



**From Consultation to Collective Choice: Decision-Oriented
Participation and Territorial Policy Capacity in Place-Based
Governance**

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Structured Abstract

Purpose

This paper addresses a recurring paradox in participatory place-based governance: despite the widespread institutionalisation of participatory mechanisms in contemporary public policy, many participatory processes generate extensive inputs but limited strategic coherence and implementation capacity. Rather than focusing on the presence of participation, the study investigates its governance effects. The purpose is to clarify how different forms of participation shape decision-making processes and territorial outcomes, and to examine how participation can contribute—or fail to contribute—to the development of territorial policy capacity.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper develops a conceptual framework distinguishing consultative participation from decision-oriented participation. This framework is applied through an analytical examination of the RESCO (Adding Value to Resources for Competitive Sustainability) approach, treated as a critical case. The case is used to illustrate how participatory governance can embed decision-making mechanisms, rather than to provide an empirical evaluation of policy outcomes. The analysis is theoretical and interpretive, using RESCO to illuminate the governance mechanisms often absent in participatory place-based policies, rather than assessing it as a best practice or policy instrument.

Findings

The analysis shows that consultative participation, while inclusive, tends to accumulate territorial knowledge without converting it into binding strategic choices. In contrast, decision-oriented participation embeds mechanisms of prioritisation, aggregation, and strategic simplification, enabling collective strategic action. The findings highlight territorial policy capacity as a governance outcome that depends less on participation per se and more on institutionalised decision-making arrangements that structure how participation operates.

Research limitations/implications

The study is based on a conceptual analysis supported by an illustrative critical case, which limits empirical generalisation. Future research could test the proposed framework across different territorial and institutional contexts and explore the political conditions under which decision-oriented participation is feasible. The paper opens a research agenda on participation as a decision-making technology and on territorial policy capacity as an evaluative criterion for participatory governance.

Practical implications

For policymakers and practitioners, the paper suggests that designing participatory processes around inclusiveness alone is insufficient. Effective place-based policies require institutional mechanisms that force prioritisation, coordination, and strategic simplification. The findings imply a shift in policy design from consultation-oriented formats toward participation structures explicitly linked to decision-making and long-term strategic commitment. These mechanisms include structured prioritisation procedures, transparent aggregation rules, and institutional arrangements that link participatory deliberation to binding strategic choices.

Social implications

The paper highlights potential social trade-offs associated with decision-oriented participation, including reduced inclusiveness and increased political conflict. While such arrangements may enhance strategic capacity, they can also marginalise certain voices. Recognising these implications is crucial for balancing democratic legitimacy and effective governance within multilevel and territorially diverse policy systems.

Originality/value

The paper contributes to governance and public policy debates by reframing participation not simply as a normative democratic principle but as a governance design problem with distinct decision-making effects. It reconceptualises territorial knowledge as a governance challenge rather than a data deficit and introduces territorial policy capacity as a novel criterion for evaluating participatory place-based policies. This perspective moves beyond normative accounts of participation and provides a decision-centred lens for analysing participatory governance.

1.Introduction

Over the past two decades, participation and place-based approaches have become central pillars of contemporary public policy (Beer et al., 2020; Brown & Weber, 2013; Rong et al., 2025). Across policy domains characterised by spatial heterogeneity and distributive tensions—such as territorial development, sustainability transitions, and environmental governance—participation is increasingly institutionalised as both a normative principle and a functional requirement (Avelino et al., 2016; Gustafson & Hertting, 2017; Xu et al., 2025). Participatory arrangements are expected to enhance democratic legitimacy, mobilise local knowledge, and improve policy effectiveness by aligning public intervention with territorial needs and capacities (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Emerson et al., 2012). However, while participation has been extensively studied as a democratic principle and as a mechanism for knowledge mobilisation, less attention has been paid to how different participatory designs structure decision-making within governance processes.

Yet, despite its diffusion and formal consolidation, participatory place-based policies frequently produce ambivalent governance outcomes. Across different territorial and institutional contexts, policy strategies often display weak prioritisation, fragmented intervention logics, and limited implementation capacity (Van Popering-Verkerk et al., 2022). Participatory processes generate extensive inputs—diagnostics, visions, and project ideas—but these rarely translate into coherent strategic hierarchies or binding decisions (Turnhout et al., 2010). As a result, participation may coexist with persistent coordination failures and fragile policy capacity, raising questions about how participatory processes actually shape collective decision-making. (Bua & Bussu, 2020).

This paradox motivates the paper. Rather than asking whether participation occurs, we ask what participation does within governance processes. Existing scholarship shows that participatory outcomes depend not only on who participates but also on how participation is institutionally connected to decision-making structures (Fung, 2015; Bobbio, 2019; Ianniello et al., 2019). However, its effects on collective decision-making capacity remain insufficiently theorised (Krick, 2022).

We argue that the limitations of participatory place-based governance cannot be explained solely by reference to insufficient resources, weak indicators, or administrative shortcomings. Instead, they reflect a more fundamental governance problem: participation is predominantly institutionalised as consultation, while decision-making authority and prioritisation remain weakly embedded in participatory arrangements. Territorial knowledge is collected, articulated, and validated, but rarely transformed into collectively accepted priorities that constrain future action. This diagnosis points to a broader theoretical puzzle in participation and governance scholarship: why the institutionalisation of participation has not translated into stronger collective decision-making capacity in place-based policy arenas.

