

Assessing the effectiveness of participation in urban planning processes: a dual perspective on civic engagement and process efficiency

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Abstract

The present paper proposes a methodology for the evaluation of participatory planning processes through an integrated lens that connects institutional design with civic experience. The model synthesises objective indicators – such as timing, access, and policy integration – with subjective dimensions – like trust, agency, and place attachment. This enables it to capture the interplay between governance structures and lived participation. The framework is situated at the intersection of institutional practice and democratic innovation, thereby facilitating cross-boundary learning between public actors, communities, and planning professionals. This exploratory study establishes the foundation for subsequent empirical validation. It provides a versatile instrument for evaluating and collaboratively designing participatory pathways that enhance citizen empowerment and fortify democratic resilience across various territorial contexts.

Key words: Process evaluation; Participatory planning; Civic Engagement; Agency.

Introduction

Public participation in decision-making is widely acknowledged as a foundational element of contemporary urban and territorial planning. It serves not only as a safeguard of deliberative democracy (Smith, 2006), but also as a mechanism for promoting more equitable, informed, and context-sensitive policies (Healey, 1997). In this perspective, participatory planning has assumed a central role in shaping urban policies that reflect social complexity and emerging territorial needs (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Fischer, 2012).

Despite its growing institutionalization, evaluating the effectiveness of participatory processes remains a complex task. Existing assessment models are often polarized between procedural approaches, focused on efficiency and organizational criteria (Rowe & Frewer, 2000), and experiential approaches, concerned with participants' perceptions, relational dynamics, and subjective outcomes (Bherer, Gauthier, & Simard, 2021; Quick & Feldman, 2011). This methodological divide limits the ability to frame participation as a systemic phenomenon shaped by both design quality and lived experience (Kapucu, 2021).

This study proposes an integrated evaluation framework that brings together structural and experiential dimensions. On the one hand, it considers process-related variables such as transparency, time management, accessibility, and the integration of participatory outcomes into planning decisions (Reed et al., 2018; Partidário & Mourato, 2020). On the other, it incorporates subjective dimensions including trust, motivation, agency, and place attachment (Zimmerman, 1995; Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Christens, 2012).

The framework is designed with two main objectives: first, to offer a comprehensive tool for evaluating participatory processes across diverse planning contexts; and second, to foster critical reflection on the relationship between structural design and democratic meaning in participatory governance. The key contributions of this work are as follows:

- To test the hypothesis that participatory effectiveness results from the interaction between procedural efficiency and experiential engagement (Michels & De Graaf, 2017);
- To investigate how process characteristics shape participants' perceptions, particularly regarding institutional trust, sense of belonging, and civic activation (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2017);
- To provide a transferable methodological model that can be adapted to evaluate a variety of participatory planning cases;
- To identify enabling and constraining factors that influence the transformative capacity of participatory processes;
- To highlight the critical role of perceived authenticity and the actual integration of public input in shaping long-term civic trust and engagement (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; Voinov et al., 2022).

The paper is structured as follows: section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations and key approaches to evaluating participation; section 3 presents the proposed methodology and analytical tools; section 4 discusses potential applications and expected outcomes and offers critical reflections. Through this structure, the study aims to contribute a methodological foundation for more reflective and effective participatory planning practices, integrating both process quality and civic experience.

Background

Participation in territorial planning is now widely acknowledged as a key component of democratic and inclusive governance, aimed at the co-production of urban policies. Beyond mere consultation, participatory planning is conceived as a deliberative and transformative process, capable of redistributing decision-making power, fostering collective learning, and valuing local knowledge (Healey, 1997; Innes & Booher, 2004). It is rooted in a dialogical and pluralistic vision of urban space, where the co-construction of spatial decisions strengthens both civic identity and collective responsibility (Sandercock, 1998).

An effective participatory process not only broadens the decision-making base but also reinforces policy legitimacy, promotes socio-spatial justice, and enhances community capacity for stewardship. Collaborative planning enables forms of relational justice by recognizing cultural and social differences (Healey, 1997), while participation that acknowledges diversity contributes to a more equitable democracy (Young, 2000). The literature on collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008) emphasizes trust, dialogue, and mutual learning as essential to shared and sustainable outcomes.

