENED
Mogalakwena*	• SDF engagement, visioning, prioritisation and development process (2022-2023) • Development of six local area development plans • LED strategy process and forum (2022-2024) (CSIR, 2025a)
Thabazimbi	• LED strategy process and forum (2024) (CSIR, 2025a)
Musina	• SDF engagement and development process (2023-2025)
Fetakgomo-Tubatse*	• City Development Strategy and long-term development vision process (2022-2024) • Regional IDP preparation engagement and development process (2024-2025) (CSIR, 2025a)

MUNICIPALITIES	MUNICIPAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING PROCESSES SUPPORTED AND STRENGTHENED
Moses-Kotane	• Long-term development vision and strategy development (2022-2024) (CSIR, 2025a)
Tsantsabane*	• SDF engagement and development process (2023-2025)
Gamagara*	• SDF engagement and development process (2023-2025)
Gamagara-Tsantsabane Mining Corridor*	• Mine-Municipal Compact established in 2023, resulting in an inter-municipal, inter-governmental and industry compact with collaboration for an emerging regional vision and strategy (2024-2025)

*Note: In these municipalities, the improvement in credibility, sharing of evidence and future projections, as well as improved stakeholder collaboration and intra-municipal alignment resulted in improved collaboration and the use of municipal processes to inform mine SLP development, community engagements and project prioritisation.

In the Mogalakwena LM, the LED Forum was established as a permanent platform for collaboration, allowing for concerns to be addressed through a clear institutional pathway. In the Thabazimbi LM, despite severe institutional challenges, the LED strategy preparation process was used to re–ignite participation of the private sector, resulting in the development of a Charter to galvanise their commitment to the process and strategy. In the case of Fetakgomo–Tubatse LM, a very large rural municipality spanning several traditional authorities, towns, villages and mining areas, an agreement was reached to structure a municipal–wide planning process through four regional IDP structures and processes, enabling strategic engagement on the prioritisation of development by mining companies, traditional authorities and the local municipality in a more meaningful and less ad hoc way (CSIR, 2025a).

While there were numerous challenges, it was evident that, when done in credible and highly participative ways, local planning interventions can provide platforms for (1) collaboration and information–sharing; (2) building trust through a shared understanding of the future; and (3) reaching agreements on land development priorities. One such experience was the development of the first–ever Mining Resource Area (MRA) Local SDF in the country, developed to guide and manage growth around Anglo American's platinum operations in the Mogalakwena LM through collaboration between the municipality, mines, traditional authorities and local political representatives. By specifically focusing on this area of past, current and potential future conflict, and involving all relevant stakeholders in the process, stakeholders' understanding of the complexity of the challenges was deepened, and the need for collaboration was recognised by all (CSIR, 2025a).

Improved collaboration and the credibility of evidence in local development plans and planning processes also resulted in a "shared realisation and urgency" amongst municipalities, provincial and national government entities and mines of the need to jointly and timely address the impacts of mine closures in the two municipalities in the Northern Cape Province, i.e., the Gamagara and Tsantsabane LMs. Starting in the Gamagara LM as a more limited mine–municipality compact, this understanding

and initiative soon widened to cover the two neighbouring municipalities in the form of a "Regional Development Compact" encapsulating a wide range of state actors (including district municipalities, several national and provincial government departments and SALGA) and non–state actors (including non–mining economic actors in the renewable energy, agriculture, hospitality/tourism and trade/retail sectors) (MCPP, 2025; CSIR, 2025b).

As positive as the establishment of the compact in these two municipalities may be, several serious concerns still have to be contended with. Key amongst these are

1) the very limited technical, administrative, financial and managerial resources in the municipalities to pursue, drive and sustain the compact without the support of the MCPP or another such entity;

2) the local government political cycle, which may see the agreements reached in the compact and other collaborative forums and structures (after years of painstaking work) disappear in the blink of an eye;

3) daunting immediate and pressing developmental challenges in the domains of housing, municipal service provision and job creation, which may lead to politicians and mining companies focusing on these immediate pressure points to avoid civil unrest and threats to mining operations; and

4) the influence of mafia–like groups that threaten, blackmail and hold both state and non–state entities to ransom, and could lead to a diversion and/or dilution of the already limited funds provided for the projects and programmes in the compact.

Looking beyond these two municipalities at the others where the MCPP has been active, as well as the wider South African local government arena, it is clear that the progression to collaboration and partnerships is a continuous, long–term, rather than a fixed, short– or medium–term journey. The complex stakeholder arenas in the mining municipalities, consisting of not only Anglo American's operations, but several other large mines, traditional authorities, previously segregated communities, commercial farming interests, tourism operators and NGOs, require many years of ceaseless, focused work. And, once a solid foundation is in place, substantial support/resources will be required to develop, embed and sustain the functioning of the compacts/structures.

6.3 CO-CONSTRUCTING SHARED FUTURE VISIONS AND ENSURING THE ALIGNMENT OF PLANS, BUDGETS AND ACTIONS WITH THESE FUTURES

A recurring and persistent theme in the international literature on mining regions and towns, government entities concerned with these areas, and mining localities, has been the diversification of regional and local economies, partially to (1) reduce dependency on mining (and pressure for jobs, livelihoods and services); and (2) prepare for mine closure (Maritz et al., 2021; Nel & Oranje, 2021).

Despite it being an area of serious concern, experience on the ground has been far from favourable, with at best limited diversification of the economies of mining regions and towns and then only with sustained and significant government support.

While planning for post–mining futures is now increasingly being done, in most cases, these plans have had only limited impacts on the trajectories of the mining regions and towns that lost their main source of sustenance. At the same time, inhabitants of these areas who did not leave have found it very hard to secure employment, despite the roll–out of intensive government–sponsored reskilling programmes.

It is against this backdrop that the MCPP included a focus on the planning and preparation of credible plans for economic diversification and post–mining futures, and the alignment of plans, budgets and actions with these futures in the municipalities in which it was active. A key component of this endeavour was to gain an in–depth understanding of (1) the awareness in the municipality of the need to plan for diversification and mine–closure; (2) the depth and extent of planning that had been done, and is being done in accordance with this awareness; (3) the degree of implementation of such plans; and (4) the reasons for the gaps in this regard, if any.

The research undertaken by the MCPP revealed a largely similar situation in all of the municipalities, irrespective of the diversity of their regional and local economies, or the number of years of extraction left in the mines in their areas (CSIR, 2024, 2025a; MCPP, 2025). While there was an awareness of the need, both in the country and in the more immediate region, and this need typically rose and subsided in accordance with lay–offs at local mines when commodity prices dropped and mines closed shafts or operations in full or went into "care and maintenance", this did not translate into sustained planning or the preparation of plans for such eventualities (see also Maritz et al., 2021). Where plans had been prepared, they were, by and large, not implemented, or only partially implemented and then only for a short period of time. As for the reasons for these gaps, the research revealed (1) a broadly shared unwillingness to confront something as final and devastating as mine closure – something akin to humankind's avoidance of engaging the inevitability of death; (2) a ceaseless need to focus on immediate developmental needs – many of them inherited from the country's past – and the political election–cycle–tied imperative to do so; (3) the lack of viable alternative industries that provide similar salaries to those earned in the mining sector, which dampened the enthusiasm to propose and/or actively pursue such sectors; and (4) the "changing of the guard", with changes in leadership positions, both in the mines and the municipalities, leading to rises and falls in the focus on the future tied to their views. Interestingly, it was stated in one of the interviews that in one of the municipalities where the mines have long–term extraction horizons (fifty years plus), it was perceived as "completely unnecessary to plan for the future" (Planning Service Provider 3, Personal Interview, 2025).

Based on these experiences and observations, the MCPP initiated engagements with stakeholders in the municipalities on the need to

1) plan for diversification and post–mining futures; and
2) prepare and implement plans with this in mind (MCPP, 2025).

The format of engagement was very similar to that deployed in other initiatives in the programme. The first step involved:

1) broad–based in–depth research;
2) projections and modelling of the potential implications of mine closure;
3) the development of possible future scenarios and what it would take to ensure that the preferred scenarios materialised and the undesirable ones did not; and
4) preparing and planning for both possible sets of futures.

This was followed by the hosting of facilitated engagement and capacity–building workshops to:

1) present the research, models and scenarios;
2) engage role players on "possible futures"; and
3) jointly develop proposals for realising the desired futures to be included in their municipal strategic and spatial development plans.

The interviews and the inputs provided on the Sensemaker platform clearly suggest that in those municipalities where it was active, the MCPP managed to help bring about a greater awareness of the need to (1) plan for economic diversification and post–mining futures; (2) introduce and transition to other economic activities, and (3) plan and prepare for the social turmoil that might accompany these transitions. It also assisted municipal development planning teams in engaging with municipal councillors and officials in (1) "getting real" about the consideration of alternative economic opportunities; (2) asking hard questions about what is possible and probable in their areas, and the scale of benefits that different economic activities might bring, and (3) avoiding the easy solutions that are often set out in LED strategies and plans (MCPP, 2024; CSIR, 2025a, 2025b; van Huyssteen, et al., 2025).

Despite the positive feedback, it is unclear whether it will be possible to sustain the newly gained "future–focused momentum", including the ceaseless (1) pursuit of economic diversification; and (2) need to plan and prepare for a post–mining future, without the involvement of an intermediary entity/structure such as the MCPP. While municipal councillors and officials have come out strongly in its support, and some also expressed this view in no uncertain terms on public platforms, the focus might once again be weakened by the immediate needs of their constituents and areas and municipal elections, relegating the issue to **just another** set of familiar sentences about the need to diversify the local economy and plan for a post–mining future in **just another** municipal plan. At the same time, the need for collaboration between a wide range of state and non–state stakeholders, and the coordination, integration and sequencing of as wide a range of strategies, frameworks, plans and programmes, without a well–resourced, dedicated entity or agency to assist with these tasks, raises serious questions about the prospects of these diversification intents and post–mining futures coming to fruition. The failure to make headway in this regard may, as such, even have a negative "agency–deficiency impact", leading local actors to reach the conclusion that there is not much they can do by themselves about the challenges posed by mining–dependent economies, or the implementation of post–mining future plans.

7. SOME TENTATIVE REFLECTIONS

The MCPP was launched as a programme aimed at (1) building and strengthening municipal capacities and capabilities; and (2) establishing and supporting collaboration between mines, municipalities and other stakeholders in municipal spaces. Having undertaken a detailed study of similar programmes in the international and local domains, the MCPP sought to address some of the identified shortcomings, and make a novel and lasting contribution in the South African mine–municipality interface space.

Experience on the ground, both as reported in interviews and inputs and comments shared on a dedicated online portal, and observed by the authors, suggests that the programme, including its approach and mode of implementation, was generally well received. In terms of its set objectives, (1) disrespect, mistrust and distrust were confronted and reduced; (2) stakeholder collaboration took place, partnerships were strengthened; and (3) a greater awareness was established regarding the need for economic diversification and planning for a post–mining future.

What did, however, emerge as an area of concern was the depth and longevity of these gains. Whether it would be possible to sustain them once the MCPP had concluded its activities, and whether municipalities located in mining regions, overburdened and overwhelmed as they already are, would be able to take on the many tasks that are expected of them without the support of an intermediary entity/structure such as the MCPP, are open questions.