We argue that this gap stems less from deficits in information, resources, or coordination, and more from a design mismatch. Participatory arrangements are often geared towards voice and deliberation,

while governance demands require closure, prioritisation, and enforceable strategic orientation. By theorising participation as a decision-making technology, the paper specifies the mechanisms through which participatory designs can (or cannot) generate territorial policy capacity.

Building on this diagnosis, the paper advances a conceptual distinction between consultative participation and decision-oriented participation (Fung, 2006). This distinction is not intended as a normative hierarchy of participatory models but as an analytical lens for examining how participatory arrangements structure collective choice. Consultative participation privileges inclusiveness, expression, and deliberation, but typically avoids explicit prioritisation and trade-offs. It allows heterogeneous knowledge claims to be voiced, yet leaves unresolved how these claims are aggregated and translated into strategic choices. Decision-oriented participation, by contrast, refers to participatory arrangements that require actors not only to contribute information or preferences, but to engage in structured processes of ranking, aggregation, and strategic simplification. Such arrangements embed decision-making functions within participation itself, thereby reducing strategic ambiguity.

The paper further argues that this distinction has important implications for how territorial knowledge and policy capacity are understood. Rather than treating knowledge as a data problem to be solved through better indicators or evidence-based tools, we conceptualise territorial knowledge as a governance problem. Knowledge becomes policy-relevant not when it is accumulated, but when it is processed through institutionalised mechanisms that force prioritisation and make trade-offs explicit. From this perspective, participation is not merely a channel for inclusion, but a technology that shapes how knowledge is filtered, weighted, and authorised. In this sense, the governance value of participation depends less on the quantity of information generated than on the institutional processes through which knowledge is prioritised and translated into strategic commitments.

To capture the governance effects of different participatory designs, the paper introduces the concept of territorial policy capacity. Territorial policy capacity is defined as the collective ability of actors within a territory to diagnose constraints and opportunities, prioritise interventions coherently, coordinate across sectors and institutional levels, and sustain strategic action over time (Howlett & Ramesh, 2016; Connell et al., 2022). While existing policy capacity literature has primarily focused on the analytical, operational, and political capabilities of public administrations, the concept of territorial policy capacity emphasises the collective capacity of heterogeneous territorial actors to transform distributed knowledge and preferences into shared strategic priorities. Participation contributes to policy capacity not by virtue of inclusiveness alone, but through its capacity to structure collective choice under conditions of scarcity and conflict.

The argument is developed through an analytical examination of the RESCO - Adding Value to Resources for Competitive Sustainability – (ILS LEDA, 2020) approach as a critical case. RESCO is analytically relevant because it explicitly formalises decision-making mechanisms within participatory processes, including prioritisation procedures, aggregation rules, and structured processes for translating collective assessments into strategic action plans. Rather than evaluating RESCO as a policy instrument or advocating its replication, the paper uses it to illuminate what many participatory frameworks systematically lack: institutionalised mechanisms that require actors to accept prioritisation and strategic simplification. By analysing RESCO as a governance arrangement, the paper demonstrates how participation can function as a decision-making technology—and why such designs remain politically demanding and relatively rare.

The paper makes three main contributions to the literature on participatory governance and public policy. Rather than focusing primarily on inclusiveness or deliberative quality, the paper shifts analytical attention to the decision-making architecture embedded in participatory arrangements. First, it reframes participation not as a binary condition—participatory versus non-participatory—but as a spectrum of governance arrangements with distinct decision-making effects. Second, it reconceptualises territorial knowledge as a governance challenge rather than a technical input problem. Third, it introduces territorial policy capacity as a key outcome for evaluating participatory governance in place-based policy contexts. The paper concludes by discussing the political costs,

scope conditions, and research implications of decision-oriented participation within multilevel governance systems.

2. Participation, place-based governance, and the limits of consultation

2.1 Participation in place-based and territorial policy

Participation has become a defining feature of place-based and territorial policy, particularly in contexts characterised by spatial heterogeneity, complex socio-economic challenges, and multilevel governance arrangements (Barca, 2008; Barca et al., 2012). Across policy domains such as territorial development and sustainability transitions, participatory governance is expected to align public intervention with local conditions by mobilising contextual knowledge and fostering ownership among territorial actors (Garcilazo, 2025).

A substantial literature has also distinguished between different modes and degrees of participation, ranging from consultation and stakeholder engagement to deliberative and collaborative governance arrangements, highlighting how institutional design shapes the scope and effects of participatory processes (Fung, 2006; Ianniello et al., 2019). Questions of prioritisation, sequencing, and collective choice are often assumed to follow automatically from inclusion and deliberation, or are displaced to later stages of implementation.

2.2 Participation, knowledge, and evidence in governance

A parallel strand of scholarship has examined participation as a mechanism for improving the knowledge base of public policy. Participatory processes are expected to complement formal indicators and expert analyses by incorporating local, experiential, and contextual forms of knowledge (Cash et al., 2003; Haas & Stevens, 2015). In place-based policy, this epistemic dimension is often emphasised, as territorial challenges are seen as too complex and context-specific to be captured through standardised data alone (McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2015).