Evaluating participatory effectiveness is thus central to understanding its real impact on territorial transformation. Participation yields both instrumental benefits, by incorporating local knowledge into better decisions (Innes & Booher, 2004), and normative ones, by enhancing democratic legitimacy and social capital (Fung, 2006; Smith, 2006). Effectiveness entails measuring not only tangible outputs but also relational impacts and civic empowerment (Michels, 2011; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

Fundamental participatory principles include inclusiveness, equity, transparency, mutual accountability, and informed deliberation (Smith, 2006; Fung, 2006). For these principles to be effective, they must be operationalized into procedural mechanisms that ensure meaningful influence on decision-making (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006). This dual nature, both transformative and technical, demands evaluation tools that can capture both the experiential quality of civic involvement and the structural efficiency of the process.

Objective evaluation tools focus on structural, procedural, and organizational features, offering criteria to assess process coherence and efficiency. Key aspects highlighted in the literature include: well-calibrated timing that allows for reflection and input (Reed et al., 2018); clarity in roles and expected competences to avoid informational inequalities (Partidário & Mourato, 2020); accessibility in terms of physical, digital, and temporal dimensions (Voinov et al., 2022); the quality and traceability of outputs (Reed et al., 2018); and the degree to which outputs are integrated into subsequent planning phases (Partidário & Mourato, 2020). Such tools are instrumental for ensuring accountability and comparability, especially in complex institutional settings, and form the basis of evaluation models adopted by public agencies and international organizations (Abelson et al., 2003). More recent approaches propose multi-scalar frameworks that integrate formal criteria with indicators of relevance, impact, and sustainability (Voinov et al., 2022).

Among these procedural variables, time management is particularly significant: appropriately paced processes facilitate meaningful engagement while avoiding rushed or diluted participation (Reed et al., 2018). Clear definitions of roles and competencies foster equitable involvement, while transparent expectations and information access are prerequisites for informed engagement (Partidário & Mourato, 2020). Ensuring logistical and technological accessibility is equally critical (Voinov et al., 2022).

Effective participatory processes also produce outputs that are relevant, accessible, and verifiable. Transparent reporting and clear documentation enhance trust and process legitimacy (Reed et al., 2018). Moreover, the integration of these outputs into actual planning decisions is a key indicator of transformative capacity (Partidário & Mourato, 2020).

While objective tools are essential, they must be embedded within broader evaluation strategies that reflect on context, purpose, and long-term effects (Reed et al., 2018; Partidário & Mourato, 2020). Participatory evaluation itself can enhance democratic quality and empower communities (Voinov et al., 2022; Osei-Kyei et al., 2023). Frameworks such as MEPPP (Monitoring and Evaluation of Participatory Planning Processes) aim to support collective learning and address the complexity of knowledge co-production (Kusters et al., 2017).

Subjective evaluation, in turn, focuses on participants' experiences and perceptions, offering a complementary lens to structural analysis. It captures the relational and symbolic dimensions of participation, how citizens feel engaged, heard, and empowered. The literature emphasizes that beyond inclusive mechanisms, perceived authenticity is crucial to meaningful participation (Papadopoulos, 2012; Bussu & Bartels, 2014; Brandsen et al., 2018).

The concept of empowerment is central to subjective evaluation. It refers to individuals' perceived capacity to influence decisions, contribute meaningfully, and act effectively. Empowerment is multidimensional: intrapersonal (self-confidence and perceived efficacy), interactional (understanding and navigating processes), and behavioral (active participation and responsibility) (Zimmerman, 1995; Christens, 2012). These dimensions intersect with trust in institutions (Fung, 2006), personal and collective motivation (Bherer, Gauthier & Simard, 2021), and emotional place attachment (Manzo & Perkins, 2006).

Empowerment is not only individual but also contextual and relational. It reflects how a participatory process fosters authentic engagement, mutual recognition, and shared learning (Fischer, 2012; Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2017). In essence, it is about enabling citizens to move from passive spectatorship to active agency.