Going forward with lessons learnt and insights gained as some form of guide, it would be important to establish whether municipalities can take on the tasks that the MCPP enabled them to perform and/or supported them with, and if not, how important these tasks are for the sustenance, strengthening and transitioning of the country's numerous mining regions into more diverse economic spaces. Should it emerge that these tasks are (viewed as) important, but that they need support from an intermediary entity/structure such as the MCPP, the question then becomes (1) how this entity/structure taking on these tasks should be established; (2) who should serve in it; (3) how it should be funded; (4) how and where it should be located in the architecture of the state; and (5) how it should be managed. Furthermore, who should decide (1) what its short–, medium– and long–term tasks should be and how these should be executed; (2) how its performance should be measured and reported; and (3) how its performance reports should be used, including to review its functions and core areas of focus, and amend these as and where required.

Looking further afield, the challenges experienced in the pursuit of collaboration and collaborative planning in mining regions clearly indicate that **these are not uniquely South African problems**. As confirmed by the international literature spanning a range of regulatory and governance contexts, the relationship between mining, local government and community development planning remains deeply contested and poorly resolved. The MCPP experience adds some interesting insights to the existing body of knowledge on why this is the case, and what kinds of interventions might begin to shift the dial in a more positive direction.

Firstly, through the production of a huge and diverse database of programme–participant and stakeholder experiences, it has added depth to appreciating the deep complexity of pursuing and sustaining collaboration in mining regions. The relationship between mines, municipalities, and local communities is historically laden, deeply entangled in both local and far wider narratives and perspectives, and far from straightforward. Mines are at the same time complicit in the current situation and also victims of escalating community demands. This creates a troubling paradox: the more mines collaborate directly with communities, the greater the demands from communities on mines become, and the greater their dependence on the mines become. At the same time, this "shielding and sidelining of the state" increases the likelihood of it evading and absconding from its responsibilities.

The resultant and sustained pressure on mines to take (and retain) direct responsibility for collaboration with local communities, as well as provide housing and basic services, makes collaboration increasingly transactional. Mines do not approach these negotiations with the long–term sustainability of the region in mind, but neither do communities or traditional authorities, who negotiate with mines based on their immediate needs and their desire to bring an end to their exclusion from the benefits of mining. What is absent in this equation is the local government, an institution that should serve as the custodian of life, livelihoods and life chances in the region, both now and in the future.

In contrast to these multi–layered and multi–actor time–and–space–laden complexities, most regulatory frameworks are written as though the impacts of mining can be mediated and successfully resolved through direct, bilateral collaborations between mines and affected communities. They fail to account for the reality that mining regions typically involve multiple mines or investors with different extraction profiles and timelines, and multiple affected communities. The **collaboration required is not one-on-one**; it is inherently regional, multi–actor, multi–layered and multi–textured. This is precisely where planning, as both a regional and municipal function, could and should play a critical role.

This plea for regional, multi–mine engagement and not one–on–one engagement, planning and agreement–seeking may seem counter–intuitive, but it is one that the MCPP experience compellingly suggests: instead of legislating for individualised mine and community engagements and responsibilities, all active and prospective mines in a region should be mandated to participate in broader, regional/area–based processes where mines, communities and other organisations with shared interests come together, share and deliberate knowledge, ideas, concerns, hopes and fears, collaborate and jointly plan and strategize. The required shift is from singular place–based transactional engagements to collective, regionally focused and coordinated, collaborative planning processes in which all role–players are participants and no single role–player is the owner or the manager of such processes. Learning from the literature base on collaborative planning, extreme and sustained care will have to be taken to ensure that differential power and "access to power bases" are recognised, planned for, and carefully managed in such processes.

Secondly, the MCPP experience has shown that the response to the complex challenges in mining regions does not lie in adding more regulatory/legal and policy emphasis to the prevailing, already highly transactional bilateral collaboration landscape. Instead, municipalities should receive far more attention when laws are drafted and policies prepared by the national sphere of government for mining regions. Importantly in this regard is recognising the strain that one–on–one investment agreements between mines and communities often place on municipalities – institutions that, unlike mines and communities, lack the leverage, human and fiscal capacity and power to assert themselves in these negotiations. In terms of the current legal and policy framework, municipalities are expected to coordinate regional development, yet they are structurally weakened in a system that routes resources, attention, and accountability through direct mine–community deals. Making matters even worse, decision–making on "the right to mine" is located not in the municipal sphere, but far away in the national sphere of government.

What the MCPP has begun to demonstrate is that a less obvious, but potentially more effective intervention lies in strengthening the capacity and positioning of the key authorities in mining regions, i.e., the local and district municipalities. The MCPP has, however, also illustrated just how far the capacity demands of genuine collaborative planning exceed what is normally expected in business–as–usual modes of planning and facilitation. These capacities extend well beyond convening meetings or producing plans, and include the ability to (1) communicate openly, respectfully and meaningfully with a wide range of role–players; (2) develop and maintain joint evidence bases; (3) undertake joint scenario development; (4) conduct shared modelling and analysis, and coordinate joint implementation – all of which are necessary to ensure credible, mutually valuable and sustainable collaboration, and to translate it into tangible impacts on the ground.

Thirdly, the MCPP has exposed the structural difficulty of bridging two very different worlds and their accompanying "perceptual and lived registers". Mining operates in a world of its own, one shaped by country–level negotiations, heavily regulated internal processes, shareholder expectations and global corporate frameworks. For mines accustomed to engaging at the national level, and with stakeholders familiar with the laws, policies and conditions in this realm, working with local governments is unfamiliar and often difficult. Given how tightly their own processes are regulated, plugging into local collaborative planning processes is a real, structural challenge. At the same time, municipal planning processes run on their own logic and timelines. The result is that processes run in parallel, with each one operating according to its own rules and particularities, and very little meaningful intersection, instead of working in tandem.

As proposed at numerous points in this chapter, this is where the value of an intermediary entity/structure becomes clear, and where the contribution offered by the experiences of the MCPP as such an intermediary capacity–building programme is perhaps most distinct. The intermediary role is not only about strengthening municipalities' capacity to plan and coordinate. It is equally about building mining

companies' understanding of why the state and formal collaborative planning processes matter, moving mining companies to see local government not as an obstacle or an irrelevant entity, but rather as an essential institutional partner for the long–term sustainability of the regions in which they operate. Strengthening this mutual understanding, grounded in shared evidence and trust, and cemented by jointly prepared and pursued future scenarios, appears to bear initial fruit. In the case of the MCPP, this was not done by tightening or hardening regulations and transactional obligations, but by creating the conditions under which collaborative regional planning can become the multi–actor coordinating mechanism it was always intended to be.

In this sense, the MCPP's contribution to the body of collaborative development planning in mining regions is twofold. Firstly, it assists by naming the challenge clearly, i.e., that direct, bilateral engagement between mines and communities and/or municipalities, however well–intentioned, is no substitute for inclusive multi–stakeholder, meaningful and deliberative regional governance and planning. Secondly, and following from this, it points towards a solution that is not the obvious one – rather than regulating mine–community collaboration more tightly, invest continuously in the institutions, relationships, shared knowledge and intermediary capacity that make genuine regional coordination possible, meaningful, impactful and sustainable.

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BRIDGING CITIZENS' AND INSTITUTIONS' PERSPECTIVES IN SERBIA: PARTICIPATION IN THE SPATIAL PLANNING OF MINING REGIONS

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BRIDGING CITIZENS' AND INSTITUTIONS' PERSPECTIVES IN SERBIA: PARTICIPATION IN THE SPATIAL PLANNING OF MINING REGIONS

ABSTRACT

Despite extensive scholarship on participatory planning, limited attention has been paid to the persistent gap between formal participatory frameworks and citizens' engagement and perceptions in mining regions. Public participation in spatial and urban planning of mining regions has been examined through conceptual lenses that emphasise power relations, governance processes, motivation drivers, and effectiveness of participatory methods. The case study draws on three theoretical pillars — participatory governance and perception gaps, motivation theories in public participation, and participatory planning methods — to interpret findings from a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews with institutional actors. These pillars support analysis of turnout, motivations for (non)participation, and preferred methods, as well as misalignments between citizens' and institutional perceptions, with emphasis on mining areas. The study employs a mixed–methods approach, relying primarily on primary data. The quantitative component uses survey data from residents in the Bor and Majdanpek mining region, capturing awareness, motivation, and engagement with formal planning procedures. The qualitative component consisted of in–depth interviews with planners, national and local authorities, mining companies, and NGOs, providing insights into institutional perspectives on participation, barriers, and practices. This enables a nuanced understanding of participation dynamics in resource extraction areas in Serbia, highlighting systemic constraints and opportunities for engagement. The study contributes to debates on participatory planning by linking empirical evidence to conceptual frameworks, emphasising citizen awareness, comprehension, and feedback mechanisms in meaningful involvement of relevant actors in resource–rich regions.

Keywords: public participation; spatial planning; participatory governance; mining regions; Serbia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Public participation in spatial planning has been widely recognised as a mechanism to improve transparency, legitimacy, and conflict mitigation, particularly in specific and sensitive environments characterised by intensive resource extraction (Owen & Kemp, 2013; Bebbington et al., 2018; Maričić & Oranje, 2025). In post–socialist countries, however, planning systems often retain centralised governance structures and formalistic participatory procedures, limiting citizens' influence on decisions with significant territorial and environmental consequences (Vujošević & Nedović–Budić, 2006; Živanović & Gatarić, 2021; Pantić & Čolić, 2023; Nikolić et al., 2025). Even the existence of vast international "hard" and "soft" legislation that regulates stakeholder participation cannot guarantee its application, especially in developing countries (Maričić, 2026). More advanced participation standards that were already established in the 1950s in Serbia (Yugoslavia), such as the principle of "cross–acceptance", have been forgotten or neglected in the current planning practice (Vujošević et al., 2012). Within Serbia's highly centralised decision–making model, local authorities frequently struggle with inefficient administration and inadequate communication between the public, private, and civil sectors (Petrović et al., 2022). The participatory approach has been largely overlooked, particularly with respect to involving citizens and valuing their opinions and perspectives (Perić, 2020a). The lack of autonomy and capacity within city administration can be seen as the legacy of a redistributive, top–down model of urban development (Toković, 2017). These constraints are especially pronounced in Serbian mining regions, where long–standing industrial traditions and institutional path dependencies shape both governance cultures and public expectations (Maričić, 2014).

Eastern Serbia's mining cities and municipalities, such as Bor and Majdanpek, illustrate the mentioned dynamics. Previous research has shown that local planning processes are affected by low institutional responsiveness, complex administrative procedures, and limited accountability mechanisms, which together contribute to reduced civic engagement (Vajović, 2017; Maričić et al., 2018). In such contexts, low turnout in public participation is frequently interpreted by institutions as a sign of apathy, whereas citizens often frame it as a rational response to structural barriers, distrust, or perceptions that decisions are predetermined, particularly when linked to major extractive investments (Bebbington et al., 2018; Perić, 2020b; Toković et al., 2025).

Motivations for public engagement in the planning of mining–affected areas are often shaped by perceived risks, environmental concerns, and the protection of local resources (Cvetinović & Veselinović, 2013; Urošević et al., 2018; Voza et al., 2022). Nonetheless, participation typically declines when communities face information deficits, power asymmetries, or anticipated conflict (Vuković et al., 2014). At the same time, research on participatory methods suggests that statutory tools, such as public reviews and early public displays, are insufficient to facilitate meaningful engagement in contested environments (Innes & Booher, 2010). Evidence points to the need for more interactive, transparent, and locally embedded methods that can foster trust and allow communities to articulate concerns in a deliberative setting (Cilliers, 2020).