This literature has highlighted important tensions between expert-driven and participatory forms of knowledge production. While participatory approaches can enrich diagnostics and reveal locally salient issues, they also generate heterogeneous and sometimes incommensurable knowledge claims. As a result, the problem of knowledge use in governance is not simply one of access or availability, but of selection and translation (Turnhout et al., 2014; Juhola et al., 2024). This insight suggests that the governance challenge lies not only in generating knowledge through participation but also in structuring institutional processes that translate heterogeneous inputs into actionable priorities.

2.3 The missing link: prioritisation and policy capacity

Taken together, these strands of literature point to a recurring limitation in participatory place-based governance: the weak institutionalisation of prioritisation (Gjaltema et al., 2020). While participation is widely mobilised to broaden agendas and enrich diagnostics, it is rarely designed to support binding strategic choice (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

This gap has important implications for how policy capacity is understood. Capacity is frequently discussed in terms of resources, expertise, or administrative competence, but less often in terms of the collective ability to make and sustain strategic choices. Where participatory arrangements avoid prioritisation, policy capacity may remain constrained even in the presence of extensive participation and rich knowledge bases (Howlett & Ramesh, 2016). The literature thus leaves unresolved a central governance question: how can participation contribute not only to legitimacy and knowledge mobilisation, but also to the production of coherent priorities under conditions of scarcity and conflict?

This paper addresses this gap by shifting analytical attention from participation understood primarily as consultation to participation conceptualised as a form of decision-making design. The following section develops a conceptual framework that distinguishes between consultative and decision-

oriented participation and introduces territorial policy capacity as a key outcome for evaluating participatory governance in place-based policy contexts.

3. Conceptual framework: participation, prioritisation, and territorial policy capacity

3.1 Participation as a governance arrangement

Participation is commonly treated in public policy as a procedural requirement or a normative attribute of good governance. In this view, participation is expected to enhance legitimacy, transparency, and policy learning by widening access to decision-making processes. While this understanding captures important democratic aspirations, it obscures a crucial analytical point: participation is not merely an add-on to governance, but a governance arrangement in its own right (Fung, 2006).

As a governance arrangement, participation structures interactions among actors, shapes the production and circulation of knowledge, and redistributes authority within policy processes. Different participatory designs therefore generate different governance effects. Participation does not simply transmit preferences or information into pre-existing decision-making structures; it actively configures how problems are defined, which claims are authorised, and how collective choices are (or are not) made (Stone, 2022). This perspective aligns with scholarship emphasising the institutional design of participatory governance, which highlights how procedural rules, representation structures, and decision protocols shape the substantive effects of participation (Fung, 2006; Ianniello et al., 2019).

3.2 Consultative participation and the limits of aggregation

The dominant form of participation in contemporary public policy can be characterised as consultative participation. Consultative participation invites stakeholders and citizens to express views, contribute knowledge, and comment on policy proposals, typically through workshops, hearings, consultations, or deliberative forums (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). Its primary functions are inclusiveness, transparency, and agenda broadening.

Consultative participation performs these functions effectively, but it also exhibits structural limitations in contexts that require strategic prioritisation. Because consultative arrangements privilege expression over choice, they tend to generate extensive and heterogeneous sets of claims (Young, 2002). However, they do not provide robust mechanisms for aggregating these claims into binding priorities. Participation thus produces abundance—of knowledge, preferences, and aspirations—without resolving how these inputs translate into binding decisions (Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007).

This dynamic is particularly visible in place-based policy contexts. Territorial diagnostics often combine statistical indicators with stakeholder inputs, producing comprehensive accounts of local needs and opportunities (Horlings & Marsden, 2011). However, when participation remains consultative, prioritisation is postponed or displaced. Difficult choices regarding sequencing, exclusion, and trade-offs are deferred to later stages of implementation or absorbed through informal negotiation among administrative and political elites (Swyngedouw, 2005).

As a result, consultative participation may enhance legitimacy while simultaneously weakening strategic coherence. It allows policy processes to remain open-ended, but at the cost of leaving fundamental decisions unresolved. From a governance perspective, this outcome reflects not a failure of participation per se, but a mismatch between participatory design and the decision-making demands of place-based policy.

3.3 Decision-oriented participation: embedding prioritisation within participation

To address this mismatch, the paper introduces the concept of decision-oriented participation (Fung, 2006). Decision-oriented participation refers to participatory arrangements that explicitly embed decision-making functions within participation itself. The concept is used here as an analytical

category rather than a normative prescription, allowing comparison between participatory designs that privilege deliberation and those that explicitly structure collective choice. Rather than limiting participation to the articulation of claims, these arrangements require actors to engage in structured processes of prioritisation, aggregation, and strategic simplification.

Decision-oriented participation is characterised by three interrelated features.

First, it entails obligatory prioritisation. Participants are required to rank issues, needs, or interventions, thereby confronting scarcity and acknowledging that not all claims can be addressed simultaneously (March & Olsen, 2010). Prioritisation transforms participation from a forum of expression into an arena of choice.

Second, decision-oriented participation relies on aggregation rules. Individual assessments are translated into collective priorities through shared criteria and transparent procedures (Mansbridge et al., 2012). These rules constrain discretionary interpretation and reduce the scope for strategic ambiguity by making trade-offs explicit and contestable.