Subjective effectiveness thus lies not in strictly measurable parameters, but in the ability to generate meaningful involvement, recognition, and transformative learning (Fischer, 2012; Nabatchi, 2012). These experiences offer a privileged lens to assess whether participants feel empowered, develop new forms of engagement and trust, and perceive their contributions as valued.

Evaluating these elements requires appropriate methodologies that go beyond declared opinions to explore relational dynamics, dialogic quality, and emotional responses (Quick & Feldman, 2011; Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2017; Kapucu, 2021).

Objective and subjective evaluations are complementary and inseparable in assessing participatory effectiveness. Structural analysis reveals key procedural elements—such as timing, accessibility, and transparency—while subjective analysis captures lived experiences, perceptions of agency, and transformative outcomes.

Literature calls for integrated models that link process design to experiential outcomes (Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Bherer et al., 2021), recognizing that procedural features shape participation quality, and that citizens' perceptions, in turn, affect process legitimacy and impact (Kapucu, 2021).

In this light, integrated evaluation emerges as a crucial approach for capturing the complexity of participation. It requires mixed methods, capable of combining quantitative and qualitative, observable and interpretive data, and indicators that reflect both efficiency and civic engagement (Innes & Booher, 2004; Reed et al., 2018).

Only through such an integrated approach can we fully understand the dual nature of participation—as both a democratic arena and a technical device—and promote planning practices that are more equitable, reflective, and oriented toward collective learning.

Compared to existing evaluation frameworks such as the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation or the MEPPP (Monitoring and Evaluation of Participatory Planning Processes), the model proposed in this study offers a more integrated and flexible approach. While these models often prioritize either procedural phases or outcome indicators, our framework explicitly connects objective and subjective dimensions, placing equal emphasis on structural features and civic experiences. The added value lies in the model's capacity to adapt across contexts while maintaining a multidimensional focus that includes institutional design, trust-building, empowerment, and place-based engagement. It is conceived not only as a technical tool for analysis, but also as a reflective device to support the design of more meaningful participatory practices.

In order to clarify the distinctive contribution of the proposed evaluation model, it is useful to compare it with two of the most established frameworks in the field of participatory planning evaluation: the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation and the MEPPP (Monitoring and Evaluation of Participatory Planning Processes).

The IAP2 Spectrum is a widely used tool that classifies public involvement into five levels (Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, Empower). While it provides a practical guide for designing participatory activities, it focuses primarily on the degree of control or influence granted to citizens, offering little insight into the quality or effectiveness of participation in terms of outcomes or experiential depth.

The MEPPP, on the other hand, adopts a more structured approach to monitoring and evaluating participatory processes, with attention to outputs, relevance, and sustainability. It proposes a multi-scalar model capable of assessing both the planning content and participation dynamics. However, MEPPP tends to concentrate on formal and procedural criteria, and while more robust than IAP2, it does not explicitly integrate subjective and experiential dimensions such as trust, empowerment, or place attachment.

By contrast, the framework proposed in this study explicitly aims to bridge this gap by integrating objective structural indicators (e.g. timing, access, use of outputs) with subjective experiential dimensions (e.g. trust, motivation, agency, place attachment). It provides a multidimensional and flexible instrument, adaptable to diverse contexts, and suitable not only for evaluation but also as a co-design support tool for future participatory processes.

As shown in Table 1, the three frameworks differ significantly in their integration level, focus, and intended use.

Table 1: comparative overview of participatory evaluation frameworks.

Framework	Evaluation Focus	Key Dimensions	Level of Integration	Adaptability	Primary Use
IAP2 Spectrum	Participation phase/type	Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, Empower	Low - phase-based classification only	Medium - standardized model	Participation typology and design
MEPPP	Process monitoring and output analysis	Participation levels, outputs, sustainability, inclusiveness	Medium - procedural + some impact focus	High - scalable and modular	Monitoring and evaluation
Proposed Framework	Structural + experiential evaluation	Timing, Access, Trust, Agency, Empowerment, Place Attachment	High - combines objective and subjective	High - adaptable and reflective	Evaluation, learning, and co-design

Methodological proposal

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined in the previous section, this study proposes a methodology to evaluate the effectiveness of participation in urban and territorial planning. The approach adopts a dual perspective, objective and subjective, aimed at constructing an analytical framework that links the structural features of participatory processes with citizens' perceptions and lived experiences.