Despite this body of work, a few studies in Serbia have systematically compared citizens' and institutional actors' perceptions of participatory planning in mining regions. The literature lacks integrative analyses that jointly consider turnout and motivations and that examine how perception gaps between citizens and institutions shape planning outcomes. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates public participation in the mining region of Eastern Serbia by combining survey data from local residents with semi–structured interviews conducted among governmental actors, NGOs, professional planners, and representatives of mining companies. This comparative approach provides a multidimensional understanding of why participation remains limited and how planning practice can be enhanced in conflict–prone extractive contexts.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that brings together insights from participatory governance, motivation theories, and research on participatory methods in planning. These three strands of literature jointly explain why participation often remains symbolic, why citizens engage unevenly across contexts, and why institutional practices frequently diverge from public expectations. By examining power relations, motivational dynamics, and the design of engagement tools, the framework offers a holistic lens to interpret the perception gaps and participation patterns identified in the empirical analysis.

2.1 PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE AND PERCEPTION GAPS

Participatory governance refers to the set of institutionalised and non–institutionalised mechanisms through which citizens engage in decision–making processes, particularly in contexts involving public goods, spatial development, and community well–being. Foundational works in the field have long emphasised that participation is not merely a technical procedure but a deeply political process shaped by power asymmetries, institutional cultures, and citizens' experiences with public authorities.

The classical model of Arnstein's (1969) **ladder of participation** conceptualises public involvement as a continuum ranging from manipulation and tokenism to full citizen control, illustrating that the degree of public influence is highly variable. While contemporary planning systems have formally embraced participatory procedures, many remain situated in the lower tiers of Arnstein's ladder – consultation and informing – where citizens are heard but seldom empowered. This framework is particularly relevant in analysing the perceived ineffectiveness of planning procedures in contexts of post–socialist transitional societies such as Serbia, where formal compliance with legal requirements does not necessarily translate into genuine citizen influence (Perić et al., 2021).

More recent scholarship, particularly Fung's (2006) **democracy cube**, moves beyond hierarchical notions of power and conceptualises participation through three

dimensions: who participates, how participants communicate and make decisions, and how much influence they hold. This multidimensional understanding allows for a nuanced comparison between citizens' preferences for inclusive and interactive methods, and institutions' reliance on formal, legally prescribed procedures. It highlights that participation mechanisms differ not only in openness but also in quality, deliberative potential, and expected outcomes.

Research in **collaborative governance** (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Quick & Bryson, 2022) further underscores that trust, transparency, and communication are essential for meaningful engagement. Lack of trust in institutions – often rooted in historical experiences of limited responsiveness – acts as a barrier to participation and reduces turnout. From this perspective, citizens' perception that participation procedures are symbolic or ineffectual can be interpreted as a rational response to a governance system that does not consistently provide feedback or demonstrate the value of their input.

Complementing these frameworks, Rowe and Frewe's (2005) **Typology of Public Engagement Mechanisms** (Gene Rowe & Lynn J. Frewer) classifies participatory processes according to the direction of information flow and the degree of interaction between citizens and decision–makers. By distinguishing public communication, consultation, and participation, the model highlights that many formal planning procedures remain primarily consultative, limiting citizens' actual influence and reinforcing perceptions of tokenism.

Similarly, Hofer and Kaufmann's (2022) **Actors–Arenas–Aims Framework** (Katharina Hofer & David Kaufmann) offers an integrated perspective that examines who participates, in which arenas, and with what objectives. This approach is particularly relevant in mining regions, where diverse actors—public authorities, companies, and local communities—operate across overlapping institutional settings and pursue potentially divergent goals, from procedural compliance to conflict management.

From a more critical standpoint, Legacy's (2017) **Crisis of Participatory Planning thesis** questions whether institutionalised participation has become routinised and depoliticised, with limited transformative capacity. Expanding this argument, Legacy et al.'s (2019) **relational critique of post-political planning** emphasises that participatory processes are inherently shaped by power relations, situated conflicts, and competing rationalities rather than neutral consensus–building.

Studies on **perception gaps** between citizens and institutions (e.g., Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Lawton & Macaulay, 2014) demonstrate that public authorities often misinterpret low participation as apathy rather than the result of structural barriers, insufficient communication, and limited opportunities for influence. This body of literature is directly relevant to the study at hand, where institutions tend to attribute low turnout to disinterest, while citizens frequently point to inadequate information channels, procedural complexity, and distrust. Understanding these perception gaps is essential when explaining the divergences identified in the empirical findings of this research.

Taken together, these frameworks indicate that participatory governance in Serbia should be assessed not only through formal procedures, but also through the interaction of the degree of citizen influence, the institutional design of participatory arenas, power asymmetries, trust in institutions, and perception gaps between citizens and authorities. In a post–socialist context shaped by legalistic compliance and strong administrative traditions, participation may be procedurally adequate yet substantively limited. For the Serbian case study, these dimensions structure the discussion by focusing on whether participation goes beyond consultation, how actors position themselves within institutional arenas, and how distrust and institutional interpretations of low turnout shape participatory outcomes.

2.2 MOTIVATION THEORIES IN PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The second theoretical pillar concerns the motivations that shape citizens' willingness or reluctance to engage in participatory procedures. Motivational factors operate at individual, relational, and structural levels and are influenced by both internal beliefs and external conditions.

The **civic voluntarism model** (Verba et al., 1995) provides one of the most comprehensive frameworks for understanding participation behaviour. It highlights three components necessary for engagement: (1) resources (time, knowledge, skills), (2) psychological engagement or motivation, and (3) mobilisation by external actors. The model suggests that participation is not solely a matter of willingness, but also of capacity and opportunity. For example, even motivated citizens may not participate if they lack information about upcoming planning procedures or perceive them as too technical or inaccessible.

Complementing this, **collective action theory** (Olson, 1965) explains that individuals are less likely to participate when they perceive their personal contribution as insignificant or when benefits are diffuse. This aspect is highly relevant in planning contexts where citizens believe that decisions are predetermined or that participation is merely procedural rather than consequential. Non–participation in this view is not apathy but a rational cost–benefit calculation.

Political psychology literature emphasises **trust, self-efficacy, and perceived influence** as critical determinants of participation. Studies show that when citizens trust institutions to consider their input, they are more willing to invest time and effort; when trust is low, participation declines (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Similarly, **internal efficacy** (belief in one's ability to understand issues) and **external efficacy** (belief that authorities will respond) significantly shape behaviour. In contexts where planning documents are highly technical and communication is insufficient, both forms of efficacy tend to be low.

Research on **participation fatigue** (Porlezza, 2019) explains long–term demotivation: citizens who repeatedly experience participatory processes without observable outcomes may gradually disengage. This framework helps explain discrepancies between institutional expectations and citizens' experiences in spatial planning.

Taken together, motivation theories illuminate why citizens may be interested in planning outcomes but still not participate; they also explain why certain groups (e.g., those with higher education or stronger environmental concerns) tend to be more active. These theoretical insights enlighten the interpretation of motives recorded in the survey and the institutional explanations provided in interviews.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that participation in spatial planning is shaped by resources, perceived efficacy, trust in institutions, mobilisation efforts, and the expected impact of engagement. In the Bor–Majdanpek case study, these dimensions will be examined not only as determinants of citizens' willingness to participate, but also as points of divergence between citizens' and institutional actors'interpretations of turnout and motivation. Particular attention will therefore be paid to how citizens explain their engagement or non–engagement, and how institutions interpret the same patterns, revealing potential perception gaps in the planning process.

2.3 PARTICIPATORY METHODS AND PLANNING PRACTICE

The third theoretical pillar concerns the methods used to engage the public and their effectiveness in fostering meaningful participation. The literature distinguishes between formal, legally mandated procedures and innovative or deliberative methods that promote interaction, understanding, and co–creation. The planning field has long discussed the tension between **statutory procedures** – such as public reviews, announcements, and opportunities to submit written comments – and **collaborative planning approaches** that emphasise co–production, dialogue, and shared learning (Healey, 1997; Innes & Booher, 2010). Statutory methods are often limited in their inclusiveness and interaction, aiming primarily at legal compliance rather than substantive engagement. This corresponds with the institutional actors' reliance on the legally prescribed methods identified in the interviews.

At the same time, studies highlight the growing importance of **innovative participatory tools**, such as participatory GIS, visualisation platforms, workshops, design games, neighbourhood walks, digital whiteboards, and virtual reality (Evans–Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Batty, 2018). These tools can make planning more accessible, especially when complex spatial information must be conveyed to non–expert audiences. Survey findings showing citizens' preference for more visual and interactive methods align with broader trends in participatory planning.

Research on **information channels** underscores that clear, timely, and citizen–oriented communication is a prerequisite to effective participation. Mass media announcements remain insufficient if not complemented with targeted outreach, digital communication, and locally embedded channels. Studies show that a lack of awareness about planning processes is one of the most significant barriers to participation worldwide (Pantić et al., 2021).

Recent scholarship on **co-creation and living labs** (Voorberg et al., 2014; Crosby et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2024) argues that participatory methods are most successful when authorities and citizens jointly explore problems and solutions. Such methods promote mutual understanding, reduce perception gaps, and can enhance trust in institutions. However, they often require more institutional resources, capacity, and flexibility than many planning systems currently possess.

Finally, research on **administrative path dependency** demonstrates that public institutions often adhere to familiar procedures, even when more effective alternatives exist, due to organisational culture, limited capacity, and risk aversion (Pierson, 2000; Sydow et al., 2009; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). This helps explain why the institutions interviewed for this study remain heavily oriented towards formal procedures, while citizens express their preference for more interactive, transparent, and accessible participatory formats.

Taken together, this body of literature suggests that the effectiveness of participatory governance depends not only on the availability of formal statutory procedures, but also on the type of engagement methods employed, the quality of communication channels, and the institutional capacity and willingness to adopt innovative approaches. In the case study, the analysis therefore focuses on: how existing legally mandated procedures are perceived by both citizens and institutional actors; how communication about planning processes is organised, and; whether there is openness towards more interactive and deliberative tools. Particular attention is paid to the divergence between institutional reliance on established formal mechanisms and citizens' expressed preferences for more accessible and dialogical forms of participation.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to examine how citizens and institutional actors perceive public participation in spatial planning in Serbia, with special focus on the Bor–Majdanpek mining area in Eastern Serbia – highly dependent on the extraction and processing of copper and gold for more than a century. Research attempts to identify key areas where interpretations diverge – particularly regarding turnout and motivations to participate from the perspective of different stakeholders.

The study employs a sequential explanatory mixed–methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative components are combined to enable a comprehensive understanding of how citizens and institutional actors interpret participation in spatial planning processes in Serbia, and in what ways their perceptions differ with respect to turnout and motives of engagement. The rationale for this design lies in its capacity to first capture patterns in citizens' attitudes and behaviours, and then contextualise and explain these patterns through in–depth insights from institutional representatives.