Third, decision-oriented participation involves strategic simplification. Complex and heterogeneous inputs are clustered into a limited number of strategic domains or priorities. This simplification does not eliminate complexity, but renders it governable by aligning priorities with institutional responsibilities and implementation capacity (Lindblom, 2018).

Together, these features distinguish decision-oriented participation from consultative arrangements. While consultative participation accumulates inputs, decision-oriented participation produces outputs that constrain future action. Participation thus functions not only as a channel for inclusion, but as a decision-making technology.

This distinction also clarifies how decision-oriented participation differs from related governance concepts. Collaborative governance primarily emphasises joint problem-solving, coordination, and shared implementation among public and non-public actors. Deliberative governance focuses on reason-giving, communicative inclusion, and the legitimacy of public reasoning. Decision-oriented participation overlaps with both traditions, but differs in its analytical focus: it examines whether participatory arrangements embed mechanisms of prioritisation, aggregation, and closure capable of transforming heterogeneous inputs into collectively binding strategic choices. Its distinctive concern is therefore not only whether actors deliberate or collaborate, but whether participation produces authorised priorities under conditions of scarcity and trade-offs.

Dimension	Consultative participation	Collaborative governance	Deliberative governance	Decision-oriented participation
Primary function	Voice, inclusion, information gathering	Joint problem-solving and coordination	Public reasoning and legitimacy	Prioritisation and collective choice
Core mechanism	Consultation and stakeholder input	Negotiation, coordination, co-production	Deliberation, justification, reason-giving	Ranking, aggregation, strategic simplification
Treatment of trade-offs	Often deferred or weakly specified	Negotiated among participating actors	Discussed through deliberative exchange	Explicitly institutionalised through prioritisation
Type of output	Views, diagnostics, proposals, feedback	Joint plans, partnerships, implementation arrangements	Legitimated preferences or reasoned positions	Binding or quasi-binding strategic priorities
Relationship to decision-making	Indirect or advisory	Shared but often implementation-oriented	Legitimacy-oriented	Directly embedded in participatory design
Main risk	Input accumulation without strategic closure	Coordination without clear prioritisation	Deliberation without decision closure	Exclusion, conflict, and epistemic selectivity

Table n.1 Comparing participatory governance concepts

The purpose of this comparison is analytical rather than normative. The framework does not suggest that decision-oriented participation is superior to collaborative or deliberative governance, but that it performs a different governance function.

3.4 Participation as performative governance

Understanding participation as a decision-making technology also highlights its performative effects. Participatory arrangements do not merely reflect pre-existing interests or knowledge; they actively shape actors' roles, identities, and expectations (Turnhout et al., 2010; Bua & Bussu, 2020). By requiring prioritisation, decision-oriented participation produces categories of relevance, establishes hierarchies of needs, and renders certain claims more actionable than others.

These performative effects have important governance implications. Prioritisation inevitably entails exclusion: some issues are elevated, others are marginalised or deferred (Fraser, 2007). These processes may also reproduce or reshape existing power asymmetries, as actors with greater organisational resources, expertise, or institutional authority may exert disproportionate influence over how priorities are framed and aggregated. Decision-oriented participation therefore redistributes not only attention, but also responsibility and political visibility. Choices become attributable to collective processes rather than to opaque administrative or political bargaining.

This performativity distinguishes decision-oriented participation from technocratic decision-making. Prioritisation is not imposed hierarchically, but emerges through structured interaction. At the same time, it differentiates decision-oriented participation from deliberative ideals that seek to avoid closure. Closure is not a failure of participation in this framework, but a necessary condition for strategic capacity (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2019).

3.5 Democratic and epistemic trade-offs

Embedding prioritisation within participation introduces unavoidable democratic and epistemic trade-offs. On the democratic dimension, decision-oriented participation may limit inclusiveness by requiring selective representation, structured interaction, and acceptance of exclusion (Turnhout et al., 2010; Bua & Bussu, 2020). Not all voices can carry equal weight in prioritisation without undermining the very possibility of choice (Follesdal, 2010).

On the epistemic dimension, prioritisation acts as a filter (Krick, 2022). It privileges certain forms of knowledge—those that can be aggregated, compared, and generalised—while marginalising idiosyncratic or non-commensurable claims (Stirling, 2008). This selectivity can enhance the usability of knowledge for decision-making, but it also risks excluding perspectives that are difficult to translate into prioritised categories (Cash et al., 2003).

Crucially, these trade-offs are not design failures, but constitutive features of decision-oriented participation. The democratic and epistemic value of participation cannot be maximised simultaneously. Instead, participatory arrangements involve choices about which values to privilege and under which conditions. Recognising these trade-offs allows for a more realistic assessment of participatory governance and avoids normative overreach.

3.6 Territorial policy capacity as an outcome of participation

The distinction between consultative and decision-oriented participation has direct implications for territorial policy capacity. Territorial policy capacity is understood here as the collective ability of actors within a territory to diagnose constraints and opportunities, prioritise interventions coherently, coordinate across sectors and institutional levels, and sustain strategic action over time (Howlett & Rayner, 2007; Christensen et al., 2016).