The objective evaluation focuses on structural and functional characteristics of participatory processes that influence their capacity to include, inform, and empower citizens. A first key dimension is time—not only the overall duration but also the process phasing and its alignment with planning stages. As Healey (1997) argue, a well-paced process fosters meaningful participation and collective reflection, avoiding symbolic or purely consultative forms of engagement.

A second dimension concerns required competences. Clarity of language, accessible content, and potential training opportunities are essential to ensure informed participation. Reducing cognitive asymmetries is central to inclusive processes. Providing clear and accessible information strengthens trust and comprehension (Mahajan et al., 2022), while training enhances participants' ability to contribute constructively, fostering individual and collective empowerment (Yamaguchi et al., 2024).

Accessibility extends beyond physical or organizational factors to include scheduling, communication methods, digital access, and outreach to marginalized groups. Authentic participation requires attention to access inequalities (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015), and inclusive digital tools can expand engagement to underrepresented populations (Pinto et al., 2023).

Another critical factor is the quality of outputs—defined by clarity, relevance, and consistency of results. Effectiveness depends not on the quantity of inputs but on their synthesis, feedback to participants, and transformative potential. Clear, coherent outputs support legitimacy and institutional uptake (Fung, 2006), and effective feedback mechanisms build trust and civic engagement (Mahajan et al., 2022).

Finally, use of outputs measures whether outcomes are integrated into subsequent planning or policy-making phases. This assesses institutional responsiveness and the coherence between participation and implementation. A process becomes transformative when outputs inform real decisions (Smith, 2009; Michels & de Graaf, 2021), marking a shift from symbolic consultation to substantive participation.

Table 2: structural criteria for the objective evaluation of participatory planning processes.

Criteria	Indicators
Time	Overall duration, process phasing, coherence with planning stages
Required Competences	Clarity of content, level of knowledge needed, support provided
Accessibility	Access methods, meeting times, information and digital inclusion
Process Outputs	Clarity, traceability, and relevance of participatory outcomes
Use of Outputs	Degree of integration into subsequent planning or programming

The subjective evaluation acknowledges citizens as active agents and focuses on their perceptions of the participatory experience. Several key dimensions underpin this perspective, while the corresponding structural indicators used to assess these aspects are summarised in Table 2. Trust in the process and institutions emerges through transparency, perceived coherence, and legitimacy of decisions. Transparent communication enhances trust (Fung, 2006), while coherence strengthens procedural legitimacy (Innes & Booher, 2004).

Motivation reflects the reasons driving participation—ranging from civic duty to personal interest or the desire to improve one's community. It is shaped by perceived efficacy and recognition of contributions (Bherer, Gauthier & Simard, 2021).

Agency refers to the perceived capacity to influence outcomes and be heard. It connects to empowerment, a multidimensional construct encompassing self-confidence, understanding of the process, and active engagement. Empowerment strengthens awareness and participation effectiveness (Yamaguchi et al., 2024).

Lastly, place attachment denotes the emotional and symbolic bond with one's environment. This connection fosters participation and care for local spaces. Recent research highlights how place attachment contributes to well-being and resilience (Kamani Fard & Paydar, 2024), making it a critical factor in participatory planning.

These dimensions are interdependent and collectively shape the perceived quality of the participatory process. To assess them, a structured questionnaire is proposed, based on validated or adapted scales from established literature:

- Trust: Measured using a 5-point Likert scale adapted from Fung (2006) and Innes & Booher (2004), focusing on perceived transparency, coherence, and institutional reliability.
- Motivation: Captured through items exploring extrinsic (e.g., civic duty, personal interest) and intrinsic (e.g., satisfaction, perceived contribution) drivers (Bherer et al., 2021).
- Agency: Assessed via perceptions of influence and capacity to express views, based on Christens (2012).
- Empowerment: Measured following Zimmerman's (1995) model, including intrapersonal (self-efficacy), interactional (process understanding), and behavioral (active participation) components.
- Place Attachment: Explored through statements on emotional connection, territorial identity, and care responsibilities (Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Kamani Fard & Paydar, 2024).