3.1 QUALITATIVE COMPONENT: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The qualitative phase consisted of 19 semi–structured interviews with experts representing a range of institutions and organisations involved in spatial planning processes in Serbia, especially in Bor and Majdanpek local administrative units. Participants included representatives from the national (3) and local (2) government sectors, national (3) and local (2) non–governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as professional planners active in practice (2) and in practice & research (5), along with the representatives of mining companies operating in the Bor–Majdanpek region (2) (Table 1). This diversity of actors made it possible to capture multiple institutional perspectives relevant to participation in mining–affected planning contexts.

Table 1. Interview respondents

PSEUDONYM	SECTOR	REFERENCE IN THE TEXT
Goran	national government	Goran, ng
Sana	national government	Sana, ng
Silvia	national government	Silvia, ng
Davina	local government	Davina, lg
Kira	local government	Kira, lg
Iris	national-level NGO	Iris, n-NGO
Manfred	national-level NGO	Manfred, n-NGO
Anita	national-level NGO	Anita, n-NGO
David	local-level NGO	David, l-NGO
Radek	local-level NGO	Radek, l-NGO
Jelisaveta	professional planner active in practice	Jelisaveta, p&p
Mirela	professional planner active in practice	Mirela, p&p
Blanka	professional planner active in practice & research	Blanka, p&r
Neli	professional planner active in practice & research	Neli, p&r
Nolan	professional planner active in practice & research	Nolan, p&r
Ramona	professional planner active in practice & research	Ramona, p&r
Zara	professional planner active in practice & research	Zara, p&r
Mladen	representative of a mining company	Mladen, mc
Serhio	representative of a mining company	Serhio, mc

Thematic analysis was applied using a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Deductive codes reflected the study's analytical focus – perceptions of turnout and motives attributed to citizens – while inductive codes captured emerging themes such as institutional constraints, administrative path dependence, communication challenges, and alternative explanations for low participation. This approach enabled a nuanced interpretation of how institutional actors understand and experience participation processes.

The interview guide was structured in accordance with the study's theoretical framework and organised into three thematic blocks. The first block addressed institutional understandings of public participation, including perceptions of its purpose, effectiveness, and influence on decision–making. The second block explored explanations for citizen turnout and motivations to participate or abstain. The third block focused on the methods and communication channels used in participatory procedures. While the broader interview protocol covered additional topics related to spatial planning in mining–affected regions, the present analysis concentrates specifically on questions concerning participation, turnout, and perceived motivations. This structure ensured consistency between the theoretical framework and empirical data collection.

3.2 QUANTITATIVE COMPONENT: CITIZEN SURVEY

The quantitative component consisted of a structured survey conducted with 300 respondents, selected through a random sampling procedure to ensure a representative sample of residents of both urban and rural settlements in the City of Bor and the Municipality of Majdanpek, located in Eastern Serbia. This is a historically significant mining region, with a continuous tradition of copper extraction since the early 20th century.

The survey was also carried out as part of the MINIPART project. A detailed presentation of the survey design, instrument, and full statistical results has been published separately in Urban Science (Pantić et al., 2026), as well as partially in Spatium (Toković et al., 2025). For the present study, these survey findings serve as the empirical basis for comparing citizens' views with institutional perspectives collected in the qualitative phase. Survey data were analysed using descriptive and comparative statistical techniques to identify trends in turnout and motivations for (non)participation. These quantified patterns provided the structure for cross–actor comparison.

The survey instrument was structured in line with the study's theoretical framework and organised into three main sections. The first section examined citizens' perceptions of public participation in spatial planning, including perceived influence, transparency, and institutional responsiveness. The second section addressed motivational factors, such as access to information, perceived efficacy, trust in public authorities, and reasons for participation or non–participation. The third section explored evaluations of existing participatory methods and communication channels, as well as preferences for more interactive or innovative formats. This structure ensured alignment between the quantitative instrument and the theoretical pillars guiding the study.

3.3 INTEGRATIVE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The final analytical step involved a structured integration of findings from both components. Quantitative survey patterns were compared with qualitative insights from institutional interviews to identify convergences and divergences between citizens' and institutions' perspectives. This comparison made it possible to pinpoint perception gaps, particularly regarding the interpretation of low turnout and the motives of participation. Through this integrative process, the study synthesises behavioural evidence with institutional narratives, thereby offering a multidimensional understanding of the participation landscape in Serbia's planning system.

3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

All participants took part voluntarily. In the survey, responses were collected anonymously. Interview participants provided either oral or written informed consent, with the option to be identified or remain anonymous. No personal or sensitive data is disclosed, and all findings are presented in aggregated form to ensure confidentiality and respect for participants' preferences.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the mixed–methods design enables a structured comparison between citizens' and institutional actors' perspectives, the study is based on a regional case (Bor and Majdanpek), which may limit the direct transferability of findings to other planning contexts in Serbia. Second, while the survey relied on a random and demographically balanced sample, self–reported data remain subject to recall bias and social desirability bias, particularly regarding past participation and motivations. Third, qualitative insights reflect the viewpoints of the 19 interviewed experts – including governmental, non–governmental, planning, and mining–sector representatives – which, although diverse, may not fully encompass all institutional standpoints involved in planning processes. Finally, the comparison of citizen and institutional perspectives is interpretative by nature; perceptual gaps identified in this study may therefore be shaped not only by structural differences but also by the researchers' analytical framing.

4. RESULTS

The analysis of public turnout and residents' willingness to participate in planning processes indicates that the central issue is public awareness of participation opportunities (informativeness) in spatial and urban planning procedures. Furthermore, the results highlight the importance of understanding the content of spatial plans and the role of spatial planning as a prerequisite to meaningful participation. Finally, the findings underscore the significance of feedback mechanisms and trust as key factors influencing both the quality and sustainability of public participation.

4.1 TURNOVER AND MOTIVATION

Interview respondents

Interview respondents are unanimous in their assessment of the extremely low level of participation in formal public participation procedures. They share experiences in which *public participation is practically non-existent. The public does not participate at all (Zara, p&r),* and where *it often happens that only a very small number of citizens attend public hearings, and that these are mostly men (Neli, p&r).*

With regard to mining projects, the situation is similar. One planner testified to experiencing weak participation in the Jadar project:

> *low public participation and a calm situation (...). I think there were [only] seven objections during the public review, and none of them challenged the project or its daily activities. They referred to roads, property, infrastructure, parcels, etc. (Nolan, p&r). Particularly low participation is observed in rural areas, where the absence of women is especially pronounced. In these contexts, women are generally not landowners, which some planners interpret as a key reason for their frequent non-participation in formal participatory procedures.*

When discussing low turnout, planners tend to attribute it not to shortcomings in institutional design or their own professional practices, but rather to "uninterested citizens": *Not many citizens participate, I must admit... they're just not very interested (Jelisaveta, p&p).*

A recurring pattern among respondents representing the authorities and mining companies is to interpret low public engagement as a reflection of broader societal trends and individualism, rather than structural barriers. As one interviewee explains:

> *Times have changed; people are more turned towards themselves, and they are not open to communication, nor are they interested... It's a social problem, but it's embedded in everything. If it weren't for that social problem, we wouldn't have an issue with public presentations [hearings] (Serhio, mc).*

Another respondent echoes this sentiment: *We've come to a time with no understanding. Everyone looks after themselves — that's a 'not in my backyard' effect (Goran, ng).*

At the same time, a respondent representing the NGO sector highlights another dimension of low engagement, namely the pervasive fear of potential retaliation: *There is fear, and people do not want to get involved with it at all (...). They get labelled immediately and think they are doing something against the government. The overall climate in society is somehow unfavourable for organising this. (Radek, I-NGO).*

Respondents' experiences further suggest that participation produces tangible outcomes primarily when private interests are at stake or in exceptional situations. As one interviewee observes,

> *There is an effect, but only at the level of private interests. I mostly think that comments related to increasing the number of storeys, changes in land use, and various minor interests tend to be accepted, while those concerning public interests are not (Anita, n-NGO); They are motivated when problems directly impact them. The greatest motivation is when something comes to their own home (Manfred, n-NGO).*

In some cases, this motivation is interpreted as explicitly economic, with objections framed around property value and compensation: *The majority of objections say: 'include my property, include my house, take the house and take everything'... There are more objections asking to be included in expropriation than to be excluded from it (Nolan, p&r).*

In mining regions, officials and company representatives frequently frame (non) participation as a pragmatic calculation rooted in economic dependency. As one representative of a mining company explains, *Anyone tied to the mine thinks that at a public presentation people will speak against the mine, so they would rather choose not to come (Serhio, mc).*

From this perspective, non–participation is interpreted as rational self–interest: *If a miner earns 250,000 RSD (...2,000 €)*[1]*, why would he care whether the Bor River is polluted? (Serhio, mc).*

Those directly affected by mining–related impacts—such as landowners and farmers—are perceived as significantly more motivated to engage, while the majority remain indifferent or supportive of mining activities regardless of the environmental consequences:

> *In mining areas, people who depend on the industry generally favour it, regardless of potential environmental impacts and If 90% of people depend on the mine, why would they show up to listen to someone speaking against it? (Serhio, mc).*

Some respondents go further, describing participation in such contexts as contradictory or even hypocritical: *It makes little sense to make a complaint against themselves — in the morning they work for the [mining] company, and in the afternoon, they go complain against it (Goran, ng).*

This interpretation of participation as interest–driven extends beyond mining regions and is echoed in respondents' broader assessments of public engagement. Several interviewees emphasise that participation tends to be reactive, emerging primarily in response to immediate and tangible threats. As one planner notes, public attention *appears only when people hear that there will be resettlement or land expropriation,* while planning processes otherwise remain *somewhere in the background* (Blanka,

[1] Median net salary in Serbia (2025) is ca. 85,000 RSD (~700 €).

p&r). Similarly, citizens are described as attending public hearings mainly to *check what will happen to their plot of land or house, to check what will happen, whether something will be demolished (Jelisaveta, p&p),*

with collective or transformative forms of engagement remaining rare. When issues of personal interest are not at stake, the motivation to participate in discussions on planning–related problems is recognised as political interest:

> *certain groups abuse the public review procedure, not only in relation to planning positions, but for broader political positions (...). Usually, someone appears from the local level and starts giving a political speech (Nolan, p&r).*

Even though respondents from all sectors and levels perceive personal and, occasionally, political interests as the primary drivers of citizen participation, some respondents describe small groups of citizens as "enthusiasts" motivated by a sense of civic responsibility and a desire for constructive engagement, seeking not merely to oppose plans but to contribute ideas and improve outcomes:

> *Participation does not always mean saying 'I don't want this,' but offering positive solutions (Silvia, ng); At least they can say they tried, and they will not simply allow things that directly affect their lives (Anita, n-NGO).*

There is also recognition of the potentially negative impacts of mining as a key motive for participation. As one planner explains, participants are often motivated by a desire to push for better solutions once they become aware of the problematic aspects of spatial plans:

> *It bothers me that they react only when they notice a problem, and I think that is what motivates them. I think they react only when they realise that something bad is going to happen, where something is planned (Zara, p&r).*

Respondents from the NGO sector point to forms of engagement that extend beyond formal participation procedures as being a relevant factor to increase turnout and enable more meaningful and effective involvement in planning. Informal and semi–formal participatory spaces — such as citizens' assemblies and meetings of local community councils — are described as more responsive, particularly when supported by the presence of experts. As a respondent recalls, one participatory process proved successful *because the experts and we [NGO] were present at that assembly*, leading to a substantial revision of the original mining concept (David, I–NGO). In this context, protest emerges as a particularly effective mechanism for eliciting turnout and influence, with some respondents describing it as the only way to compel institutional responsiveness outside of electoral cycles.