While policy capacity literature has traditionally focused on the analytical, operational, and political capacities of governments and public administrations. By contrast, territorial policy capacity emphasises the collective capacity of heterogeneous territorial actors—including public authorities, private stakeholders, and civil society organisations—to translate distributed knowledge into shared strategic priorities. In this sense, territorial policy capacity extends existing policy capacity

frameworks by highlighting the governance conditions under which collective decision-making can emerge within territorially embedded and multi-actor policy arenas.

Consultative participation contributes to policy capacity primarily through inclusiveness and knowledge mobilisation. However, without embedded prioritisation, these contributions often remain latent. Decision-oriented participation, by contrast, contributes to policy capacity by structuring collective choice. It transforms participation into a mechanism for aligning knowledge, authority, and action (Sørensen & Torfing, 2011).

Territorial policy capacity thus emerges not from participation alone, but from the design of participation. Where participatory arrangements institutionalise prioritisation and aggregation, they can enhance strategic coherence and ownership. Where they remain consultative, policy capacity is likely to remain fragmented, even in the presence of extensive participation (Emerson et al., 2012).

3.7 Analytical implications

This conceptual framework yields three analytical implications. First, participation should be analysed as a variable governance arrangement rather than as a uniform normative good. Second, the effects of participation depend on whether decision-making functions are embedded within participatory processes or displaced to other arenas. Third, territorial policy capacity provides a useful lens for evaluating participatory governance beyond procedural criteria.

The next section applies this framework to the RESCO approach as a critical case. By examining how RESCO institutionalises prioritisation and aggregation, the analysis illustrates both the potential and the political costs of decision-oriented participation in place-based policy contexts.

3.8 Approach and case rationale.

The paper develops a conceptual argument through an analytical examination of the RESCO (Adding Value to Resources for Competitive Sustainability) approach as a critical case of decision-oriented participation. RESCO is treated as a critical case because it deliberately internalises within participation a set of functions that mainstream participatory place-based frameworks often leave under-specified—namely prioritisation, aggregation, and strategic simplification. In addition, the approach provides a relatively explicit operationalisation of prioritisation and aggregation mechanisms within participatory processes, making it analytically suitable for illustrating the governance mechanisms discussed in the conceptual framework. The analysis is based primarily on documentary materials, including methodological manuals, guidelines, and operational documentation produced by the RESCO developers and implementing organisations, complemented by the reconstruction of the approach's procedural logic and decision rules. The aim is not to provide an outcome evaluation, impact assessment, or causal attribution of policy effects, but to use RESCO to clarify the institutional mechanisms through which participatory designs can produce binding priorities and, in turn, strengthen territorial policy capacity. Accordingly, the paper's claims are bounded to the level of governance design and mechanism specification; future empirical research is needed to assess external validity across diverse territorial and political contexts and to examine implementation dynamics, power asymmetries, and distributive effects in practice.

Figure 1 summarises the analytical framework developed in this section, illustrating how different participatory designs shape the relationship between participation and territorial policy capacity.



Figure 1 Consultative and decision-oriented participation as alternative governance designs and their implications for territorial policy capacity. Our elaboration Mermaid Software

4. RESCO as a critical case of decision-oriented participation

4.1 Why RESCO as a critical case

The RESCO (Adding Value to Resources for Competitive Sustainability) approach is analysed as a critical case because it explicitly embeds prioritisation, aggregation, and strategic simplification within participatory processes. It is not treated as a representative case, a best practice, or a policy instrument to be replicated, but as an analytical device for examining how participation can be institutionally designed to perform decision-making functions (Fung, 2006).

RESCO is particularly relevant because it departs from mainstream participatory place-based frameworks, which often emphasise inclusiveness, consultation, and the articulation of local knowledge while leaving prioritisation and strategic choice weakly specified (Ansell & Gash, 2008). By contrast, RESCO requires participatory processes to confront scarcity, exclusion, and strategic simplification. Its analytical value therefore lies in showing what becomes visible when participation is designed to produce binding priorities rather than open-ended inputs.

4.2 Institutionalising prioritisation within participation

At the core of the RESCO approach lies a structured participatory process that obliges actors to identify, assess, and rank territorial resources and development options. In operational terms, this process is typically organised through structured participatory arenas—such as value chain focus groups and inter-sectoral working groups—in which stakeholders collectively assess territorial resources and development options before translating these assessments into ranked priorities. Unlike consultative arrangements, where stakeholders contribute information without confronting trade-offs, RESCO requires participants to move from diagnosis to prioritisation within the same institutional setting.

This design has two important governance effects. First, prioritisation is made explicit and unavoidable. Participants are required to agree on a limited set of strategic priorities, thereby acknowledging that not all resources or sectors can be addressed simultaneously. Scarcity is not externalised or deferred, but internalised within the participatory process itself.

Second, prioritisation is collective rather than individual. While actors enter the process with heterogeneous perspectives and interests, RESCO translates these inputs into shared rankings through structured interaction and aggregation rules. This reduces strategic ambiguity and limits the scope for later reinterpretation of participatory outputs by administrative or political authorities.

4.3 Aggregation, strategic simplification, and knowledge filtering

RESCO also illustrates how decision-oriented participation performs strategic simplification. Territorial contexts are characterised by complex and overlapping challenges spanning economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Participatory diagnostics often reflect this complexity, producing comprehensive but unwieldy accounts of territorial conditions.