Table 3 uses Likert-scale responses (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), preceded by filter questions on process familiarity and participation frequency.

Table 3: dimensions and sample items for subjective evaluation of civic participation experience.

Construct	Sample Items
Trust	"The participatory process was transparent"; "Information provided was coherent and reliable"
Motivation	"I felt motivated to improve my community"; "My contribution could make a difference"
Place Attachment	"I feel emotionally connected to where I live"; "This place is part of my identity"
Agency	"My opinion was listened to and considered"; "I played an active role in decision-making"
Empowerment	"I feel more competent after participating"; "I gained tools to influence future decisions"

As highlighted by Fung (2006) and Innes & Booher (2004), effective participation balances procedural adequacy with participants' perceptions of being heard and valued. Baiocchi & Ganuza (2017) further show how public recognition of participants' views strengthens trust and agency. Similarly, Manzo & Perkins (2006) demonstrate that place attachment deepens civic engagement, especially when coupled with a participatory context that fosters empowerment.

Potential applications and critical reflections

This study offers a preliminary theoretical framework for evaluating the effectiveness of participatory processes in urban and territorial planning. As an exploratory contribution, it does not yet include empirical validation but is intended as a foundation for future applied research. Similar to other conceptual or methodological studies in the planning field, the aim is to develop a coherent evaluative model that can be tested, refined, and adapted across different case studies and territorial contexts (see e.g., Innes & Booher, 2004; Reed et al., 2018).

Recognizing the active role of local communities in territorial governance is essential to address the complex challenges of contemporary societies. Participation should not be confined to token consultation; rather, it must be seen as a structural component of governance, capable of enabling citizens to act as informed and responsible agents. This shift moves beyond the spectator-actor dichotomy, placing communities at the center

of local development strategies. Empowerment, in this perspective, is not a by-product but a core outcome of participatory inclusion, fostering civic awareness, decision-making autonomy, and access to tools for social and territorial transformation (Rota, 2023).

From this standpoint, territory should be conceived not merely as a physical space but as a common good requiring sustainable, inclusive, and collaborative management. Valuing local resources and strengthening cooperation networks emerge as crucial strategies for building cohesive and identity-driven development models. Promoting collaboration between public and private actors, and across urban and rural settings, is key to fostering resilient territorial systems. These dynamics call for the establishment of community learning networks to cultivate a culture of sustainability and active citizenship, equipping communities with knowledge and skills for collective decision-making.

In this view, sustainability becomes not only a goal but a guiding principle for reshaping territorial governance. It functions as a heuristic and educational device that steers collective choices toward fairer and more enduring models of coexistence. Addressing socio-economic transformations requires a holistic approach, where endogenous knowledge is integrated with participatory governance and adaptive management. Within this framework, cultural heritage plays a strategic role—not as a static legacy but as a dynamic force capable of enabling regeneration processes and reinforcing collective identity (Carta, 1999).

Future research should focus on how participatory governance can reframe the relationship between people and place, particularly in contexts affected by deterritorialization and the erosion of local identity. Reinforcing the idea of territory as a “common home” (Tanca, 2015) involves recognizing it as a relational space where social and cultural capital can generate resilience and self-determination. The organization of space according to local specificities and the valorization of endogenous resources are essential for ensuring long-term cultural and social reproduction.

Active participation is therefore a decisive element for building inclusive and resilient governance models. Through deliberative processes and participatory research methods, communities can cultivate a deeper sense of belonging (Ilovan, 2022). The interplay between territorial identity and place attachment becomes central in planning, as emotional and symbolic bonds to place directly affect levels of civic engagement. Shared narratives and collective memory transform space into an essential component of community life.

In this light, public policies must account for the relational dimension of governance, acknowledging how interactions between individuals, groups, and institutions influence territorial attachment. Standardized approaches risk neglecting the cultural and symbolic specificity of places. Qualitative methodologies—such as in-depth interviews and discourse analysis—are increasingly recognized as valuable tools to explore the emotional and experiential dimensions of civic engagement.