Survey respondents

Results of the quantitative survey among the residents of Bor and Majdanpek indicate certain alignments with, as well as differences from, what the interviewees stated. Contrary to interviewees' observation that the public interest is not important to citizens, the largest share of respondents (34%) cited a desire to improve their community as a motivation for participating. The second most frequently mentioned motivation among citizens (27%) — being personally impacted by the problem — corresponds to the concern highlighted by interviewees, indicating that the issue they noted is also acknowledged by the residents. A discouraging finding is that a considerable share of respondents (25%) reported that nothing motivates them to participate, which resonates with the low turnout noticed by the interviewees but also by the respondents. Less than 10% of respondents took part in public review procedures, and nearly 40% reported either being unaware of their existence or unwilling to participate even if informed.

Survey results confirm interviewees' observations that personal affectedness is a key driver of citizen engagement. Quantitative analysis shows that citizens' concerns are primarily shaped by direct experience and personal affectedness. A statistically significant relationship was found between place of residence and perceived community problems ($\chi^2(15) = 72.184$, $p = 0.001$): the urban residents of Bor predominantly emphasised environmental problems due to continuous exposure to industrial pollution, while the rural residents of Bor were more concerned about displacement, reflecting the direct impact on several surveyed villages. In rural areas of Majdanpek, communal issues emerged as the primary concern, likely linked to long–term infrastructural neglect and limited public investment.

4.2 INFORMATIVENESS

Interview respondents

Inadequate public information and the incomprehensibility of the information provided to citizens are highlighted as significant causes of low public participation. Issues of information and lack of awareness regarding plan preparation processes and opportunities for participation were identified primarily by spatial planners, and subsequently by actors from other sectors, including the representatives of mining companies. The problem is identified both in the channels through which information is disseminated and in the lack of willingness to invest additional effort in informing the public through alternative means. In contrast, governmental bodies tend to frame access to information differently.

As one planner notes, *In Germany, official notifications are delivered to people's home addresses, while here only those who work for the City Hall are informed (Ramona, p&r)*.

This institutionalised narrowness of outreach is further illustrated by another respondent who points to the almost complete absence of active communication with local communities:

> *How are they supposed to get informed? Have you ever seen someone talking in public about a plan? No. The radio does not talk about it. There is no loudspeaker going through the village. So how are they supposed to find out? (...) We simply have no touch with them [citizens] (Mirela, p&p).*

Regarding the lack of information, planners are particularly critical of the role of local authorities. According to some, local authorities are the actors that should bear responsibility for informing the local public about plans and ways of engaging in participatory processes. The problem is diagnosed in *the passivity of local authorities, because when they see that a spatial plan out of their [local] jurisdiction is being developed, they simply do not get involved and only participate formally in the process (Nolan, p&r)*. They particularly emphasise the lack of direct, *one-on-one* communication with residents:

> *People are not worked with directly. No one goes to the grassroots level, to local community offices, and tells the head of the local community to organise people and explain what is important in the plan for them (Mirela, p&p); Has anyone actually asked people what they really want in their settlement... what kind of school they want, what kind of cultural centre? (Mirela, p&p).*

Other planners emphasise that passivity stems from fear among lower levels of authority: *they talk about wanting participation, but they do not implement it as an administration, and they are loyal and kept on a 'short leash' in terms of obedience and how these things are done; there is hesitation and mistrust, and they believe that decisions are made elsewhere — Belgrade makes decisions instead of them (Ramona, p&r)*.

Planners see their own role as active in communicating with citizens in the field, but they do not consider informing the community to be their responsibility, nor do they believe that plan developers have the necessary capacity for this:

> *we come to the field, whether a plan is being developed or a public inspection is underway, we hold public presentations, explain to people what is happening, what the planning solutions are, and what the impacts will be. It is easy to explain it to them and easy for them to comprehend. There is no one else to explain it to them except us, and as plan developers, we simply cannot cover everything (Nolan, p&r).*

However, some planners frame non–information as a matter of personal choice rather than a structural constraint. One planner reflects:

> *In mining basin areas, it's questionable how much residents share information among themselves. These are peri-urban or rural areas where people have less access to information than in cities, they don't mingle around much, they don't use social networks to any extent, they don't know where to find the right information, so they're simply not informed on time (Jelisaveta, p&p).*

Some indicate citizens' unrealistic expectations that the state will inform them, shaped by the legacy of socialism: *Someone has to explain to them that the state is not*

taking care of them... If that is missing, the result is — there are no interested individuals to participate (Blanka, p&r).

However, representatives of a mining company pointed directly to structural shortcomings when interpreting non–information. One of them notes:

> *There is no state strategy for the development of mining in relation to spatial planning (...). People were distrustful of the state because the state did not provide timely clarification or information about its plans, the company's plans, or the reasons behind all of this. I think the state, its institutions, failed the most here (Mladen, mc).*

Nevertheless, responsibility for informing the citizens is still shifted away from the mining company itself: *No company will invest too much in explaining things to the local community; their priority is production — increasing production and ensuring maximum profit (Mladen, mc).*

Non–information is interpreted by the NGO sector as the result of an absence of intent on the part of the competent actors.

> *Rarely does anyone, except perhaps some fanatic, go to the city's website daily... Information is indeed the key problem (Iris, n-NGO); The very idea of publishing something in the Official Gazette or on a website — who even goes to the website? Or in Kurir[2]. Please, don't. That's really beneath [any minimum effort that could be expected]. It is simply clear to people from the outset that no one actually wanted to inform them about it, rather it's just whoever happens to hear about it (Anita, n-NGO).*

As another respondent explained: *When information is not published on a website or in daily newspapers that are anyway rarely read or followed in villages, and when people do not travel to the city or check notice boards at City Hall, and are absent from public forums, or when invited individuals fail to pass information on to their neighbours — or are simply not interested in participating — the result is that residents are not at all present at public hearings (David, l-NGO).*

Respondents are critical of attempts to shift responsibility for public notification from the state to citizens and the civil sector: *Responsibility for whether citizens are informed or not lies with the competent authority (...). It is not my job, as an ordinary villager, to deal with this (Manfred, n-NGO); We do not have the capacity to organise citizens, nor is that our job (David, l-NGO).*

In contrast, a state–level governmental representative sees it differently. In Goran's point of view, citizens do have sufficient access to information, but are selectively or inadequately exposed to it: *Citizens have the opportunity to inform themselves; they are informed. Sometimes someone informs them in a one-sided way — only about the negative sides, not the positive ones.*

Similarly, when citizens report not being informed on time, their explanations are attributed to personal priorities rather than systemic issues: *No one is excluded, there*

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[2] Kurir is a daily newspaper with a reputation for sensationalist ('yellow') reporting.

is only the impression that they aren't informed on time. But when they explain why, they say they don't have time to go to the local administration office, read websites, track updates, etc. (Goran, ng).

However, the representatives of local authorities share their first–hand experience, emphasising both willingness and capacity constraints. They stress a genuine commitment to expanding the reach of information and involving a broader segment of the public in planning–related procedures, while simultaneously pointing to limited institutional capacities. As Kira explains, *A very small number of people are doing a large number of tasks. Within our working hours, there is simply no room to devote more attention to an issue beyond what is legally prescribed.*

Additional efforts to disseminate information through alternative channels are framed as an individual act rather than an institutionalised practice: *In this case, posting on the municipality's Facebook page was more a matter of goodwill (...), we did it voluntarily and simply did not have the resources to influence visibility or promotion (Kira, lg).*

Despite these limitations, the respondent underscores the importance of encouraging public involvement, noting that *it was important to us that people participate and continue to take part in such procedures, because ultimately the direction in which these processes develop depends on all of us (Kira, lg).*

Survey respondents

The fact that most citizens are unfamiliar with even the names of participation procedures — such as early public review and public review — points to substantial shortcomings in the informativeness of the participatory framework. Citizens' lack of awareness is evident, as confirmed by the quantitative survey: around 74% of respondents rated their knowledge of development plans as non–existent or very poor, 22% as well–informed, and only around 4% as very well–informed. An open–ended question revealed that most residents rely on the internet and social media as primary information channels. Notably, consistent with interviewees' observations, roughly 22% reported not actively seeking information, giving answers such as *nowhere, I have no source,* or *I am not interested*. However, this share of 22% is far from supporting the claim that a majority is uninterested.

Non–transparency was also reflected in residents' responses, with remarks such as *plans are not available, they are posted and quickly removed from the municipal website* and *we had to inquire about everything ourselves at the urban planning office*. Where official information is lacking, people often rely on informal social networks[3] to stay informed. When citizens were asked — through an open–ended question — to suggest ways to improve public awareness of participation in spatial and urban planning processes, almost one–third of respondents did not provide an answer, highlighting limited engagement and a gap between the criticism of non–transparency and the ability to propose concrete improvements.

[3] Encompassing parents, children, acquaintances, friends, colleagues, shop assistants, cleaners, neighbours, social circles, a husband who is a journalist, a wife working for the City/Municipality, activists, other residents, people "around the village" and those at the green market.

4.3 EXCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION

Interviewee respondents

Representatives of the NGO sector pointed out that poor stakeholder information might not be accidental, but rather a deliberate strategy of the state sector. They emphasise that citizens do not participate in plan development, not because they are unwilling, but because they cannot — the public is systematically excluded. *Most often, the local population is excluded until the phase when they see the excavator (Manfred, n-NGO).*

Structural exclusion of the public is also reflected in the choice of venues where participation is organised: *It always happens centrally, in one venue, where there is often no one [to offer professional support and plan interpretation] (Iris, n-NGO).*

Interviewees stress the need to organise public reviews in local community spaces: *It really is not impossible to organise a public review at the location where the plan actually takes place. Padinska Skela[4] cannot have a public review on 27th March Street[5], because people simply cannot get to the city centre during working hours and working days to see the plan (Iris, n-NGO).*

As a core systemic obstacle, they identify the formalism and minimalism of early public review and public review procedures. As one interviewee noted: *The problem is that, as a rule, the competent authority uses exclusively those minimal methods of informing the public, (...) the law does not prohibit the competent authority or the plan developers from identifying the interested public and specific groups or individuals, but this never happens (Manfred, n-NGO).*

Similarly, David emphasises that *Our mandatory methods of informing citizens are not a solution... [The participation procedures are] formalised and short.* NGO interviewees share the impression that participation in practice is often carried out at a level below even the legally prescribed minimum, merely to satisfy procedural form, without any substantive intention to involve citizens. As one respondent put it: *This is all formal compliance, without any intention for it to actually have an effect. It's more like: here, we have fulfilled our legal obligation (Anita, n-NGO).*

One interviewee described what they termed an extreme case: *A forceful example is that a second public presentation was scheduled in Belgrade, in the Government building, at 8:00 AM, and it was announced that very morning in Kurir. That is administrative viciousness. This is how trust is permanently lost (Manfred, n-NGO).*

Other examples referred to systematic procedural abuses, *such as excluding the early public review phase and shortening procedures (Manfred, n-NGO).*

Similar logic was described in the context of local budgeting: *If a municipal budget is being adopted, it is formally announced — according to the law — the next day at 12:00 PM in the large hall of City Hall that there will be a public hearing on*

[4] A settlement in the administrative area of the City of Belgrade, about 20 km from the city centre.