Through its focus on ranking and clustering, RESCO reduces this complexity into a manageable number of strategic domains. These procedures correspond to the aggregation and strategic simplification mechanisms described in the conceptual framework above, illustrating how participatory inputs can be transformed into a limited set of collective priorities. This simplification does not imply a denial of complexity, but a reconfiguration of it into categories that can be aligned with institutional responsibilities and implementation capacities.

Crucially, this process involves knowledge filtering. Certain types of knowledge—those that can be compared, generalised, and linked to strategic priorities—gain prominence, while others are marginalised or deferred. This filtering enhances the actionability of knowledge, but it also reveals the epistemic selectivity inherent in decision-oriented participation.

4.4 Performative effects and the redistribution of responsibility

By embedding prioritisation and aggregation within participation, RESCO generates performative governance effects.

Prioritisation assigns political visibility to certain issues and actors, while rendering others less central (Turnhout et al., 2010). It also redistributes responsibility for strategic choices. Decisions emerge from a collective process rather than from opaque administrative negotiations, making outcomes more attributable but also more contestable.

These performative effects help explain why decision-oriented participation is politically demanding. Requiring actors to accept prioritisation entails acknowledging losses as well as gains. Participation thus shifts from a low-cost exercise in inclusion to a higher-stakes arena of strategic commitment.

4.5 Democratic and epistemic tensions in the RESCO case

The RESCO case also illustrates the democratic and epistemic tensions inherent in decision-oriented participation. On the democratic side, the requirement to prioritise constrains inclusiveness. Participation must be structured, time-bounded, and selective in order to produce decisions. This challenges deliberative ideals that emphasise openness and ongoing inclusion.

On the epistemic side, prioritisation privileges certain forms of knowledge while marginalising others. In addition, actors with greater organisational resources or technical expertise may exert stronger influence over how priorities are framed and ranked, highlighting the role of power asymmetries within participatory decision-making processes. Local experiential knowledge that does not easily translate into ranked priorities may be sidelined, even if it remains socially or politically significant. At the same time, the filtering of knowledge enhances coherence and reduces information overload.

These tensions are not accidental by-products of the RESCO approach, but reflect fundamental trade-offs in participatory governance design. The case demonstrates that enhancing decision-making capacity through participation requires accepting limits on both democratic inclusiveness and epistemic pluralism.

4.6 Implications of the case for territorial policy capacity

Viewed through the conceptual framework developed above, the RESCO case illustrates how decision-oriented participation can support territorial policy capacity by institutionalising prioritisation, aggregation, and strategic simplification. It shows that participation contributes to strategic capacity not through knowledge mobilisation alone, but when participatory arrangements convert heterogeneous inputs into collective priorities and coordinated action.

At the same time, the case confirms that such capacity-building has political and epistemic costs. Decision-oriented participation increases the visibility of trade-offs, exposes conflicts, and may marginalise claims that do not translate easily into ranked priorities. As a critical case, RESCO therefore does not demonstrate the effectiveness of a specific development methodology, but clarifies the institutional conditions under which participatory governance can become a decision-making technology.

5. Implications for governance and public policy

5.1 Rethinking participation as a policy instrument

The conceptual distinction between consultative and decision-oriented participation has direct implications for how participation is understood and deployed as a policy instrument. Participation is often treated as a generic governance good, assumed to enhance legitimacy, knowledge, and effectiveness simultaneously. The analysis developed in this paper challenges this assumption by showing that participatory arrangements differ fundamentally in the functions they perform.

From a governance perspective, participation should be analysed not as a uniform procedural requirement, but as an instrument whose effects depend on its institutional design (Fung, 2006). From a policy design perspective, this implies that participatory processes require explicit rules for prioritisation, aggregation, and closure if they are expected to contribute to strategic decision-making. Consultative participation primarily performs expressive and legitimising functions, while decision-oriented participation performs decision-making and capacity-building functions. Treating these designs as interchangeable obscures the trade-offs involved and contributes to unrealistic expectations about what participation can achieve.

This implies that debates about participatory governance should shift from questions of presence and intensity—how much participation is enough—to questions of function and design: what is participation expected to do within a given policy context, and at what cost?

5.2 Implications for place-based and territorial policy

The findings of this paper are particularly relevant for place-based and territorial policy, where participation is routinely invoked as a means of aligning policy interventions with local conditions. In such contexts, the accumulation of territorial knowledge is often prioritised, while mechanisms for translating that knowledge into strategic choice remain underdeveloped (Barca et al., 2012).

The analysis suggests that the contribution of participation to territorial policy capacity depends on the institutional mechanisms through which territorial knowledge is translated into collective priorities. Where participatory processes remain primarily consultative, they may enrich territorial diagnostics while leaving strategic coherence unresolved. By contrast, participatory arrangements that embed prioritisation and aggregation rules are better positioned to support coordinated territorial action. This does not imply that decision-oriented participation should replace consultative arrangements. Rather, it highlights the importance of functional differentiation within participatory architectures. Different stages of policy-making may require different participatory designs, and conflating these functions risks overburdening participation with incompatible expectations.

5.3 Knowledge, evidence, and strategic simplification

The paper also contributes to ongoing debates about knowledge and evidence in governance. Policy failures in place-based contexts are often attributed to insufficient data, weak indicators, or limited analytical capacity. The analysis developed here suggests that these explanations are incomplete.