Future research directions should also address how global dynamics and growing mobility are reshaping local identities. Urbanization, labor market transformations, and digital interconnectivity are altering the ways individuals relate to their environments. It is therefore necessary to explore the ambivalent, and at times conflictual, relationships people develop with their lived spaces. This awareness is key to designing planning strategies that are more sensitive, inclusive, and attuned to local needs and experiences (Ilovan, 2022).

Despite the absence of empirical validation in this study, the proposed framework has the potential for a wide range of applications. For instance, it could be applied to participatory budgeting processes in medium-sized European cities, where evaluating both procedural transparency and residents’ sense of agency is crucial. Alternatively, it could provide a framework for the evaluation of place-based cultural regeneration projects in rural areas, where community attachment and trust in institutions are significant variables. The following hypothetical applications illustrate how the framework can be adapted to different participatory settings, serving both as a diagnostic and a design-support tool.

This work is intended to be conceptual in nature and is presented as a proposal. It is argued that the proposal provides a foundation for a more nuanced understanding of participation as both a technical and democratic process.

It is imperative that future empirical studies are conducted in order to test the framework, evaluate its applicability across diverse contexts, and refine its indicators to ensure relevance, reliability, and transformative potential.

While the proposed roadmap outlines a coherent path towards empirical validation, further reflection is required on two critical aspects: scalability and the active involvement of local actors in the evaluation process.

Firstly, the scalability of the framework will be addressed through a modular and adaptable design. The framework has been designed to function at different scales, including project, neighbourhood, municipal and regional levels. It achieves this by allowing the selective use of indicators based on contextual relevance. The calibration of structural dimensions, such as timing or accessibility, is contingent upon the complexity of the process. Conversely, experiential components, including trust and place attachment, can be adapted through the utilisation of shorter or more in-depth instruments. Furthermore, the utilisation of digital tools and online platforms will be investigated to enhance the scope of data collection, particularly in multi-site or cross-country applications.

Secondly, the involvement of institutional stakeholders and local communities will be pivotal in both the testing and refinement phases. The framework is not merely intended as a tool “for” evaluation, but as a device “with” and “through” participants. In order to achieve this objective, the empirical phase will incorporate participatory validation methods, such as co-design workshops, focus groups, and deliberative feedback sessions with public officials, community leaders, and citizens. These interactions are designed to ensure contextual calibration of indicators, enhance legitimacy, and cultivate a culture of shared learning around participatory quality.

The dual strategy of modular scalability and embedded stakeholder engagement is set to be pivotal in ensuring the relevance, usability, and transformative potential of the framework across diverse territorial and institutional settings.

To guide future research and application, Table 4 presents a phased roadmap detailing the objectives, methodologies, and expected outcomes for each step of the empirical validation process.

Tables 4: future research pathways and empirical validation roadmap.

Phase	Objective	Methodology	Expected Outcome
1. Contextualization	Identify suitable case studies across different urban and rural settings	Case selection based on diversity of governance contexts and participatory models	Comparative insight into context-sensitive variables
2. Instrument Development	Refine and operationalize indicators from the proposed framework	Pilot testing of questionnaires and interview guides; expert validation via Delphi method	Reliable tools for assessing structural and experiential dimensions
3. Data Collection	Apply the evaluation framework to real participatory processes	Mixed-method approach: surveys, interviews, participant observation, document analysis	Comprehensive datasets combining quantitative and qualitative evidence
4. Analytical Integration	Test relationships between structural variables and perceived effectiveness	Statistical analysis (e.g. SEM, regression) + narrative synthesis of qualitative insights	Validation or refinement of hypotheses on effectiveness drivers
5. Cross-Case Comparison	Identify patterns and divergences across contexts	Comparative case study methodology	Generalizable lessons and adaptive model improvements
6. Participatory Validation	Involve local actors in reviewing results and recommendations	Feedback workshops, focus groups with stakeholders	Enhanced legitimacy and usability of the evaluation tool
7. Dissemination and Scaling	Share findings with academic, institutional, and civic audiences	Publications, policy briefs, training modules	Uptake of the model in planning practices and policies

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