[5] Address of the City of Belgrade Secretariat of Urban Planning and Construction.

the budget. Do you know who appears at the event? Nobody! But the form has been fulfilled (...) (Radek, l-NGO).

Another way in which participatory procedures are hollowed out is through scheduling during vacation and holiday seasons:

> *This past summer, in July and August, we had ten plans that were in early public review or public review within one or over two weeks. This also happens during winter holidays, when such plans are scheduled... (Iris, n-NGO).*

In response to the question as to who is excluded from the process, NGO respondents mostly state that the public as such is excluded. *It is no longer a question of excluding a particular group... I think that the entire public is completely excluded from participation (Anita, n-NGO).*

The risk of further excluding the public through the introduction of e–participation is recognised:

> *Do you remember the proposed policy to take everything online? There was one paragraph that was actually the most dangerous, and I think it also relates, among other things, to mining areas: it stated that people who are not on the territory directly affected by the plan — that is, who do not live or work there — have no right to decide on it. That would mean, in the case of Košutnjak and Makiš[6] in relation to Belgrade, as well as in other areas, that you are completely excluding the public from the decision-making process (Anita, n-NGO).*

The government attitude towards territorial exclusion is that public engagement is relevant only for localised, narrow interests, not for matters of "public interest" and "state policy". This narrowing of (a minimal level of) participation is reinforced in calls for establishing a stricter "legal legitimacy" for participants: *Legal legitimacy in market conditions means property rights holders... those are the people who should be listened to. Others who look at this from the outside, who comment... (Goran, ng)* are seen as non–legitimate. In the view of public interest, planners see public participation in an early review process as redundant and rather as an obstacle that *burdens the planning team* (Blanka, p&r; Nolan, p&r), especially in the context of mining areas, *because mining is a core sector of the national economy of a country and does not depend on whether we want it or not, but rather on whether we have raw materials or not. The issue is not whether mining will be developed, but whether resources will be used (Nolan, p&r).*

In this case, the local population is understood as a passive object of planning rather than an active participant. They should participate in the process, but their role should be limited to providing information, rather than exercising decision–making authority on an equal footing with other actors:

[6] Košutnjak is a protected green area in Belgrade, often referred to as the "lungs of the city." Makiš is a water supply plain in Belgrade. Both are considered to have regional significance for air quality and the water supply system, thus exceeding purely local interests. As a forest and an alluvial plain, these areas are almost uninhabited.

> *You cannot mine there unless you relocate them [the local population]. You have to talk to them. If you have settlements, agricultural production, watercourses, or water in a given area, you cannot even consider mining there unless you first conduct an economic analysis of that population. What will it mean for that population? (Mirela, p&p).*

Going back to the state government's views on exclusiveness in participation, Goran agrees that early public review could be more appropriate for urban than spatial planning. Furthermore, in the current context, exclusion from participation processes does not appear to be a structural issue but an individual choice: *We've come to a situation where people who want to understand — understand and participate; and people who want to criticise — criticise as much as possible without looking at the whole picture (Goran, ng).*

Similarly, another national government representative states: *If everyone followed what is defined in the Law on Strategic Environmental Assessment, there would be no obstacles for anyone to be included or allowed to contribute if they want to (Silvia, ng).*

Survey respondents

The exclusivity in formal decision–making, observed by the interviewees, is reflected in the low participation of residents, as confirmed by local citizens in Bor and Majdanpek (Figure 1). Awareness and engagement remain limited, with only ca. 4% of respondents reporting participation in the early public review and 7% in the public review. The lack of both past participation and expressed willingness to engage among nearly two–thirds of respondents, particularly in the early public review, indicates the generally low participatory potential of the local population. It also indicates issues related to the meaningfulness of the early public review in its current form.

The findings of the quantitative survey are consistent with the views of NGO representatives: citizens do not participate in plan preparations not because they are unwilling, but because they are unable to — public engagement is systematically excluded. Most residents are willing to dedicate time to participate in the creation of planning documents. Specifically, the majority (ca. 66%) are willing to dedicate as much time as necessary or at least several hours. Only 15% are not willing to dedicate any time at all. Similarly, lack of time does not emerge as a dominant reason for non–participation.

Interviewees also highlighted the timing of public reviews as part of an exclusive strategy that effectively excludes a large portion of the public. The quantitative survey confirmed this, showing that only a third of respondents (34%) stated that the time of day was irrelevant, while the majority preferred time slots outside of working hours (Figure 2).

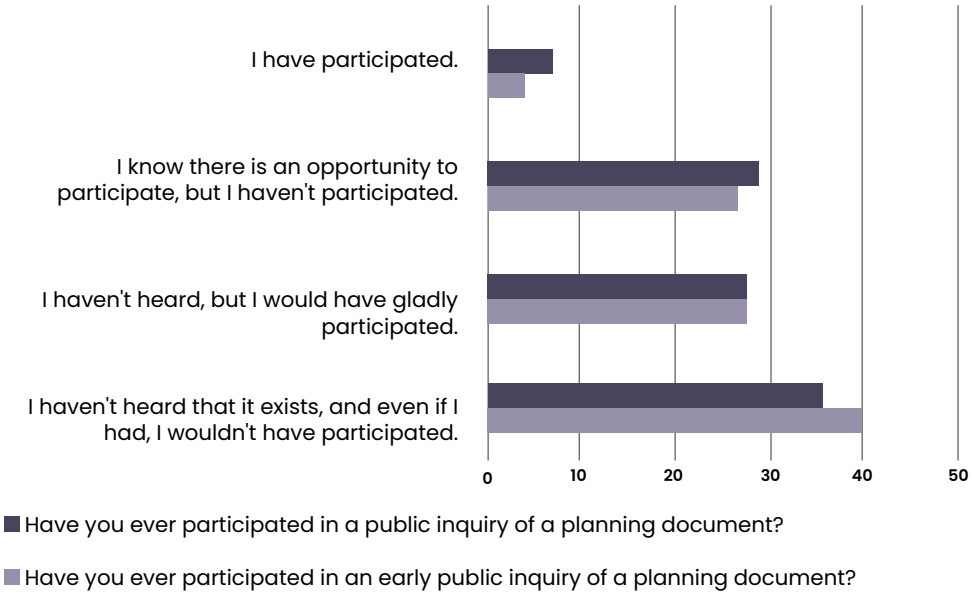

Figure 1. Participation of the local population in the development of planning documents

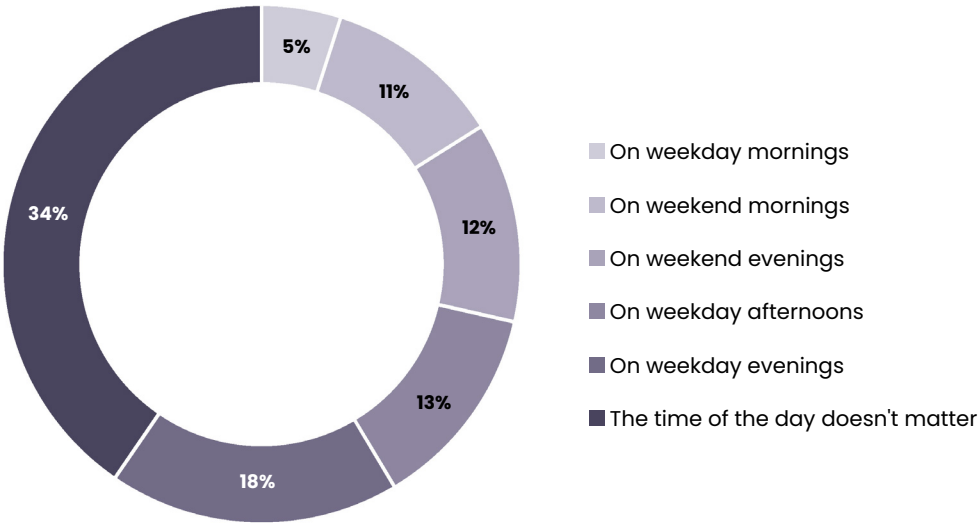

Figure 2. Preferred time for citizens to attend public meetings or events

4.4 UNDERSTANDING TASKS AND JURISDICTIONS

Interview respondents

NGO respondents, countering the notion that participation is solely a matter of individual choice, highlight that participatory procedures are ill–suited to ordinary citizens, which can deter their involvement in planning. *The public review, in its current form, is not adapted to laypeople... People simply cannot understand it (Manfred, n-NGO).*

In addition to the use of highly technical language in addressing the public, interviewees emphasise the problem of graphic presentation formats that average computer users cannot access, as high–resolution map files often require specialised software. Procedures designed in this way deepen the already pronounced asymmetry of power between authorities, experts, and lay citizens. This represents, as one respondent described it, *the manifestation of this terribly unequal power relationship (Iris, n-NGO).*

This imbalance is further exacerbated by the inappropriate behaviour of plan developers and commissions during public reviews:

> *Most often, they behave inappropriately and impolitely towards participants and do not help them in exercising their rights; on the contrary, they try to deprive them of those rights through manipulation and very often through threats. We have witnessed municipal officials coming in and interrupting a session (Manfred, n-NGO).*

Planners agree that planning documents, especially those at the strategic level, are difficult for "ordinary" citizens to read. They acknowledge their own responsibility and the need to adapt professional terminology to lay audiences and to the goal of encouraging participation:

> *The larger the scale (...), the clearer it is to them, and they more easily recognise their personal interest, especially when it concerns a specific plot of land, compared to a general urban plan or a spatial plan for a special-purpose area. It is up to the planner in charge to find a way to bring the plan closer to them [citizens] through images, games, or graphics, showing what the plan is about. We are often lulled into our own professional world, terminology, and ways of thinking, and we do not think about whether we are clear to others (Ramona, p&r).*

Some planners stress that citizens' limited expertise is problematic, placing the responsibility on planners to enhance their understanding: *general objections are submitted incorrectly, often by certain NGOs and institutions, etc. They challenge the plan in an unprofessional and superficial way, and therefore the objections are always rejected (Nolan, p&r); It is questionable what they are even talking about. What they say usually later becomes the subject of objections that we dismiss as unfounded, because they do not actually relate to what we are doing [in terms of planners' jurisdictions]. This shows that even those who are interested [to participate] do not have even minimal knowledge of what spatial and urban plans are and what the scope of spatial and urban planning is (Zara, p&r).*

While some see incompetence in formulating objections as the reason for their rejection, other experts stress that responsibility lies in how plans are communicated to citizens:

> *I think citizens are capable of recognising a higher public interest, however we might call it, if it is presented to them in the right way, especially when it concerns their local community. I think what demotivates them is the lack of feedback (Neli, p&r).*

The experiences of local authorities also point to the problem of understanding the plans: *... citizens still do not know what planning is and how it is conducted... They most often do not even understand the basic idea of the plan itself. (...) The majority of citizens do not engage with matters that are actually related to planning... (Davina, lg).*

At the same time, planners point to responsibility within the educational system, emphasising that even within their own profession, there is insufficient information and knowledge about public participation in planning. Often, *they are not even aware that this is something they should be doing — not even spatial planners, let alone the wider public (Zara, p&r), while even urban planning students are not sufficiently skilled to formulate objections to a plan] in any way, let alone in the proper way (Zara, p&r),* pointing to the need to introduce dedicated courses at the university on the importance of participation in spatial planning.