Territorial knowledge becomes policy-relevant not through accumulation alone, but through institutionalised processes of filtering and prioritisation. Decision-oriented participation illustrates how strategic simplification is a governance necessity rather than a technical deficiency. While simplification enables coordination and action, it also entails epistemic selectivity, directing attention

toward how knowledge is authorised, aggregated, and rendered actionable within governance arrangements.

5.4 Democratic implications and the politics of trade-offs

Embedding decision-making functions within participation also reshapes the democratic landscape of governance. Decision-oriented participation makes trade-offs explicit and attributes responsibility for prioritisation to collective processes. This enhances transparency, but it also exposes participation to contestation and conflict. Moreover, the structuring of prioritisation processes may amplify existing power asymmetries if certain actors possess greater organisational resources or expertise to shape how issues are framed and ranked.

From a democratic perspective, the analysis cautions against equating participation with inclusiveness alone. While consultative participation maximises voice, decision-oriented participation necessarily constrains it in order to produce closure. These constraints are not incidental, but constitutive of participation that aims to support strategic capacity.

This insight has broader implications for democratic theory and practice. It suggests that participatory governance involves choices not only about who participates, but about how much openness can be sustained without undermining collective decision-making. Making these choices explicit is essential for avoiding depoliticised or technocratic uses of participation.

5.5 Implications for multilevel governance

Finally, the analysis has implications for multilevel governance systems, where participatory requirements are often standardised across diverse territorial contexts. The RESCO case illustrates how decision-oriented participation depends on context-specific institutional arrangements and cannot be easily mandated through uniform procedural rules.

Multilevel governance frameworks that promote participation without addressing prioritisation risk generating extensive consultation without strategic alignment. Conversely, imposing prioritisation from higher levels may undermine local ownership and legitimacy. Decision-oriented participation therefore occupies a difficult intermediate position, requiring both local engagement and institutional support for binding choice.

This highlights the importance of governance capacity not only at the territorial level, but across levels of policy-making. Supporting decision-oriented participation requires alignment between funding rules, administrative responsibilities, and political accountability structures (Wu et al., 2015). The following section discusses the limits, risks, and broader research implications of this argument, focusing on the conditions under which decision-oriented participation may fail or generate unintended consequences.

6. Discussion: limits, risks, and research agenda

6.1 The political costs of decision-oriented participation

While decision-oriented participation may strengthen strategic coordination and collective commitment, it also entails significant political costs.

Requiring actors to rank priorities and accept strategic simplification transforms participation from a low-cost exercise in inclusion into a higher-stakes arena of collective choice (Turnhout et al., 2010). This shift increases the visibility of conflict and makes losses explicit.

Some claims are elevated, others are deferred or excluded. This dynamic can generate resistance, particularly among actors whose interests or identities are marginalised through prioritisation. As a result, decision-oriented participation may be politically fragile and difficult to sustain over time.

These costs help explain why participatory governance often gravitates toward consultative designs, even in contexts where strategic capacity is weak. The avoidance of explicit prioritisation may reflect not institutional inertia, but a deliberate political choice to minimise contestation and preserve procedural legitimacy.

6.2 Risks of capture, exclusion, and depoliticisation

Decision-oriented participation also raises risks of capture and exclusion. Structured prioritisation processes may privilege actors with greater organisational capacity, technical expertise, or familiarity with strategic framing (Krick, 2022). Even when participation is formally inclusive, the capacity to influence rankings and aggregation rules may be unevenly distributed. These asymmetries highlight that decision-oriented participation does not eliminate power relations but reorganises them within structured participatory arenas.

Moreover, the emphasis on strategic simplification carries the risk of depoliticisation. By translating complex social and environmental issues into ranked priorities, participatory processes may obscure underlying power relations and normative disagreements. What appears as collective choice may, in practice, reflect the stabilisation of particular problem framings or development trajectories (Cairney, 2016; Cairney, 2017).

These risks underscore the importance of analysing not only the outcomes of decision-oriented participation, but also its internal dynamics. Governance arrangements that embed prioritisation must be examined critically with respect to who defines criteria, who controls aggregation mechanisms, and how dissent is accommodated or marginalised.

6.3 Scope conditions and contextual dependency

The argument advanced in this paper is not that decision-oriented participation is universally desirable or appropriate. Its feasibility and effects depend on specific scope conditions. Institutional stability, administrative capacity, and political support are likely to shape whether prioritisation within participation can be sustained. These conditions also shape whether participatory designs that embed prioritisation can be institutionally supported and politically legitimised.

In contexts characterised by high political fragmentation, weak trust, or limited implementation capacity, decision-oriented participation may exacerbate conflict without delivering strategic coherence. Conversely, in settings where participatory norms are well established and institutional responsibilities are clear, embedding prioritisation may strengthen coordination and ownership.

This contextual dependency cautions against treating decision-oriented participation as a transferable model. Rather than asking whether such designs should be replicated, future research should examine under what conditions they contribute to policy capacity and when they generate counterproductive effects. Particular attention should be devoted to non-Western and developing governance contexts, where institutional capacity, state-society relations, and participatory traditions may differ substantially from those typically examined in the place-based governance literature (Andrews, 2013; Vivier & Sanchez-Betancourt, 2023). Comparative research across diverse territorial settings could help assess the external validity of the framework and identify how decision-oriented participation interacts with different administrative, political, and socio-cultural conditions.