> *There is resistance within the profession as well. To implement this in practice, you need knowledge; it is not just about skills. You need to know what you want to achieve, and then adapt the techniques to your goals (Ramona, p&r).*

Several interviewees highlighted the prevalence of "office–based planners" reluctant to interact with citizens: *I can do everything from satellite images and data in my computer — I don't need the field. Talking to people is exhausting (Blanka, p&r).*

Survey respondents

Among the reasons for not participating in the process of creating planning documents, as we will see in the next section, the prevailing factor is citizens' lack of trust in their ability to effect change. However, as shown in Figure 3, a small percentage of citizens (11%) adopt a self–reflective approach and cite a lack of expertise as a barrier to participation. These findings suggest that before undertaking any public education initiatives, local actors — and particularly the state — face an even more challenging task: building citizens'trust in the functioning of institutions.

Furthermore, citizens' views on issues of competencies and responsibilities can be inferred indirectly from the suggestions they made to improve participatory methods, as the aspects they seek to enhance reveal what they currently perceive as missing in existing participation procedures. Citizens address the exclusivity in planning document creation as a challenge. Nearly half did not respond, which indicates that they do not feel competent in the field. The rest proposed direct e–government voting, financial incentives, consideration of citizens' remarks, and clear, transparent communication. In general, they pointed to the need to depoliticise the authorities and restore trust, along with raising awareness and motivating people to engage.

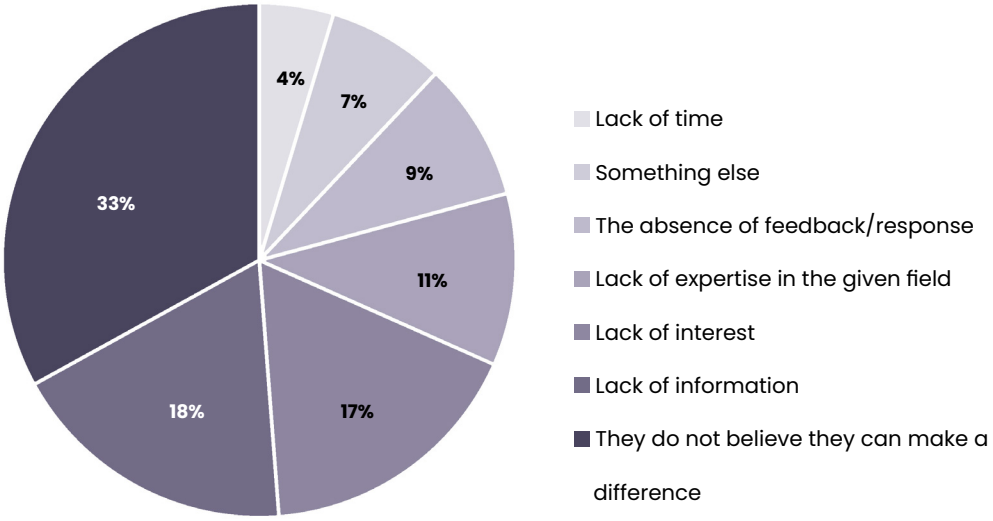

Figure 3. Key reasons for low participation in the planning document creation process

4.5 TRUST AND FEEDBACK

Interview respondents

Interpreting the reasons for public non–participation, representatives of the civil sector primarily point to a deep distrust in the state, which they see as a direct product of how formal participation has been practised.

> *The lack of trust is very strong, and it then very quickly turns into conflict (Iris, n-NGO); This is a distrust that has built up over decades. Citizens have little trust in the system. Even if someone were to come and say, 'everything will be fine, don't worry,' they would not believe the authorities, because on several previous occasions things were not O.K. (Manfred, n-NGO).*

Distrust is caused by a range of structural factors, but what dominates is the perception that no one wants to truly include citizens, and that participation is just a veneer: *Things are always done according to the principle of 'whatever little Perica*[7] *put into the plan is what will be implemented next year'. Then it gets wrapped up and presented as if there had been a public debate, even though there isn't a single 'p' of a public debate. It will be said that everything has been fulfilled, while in fact nothing has been fulfilled. Unfortunately, there is no real public and no broad participation of the citizens (Radek, l-NGO).*

From the point of view of the NGO sector, the absence of an institutional response to comments submitted during the early public review phase, i.e. the lack of feedback, is the most salient limitation. As one respondent explained:

[7] Little Peter, a stereotypical character in Serbian jokes, commonly portrayed as naïve or unintelligent.

We are well-intentioned, and we provide constructive comments. We try to formulate them in a way that planners can easily incorporate into a decision or document. (...) Most often we receive no response whatsoever to these comments (David, l-NGO).

Even in cases where respondents receive confirmation that comments have been received, the lack of substantive feedback remains a major problem: *We were not told what was accepted and what was not... Notification that the comments were received and forwarded to the planners means nothing (David, l-NGO)*. Interviewees emphasise that this problem is twofold, *because it leaves people in a state of uncertainty and with the belief that no one has even looked at what they did (Anita, n-NGO)*. Other respondents note that when replies are provided, they are often dismissive: *The most common responses are: 'this is not the subject of the plan,' 'this was the subject of another discussion', etc. (Manfred, n-NGO)*.

Interestingly, mining companies and some planners approach the issue of trust from a very different perspective, expressing suspicion towards stakeholders involved in participation processes. A representative of a mining company articulated deep mistrust towards protest or mobilisation, noting: *When the public got involved and problems appeared, it looked 'directed' from somewhere — someone with personal, not public interests, initiated it (Serhio, mc)*. Such views suggest an underlying delegitimisation of public participation through collective action. When asked why citizens who actively mobilise against mining projects do not participate in formal procedures, respondents

Table 2. Evaluation matrix of the contributions of major actors in addressing problems caused by mining activities (%)

Source: Authors.

ACTORS	NO CONTRIBUTION	SMALL CONTRIBUTION	NEITHER A SMALL NOR A LARGE CONTRIBUTION	LARGE CONTRIBUTION	VERY LARGE CONTRIBUTION
State	52.0	21.5	15.1	7.7	3.7
Local government	56.0	19.5	16.8	6.0	1.7
Private companies	59.6	20.5	15.5	3.4	1.0
NGOs	64.0	13.4	16.2	3.7	2.7
Experts and the scientific community	67.0	14.5	14.8	3.0	0.7
European Union	66.9	17.9	11.8	3.4	0.0
Citizens (local activism)	34.9	27.8	22.0	12.6	2.7

admitted they did not have a clear explanation: *It's not that people are inactive — they point out problems — but participation itself is missing, and I'm not sure why (Blanka, p&r)*. This selective engagement is interpreted ambivalently by officials, some of whom express suspicion towards sudden mobilisations: *If stakeholders get involved only when the plan is about to be adopted, I can't help but wonder why (Blanka, p&r)*. Blanka also extends this scepticism to civil society, describing NGO–driven initiatives as *very one-sided*.

Survey respondents

Observations made by civil society representatives regarding citizens' lack of trust in the state and other relevant institutions are confirmed by several responses in the quantitative research conducted with citizens. Nearly one–third of respondents, as previously noted (Figure 3), cite the belief that they cannot make a difference as a reason for not participating in the creation of planning documents. The absence of feedback, which is particularly recognised as a problem by the NGO sector, is also acknowledged by citizens, although only 9% identify it as a reason for non–participation. Many of the responses provided by citizens under the open–ended option "other" (7%) point precisely to a lack of trust in key actors, including *feelings of powerlessness against profit-driven, self-interested stakeholders, distrust in authorities, local and national, and a lack of local authorities' interest in involving citizens in planning*, among others.

Distrust in key actors is further evident in responses to the question *How often does the local population feel that local authorities consider their suggestions?* More than half of respondents (54%) answered *never*, followed by *rarely* (31%) and *sometimes* (10%). Only an insignificant share of respondents perceive that their suggestions are taken into account, with 3% answering *often* and less than 1% *always*. Distrust among the local populations of Bor and Majdanpek, both towards the state and other key actors, is also visible in the evaluation of key actors' contributions to addressing problems caused by mining activities (Table 2).

5. DISCUSSION

Our analysis of participation in spatial planning processes in Serbia demonstrates that residents' willingness and motivation to engage are central to understanding participatory dynamics. This aligns with Verba et al.'s (1995) civic voluntarism model, which emphasises that participation depends not only on formal opportunities but also on citizens' motivation, resources, and external mobilisation. Low turnout in formal procedures thus reflects not a lack of civic interest but a rational response to limited perceived efficacy and structural constraints, such as short deadlines, inaccessible documentation, and asymmetries of power between experts and citizens (Olson, 1965; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). However, many aspects of public participation depend on both citizens' willingness to engage as well as the readiness of governmental institutions to implement systemic changes (Nikolić et al., 2021).

Institutional actors frequently interpret low participation as a consequence of citizens' disinterest or individualism, effectively shifting responsibility onto the public (Lawton & Macaulay, 2014). Our findings confirm that this narrative obscures a deeper structural barrier: planning procedures often prioritise legal compliance over substantive engagement, particularly in mining–affected regions where state interests are viewed as predetermined. Such patterns correspond with Arnstein's (1969) lower rungs of participation, where informing and consultation remain symbolic rather than empowering.

Public awareness is closely linked to motivation. Consistent with the literature on participatory governance, awareness of participatory mechanisms is a prerequisite for engagement (Fung, 2006; Pantić et al., 2021). Our study reveals that formal communication channels — such as official gazettes, websites, and centrally located notice boards — fail to mobilise citizens, particularly in rural areas. Citizens' limited knowledge of early public review or public review procedures confirms that lack of information, rather than apathy, drives low participation

In addition to awareness, the ability to comprehend planning documents shapes both the quality and perceived relevance of engagement. Complex spatial plans, technical jargon, and inaccessible graphic formats reinforce power asymmetries and discourage participation (Healey, 1997; Innes & Booher, 2010). While some planners attribute rejected objections to citizens' incompetence, our findings suggest that institutional responsibility lies in adapting communication, clarifying jurisdictions, and enabling residents to recognise both the relevance of plans and their own role in planning processes.

Finally, trust and feedback emerge as critical determinants of sustainable participation. Consistent with Ansell & Gash (2008) and Quick & Bryson (2022), our results show that the absence of substantive responses to citizen input undermines trust and external efficacy. The lack of trust constitutes a significant factor behind non–participation, particularly in light of comparative evidence from the European Social Survey showing that Serbia stands out from other countries in exhibiting predominantly pessimistic attitudes towards political institutions (Janković & Toković, 2021). Long–term disengagement and low turnout reflect participants' rational assessment that contributions are unlikely to influence outcomes, reinforcing perception gaps between institutions and citizens.

Taken together, these findings underscore persistent misalignments between citizens' experiences and institutional expectations, echoing studies on perception gaps in collaborative governance (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Lawton & Macaulay, 2014). Bridging these gaps requires moving beyond procedural compliance towards participatory approaches that actively cultivate motivation, ensure awareness, enhance understanding, and institutionalise feedback. Without such interventions, participation risks remaining a formal exercise that reproduces distrust, diminishes legitimacy, and limits the transformative potential of spatial planning.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the dynamics of public participation in spatial planning in Serbia, especially in sensitive mining–affected regions, highlighting the interplay between citizens' motivation, awareness, comprehension, and trust, as well as understanding the misalignments between citizens' and institutions' perceptions, with special emphasis on mining areas. The analysis revealed that low turnout in formal participatory procedures is not simply a matter of civic disinterest but the result of structural barriers, procedural formalism, limited accessibility of information, and entrenched power asymmetries. Citizens often perceive participation as symbolic, while institutions frequently interpret low engagement as apathy, creating persistent perception gaps that undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of planning processes.

Key factors shaping participation include residents' willingness and motivation, the accessibility and clarity of planning information, citizens' understanding of spatial planning tasks and jurisdictions, and the presence of feedback mechanisms. The findings demonstrate that meaningful participation emerges only when individuals are informed, able to comprehend planning content, and confident that their input will be acknowledged and considered. Conversely, the absence of feedback and transparency fosters distrust, discouraging engagement and reinforcing inequalities in decision–making.

The study also highlights that no single actor is solely responsible for the observed challenges. Authorities and planners can improve communication, adapt participatory methods, and provide timely, comprehensible information. NGOs can support outreach, capacity building, and the mobilisation of underrepresented groups. Importantly, citizens' ability to participate effectively also depends on education — both formal, through the public education system, and non–formal, through community learning and awareness initiatives. Citizens, in turn, need to be open to acquiring knowledge about planning processes and their own potential role within them. Effective participation thus requires a collaborative approach, where each actor recognises both the limitations and the potential of their role in enhancing planning processes.

Overall, this research underscores the need for a more inclusive, transparent, and responsive participatory framework in spatial planning. By addressing structural barriers, fostering trust, and integrating feedback, it is possible to bridge perception gaps and strengthen citizen engagement. This is especially important in areas with resource extraction, where tensions are present due to the strong economic benefits of mining, but also significant negative socio–environmental impacts that need to be balanced for the common good. The findings suggest that, with concerted effort, all stakeholders — authorities, planners, NGOs, and residents — can collectively contribute to enhancing participatory practices, making spatial planning more democratic, effective, and socially responsive.

Future research should extend this analysis through longitudinal studies examining how trust, motivation, and turnout evolve, particularly in regions undergoing intensive

socio–economic transformation due to resource extraction. Comparative studies across other mining–affected or post–socialist contexts would also help determine whether the identified perception gaps are structurally embedded or context–specific. Moreover, experimental research testing innovative participatory formats — such as deliberative workshops, digital engagement platforms, or feedback–tracking mechanisms — could provide empirical evidence on how to move beyond procedural formalism. From a practical perspective, pilot innovation initiatives that combine institutional reform, participatory capacity–building, and civic education may offer promising pathways to strengthening democratic governance in spatial planning.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS: PARTICIPATION, LEGITIMACY, AND THE GOVERNANCE OF EXTRACTIVE TRANSITIONS

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CONCLUDING REMARKS: PARTICIPATION, LEGITIMACY, AND THE GOVERNANCE OF EXTRACTIVE TRANSITIONS

The selected chapters in this edited volume collectively speak to a central theoretical and empirical tension in the contemporary governance of extractive and transitional economies: the persistent gap between formalised participatory architectures and substantive democratic agency. While participatory governance has become a normative cornerstone of environmental regulation, urban & spatial planning, and just transition policies, the evidence presented here suggests that participation too often remains what Arnstein (1969) describes as "consultation without redistribution of power", rather than genuine co–decision–making.

Building on this foundational critique, the volume engages implicitly and explicitly with several interrelated theoretical strands: procedural justice (Rawls, 1971; Schlosberg, 2007), redistribution of power (Arnstein, 1969), distributive justice (Roemer, 1996; Lamont & Favor, 2017), multi–level governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Howlett et al., 2017) and participatory governance as a socio–institutional process rather than a procedural instrument (Fung & Wright, 2001; Blackstock et al., 2014). Across cases, it becomes clear that legitimacy is not generated through the mere existence of participatory procedures, but through their capacity to produce a relational coherence between institutions and affected citizens. Where this coherence breaks down, participation becomes performative, and governance systems move into a zone of latent or active legitimacy deficit.

The extractive regions *per se* represent multi–scalar features with contextual variability (mostly income inequality, environmental degradation and social disparities) in the region and its surroundings. They require specific attention and the use of appropriate multi–level governance – national, regional and local – policies and instruments to balance the diverse interests of often opposing key actors. Certainly, an additional challenge is ensuring adequate public involvement, as well as carrying out deliberative planning. Conceptualised by John Forester (1999) as a collaborative decision–making process, this approach allows communities and stakeholders to use reasoned argument, evidence, and open dialogue to shape public policies, urban and other spaces.

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CROSS-CUTTING INSIGHTS THROUGH A THEORETICAL LENS

Across all five chapters, several analytically significant patterns emerge through these conceptual frameworks.

First, procedural justice remains the primary, though insufficient, benchmark of participatory governance (Rawls, 1971; Schlosberg, 2007). The EU just transition frameworks, spatial planning regulations, and mining governance mechanisms examined in this volume formally adhere to procedural standards of inclusion. However, as the Stara Zagora case demonstrates (Peev & Aleksieva, 2026), procedural compliance does not necessarily translate into distributive influence or decision–making power. This reveals a consistent disconnect between input legitimacy (participation opportunities) and throughput legitimacy (actual influence over governance processes) (Fung, 2006).

Second, legitimacy is systematically undermined by asymmetries of distributed power, information, and institutional responsiveness. Peev & Aleksieva (2026) describe some EU methodological recommendations for citizen participation that can strengthen legitimacy and democracy, concluding that national formal structures are not sufficient for building the necessary legitimacy and trust. The Serbian case (Pantić et al., 2026) and the broader extractive governance analysis by Spiller et al. (2026) demonstrate that legitimacy is not static but continuously produced through interactions between citizens, institutions, and corporate actors. Where feedback loops are weak or absent, legitimacy becomes fragile and contested.

Third, participation functions as a multi–scalar governance assemblage rather than a formally defined institutional mechanism. As Howlett et al. (2017) point out, where horizontal and vertical dimensions of policy–making is lacking, there is a substantial risk of failure. The cases from South Africa (Oranje et al., 2026), Finland (Häyrynen et al., 2026), and Bulgaria (Peev & Aleksieva, 2026) illustrate that participatory outcomes depend on interactions between local governance capacity, national regulatory frameworks, corporate practices, and transnational policy regimes. This aligns with multi–level governance theory (Hooghe & Marks, 2003), while also highlighting coordination failures across scales as a persistent barrier to effective participation.

Fourth, participatory governance must be understood through co–production and knowledge asymmetry. Participation is not only about voice but also about epistemic inclusion—who defines problems, whose knowledge counts, and how expertise is legitimised. This aligns with science and technology studies approaches (Jasanoff, 2004) and deliberative democracy theory (Fung, 2006), showing that exclusion often operates through epistemic rather than purely political mechanisms.

Fifth, legitimacy, liability, and learning are increasingly interconnected under contemporary regulatory regimes. Pantić et al. (2026) demonstrate on a case study of Serbian mining region that participatory failure is no longer only political but also legal, as EU corporate due diligence frameworks (Directive (EU) 2024/1760) and human rights obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1950/2004) begin to translate participation deficits into legal exposure.

TOWARD A RELATIONAL AND JUSTICE-ORIENTED THEORY OF PARTICIPATION

Taken together, the findings suggest the need to move beyond procedural accounts of participation toward an integrated theoretical framework combining procedural justice (Rawls, 1971), distributive justice (Young, 1990), recognition justice (Fraser, 2000), multi–level governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2003), and participatory governance as a socio–institutional process (Fung & Wright, 2001).

Within this lens, participation is not a discrete policy tool but a dynamic governance condition produced through continuous interaction between institutions, citizens, and non–state actors across scales. Its effectiveness depends not only on formal inclusion but also on feedback visibility, responsiveness, and perceived influence over outcomes (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006).

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR EXTRACTIVE AND TRANSITIONAL GOVERNANCE

The research by Spiller et al. (2026) highlighted the dominating sensitive issues in extractive regions as corruption, transparency, revenue transfer, multi–lateral organisations, mining impacts, human rights; and proposed related system–level solutions to foster greater coordination both internationally and within host countries. As Peev & Aleksieva (2026) have pointed out, the EU member countries should follow the EU's methodological recommendations for effective governance, in attempt to successfully move from formal/tokenistic to substantive and decentralized participatory procedures. Oranje et al. (2026) go a step deeper by concentrating on the relationship between mining companies and communities, and a step further by proposing an intermediary entity that would strengthen municipalities' capacity to plan and coordinate, but also build mining companies' understanding of why formal collaborative planning matters – with the aim of bonding them as partners for long–term sustainability. As Pantić et al. (2026) have observed, the citizens, as the third pillar in this relationship, must be properly informed and confident that their input will be considered in decision–making process.

Taken together, these findings – drawing on the perspectives of experts, government officials, NGO representatives, consultants, academics, citizens, and vulnerable stakeholder groups – point to several governance principles necessary for moving beyond tokenistic participation towards meaningful citizen influence in decision–making:

- First, consultation without opportunities for meaningful influence on decisions is insufficient to establish legitimacy in high–conflict extractive contexts (Arnstein, 1969). Where participation remains merely advisory and produces little visible effect, repeated engagement may instead contribute to participation fatigue and deepen mistrust;
- Second, participatory governance must be designed as a feedback–sensitive system rather than a procedural checklist, ensuring that citizen input is traceable and demonstrably connected to decision–making (Fung, 2006);

- Third, intermediary institutions and multi–actor governance platforms can help address structural asymmetries among actors in mining regions and strengthen their capacity for sustained collaboration (Hooghe & Marks, 2003); and
- Finally, participation should be recognised as an important mechanism for identifying and addressing potential conflicts and human rights concerns at an early stage, particularly in the context of emerging due diligence and human rights regimes (Directive (EU) 2024/1760; Council of Europe, 2004).

CLOSING REFLECTION

Ultimately, this edited volume argues that participatory governance in extractive and transitional contexts must be understood as a relational and justice–embedded system of governance production rather than a procedural add–on. When participation is substantively embedded, it generates trust, shared ownership, and adaptive capacity; when it is formalistic or disconnected from decision–making, it produces legitimacy gaps that may escalate into political conflict, legal liability, and governance failure.

The contributions in this volume, therefore, invite a rethinking of participation not as a bounded administrative requirement, but as a core condition of democratic sustainability transitions. Results of the interview analyses presented in the book *People, power and planning: Participatory approaches in mining regions* (Maričić et al., 2026) indicated the value of such publications, as well as similar studies, in highlighting the limitations, shortcomings, and inconsistencies of public participation processes in mining regions worldwide. In addition to post–socialist and post–apartheid transition countries, such as Serbia and South Africa, a lack of transparency, closed–door decision–making, the withholding of relevant information from the wider public, and tokenistic forms of participation also characterise contemporary developments in considerably more democratically established societies, such as Finland. At the same time, many affected stakeholders lack the capacity to truly participate. The inclusion of some specific methods, such as cultural planning action (Häyrynen et al., 2026), could provide a good additional tool for overcoming some obstacles and bring a more balanced outcome for all interested parties.

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