6.4 Implications for democratic theory

The analysis also has implications for democratic theory. Participatory governance is often evaluated against ideals of inclusiveness, deliberation, and voice. Decision-oriented participation challenges these ideals by reintroducing closure and exclusion as necessary elements of collective choice. Participation should therefore be evaluated not only in terms of inclusion, but also in terms of how collective decisions are structured and justified under conditions of disagreement and scarcity. This points toward a more pluralistic understanding of participatory democracy, recognising that democratic values may vary across policy stages and do not necessarily converge.

6.5 Research agenda

The framework developed in this paper opens several avenues for future research. First, comparative studies could examine how different participatory designs embed or avoid prioritisation across policy domains and institutional contexts. Such studies could also investigate how specific institutional

design features—such as prioritisation procedures, aggregation rules, and representation structures—shape the relationship between participation and policy capacity.

Future empirical research could also operationalise territorial policy capacity through observable governance dimensions associated with decision-oriented participation. While the present paper develops the concept at a theoretical level, several dimensions lend themselves to empirical investigation across different governance contexts. These include the existence of formal prioritisation procedures, the transparency of aggregation rules, the degree of cross-sectoral coordination, the stability of collectively agreed priorities over time, and the extent to which participatory outputs influence subsequent policy implementation. Examining these dimensions comparatively could help assess whether participatory arrangements contribute to territorial policy capacity and under what institutional conditions such contributions are sustained.

Second, empirical work could focus on the micro-dynamics of prioritisation within participatory processes, including how criteria are negotiated, how aggregation rules are perceived, and how actors respond to exclusion. This would deepen understanding of the performative effects identified in this paper.

Third, further research is needed on the long-term effects of decision-oriented participation. While prioritisation may enhance short-term coherence, its impact on trust, legitimacy, and institutional learning over time remains underexplored.

This discussion has highlighted that decision-oriented participation is neither a panacea nor a simple corrective to the limitations of consultative governance. It can enhance territorial policy capacity by embedding prioritisation within participation, but it also introduces political, democratic, and epistemic tensions that cannot be designed away.

Dimension	Illustrative empirical indicators
Prioritisation capacity	Existence of formal ranking procedures; explicit prioritisation criteria
Aggregation capacity	Presence of transparent aggregation rules; collective decision protocols
Strategic coherence	Consistency between identified priorities and policy actions
Coordination capacity	Cross-sectoral and multi-level coordination mechanisms
Institutional commitment	Persistence of priorities across planning and implementation phases
Implementation influence	Degree to which participatory outputs shape policy decisions and resource allocation

Table n.2 Illustrative dimensions for operationalising territorial policy capacity

These dimensions (Table n.2) should be understood as illustrative rather than exhaustive. Their purpose is not to prescribe a standard measurement framework, but to demonstrate how territorial policy capacity may be translated into empirically observable governance characteristics across different territorial and institutional settings.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the widespread institutionalisation of participation in place-based policy has not been matched by an equivalent capacity to support strategic decision-making. Rather than treating this gap as a technical or procedural failure, the paper has reframed it as a governance problem. More specifically, the paper argues that this gap reflects a mismatch between participatory arrangements primarily designed for consultation and governance contexts that require collective prioritisation and strategic closure. The central claim advanced is that participation is most likely to

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3 contribute to territorial policy capacity when decision-making functions such as prioritisation,
4 aggregation, and strategic simplification are embedded within participatory arrangements.

5 By introducing the distinction between consultative and decision-oriented participation, the paper has
6 shown that participatory governance is not a homogeneous practice but a spectrum of governance
7 arrangements with distinct effects on knowledge use, democratic legitimacy, and strategic capacity.
8 While consultative participation excels at mobilising voices and articulating territorial knowledge, it
9 often leaves unresolved the collective choices required for coherent action. Decision-oriented
10 participation, by contrast, embeds collective choice within participatory processes, enabling
11 participation to contribute more directly to strategic governance.
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13 The analysis of RESCO as a critical case has illustrated both the potential and the limits of this
14 approach. Rather than providing an empirical evaluation of a specific policy instrument, the case
15 serves to clarify the institutional mechanisms through which participatory designs can structure
16 collective decision-making. RESCO demonstrates how participation can be institutionally designed
17 to produce binding priorities and enhance territorial policy capacity. At the same time, the case
18 highlights the political, democratic, and epistemic costs associated with such designs. Decision-
19 oriented participation makes exclusion visible, redistributes responsibility for strategic choices, and
20 introduces forms of epistemic selectivity that cannot be eliminated without undermining decision-
21 making capacity.
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23 The paper does not propose decision-oriented participation as a universal solution or a transferable
24 model. Instead, it offers a conceptual lens for analysing how participatory arrangements distribute
25 democratic and epistemic costs and benefits across different policy contexts. Future research should
26 further investigate the conditions under which embedding prioritisation within participation enhances
27 policy capacity, and when it risks exacerbating exclusion or depoliticisation.
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29 By shifting attention from participation as presence to participation as governance design, the paper
30 contributes to ongoing debates on participatory governance, place-based policy, and policy capacity.
31 It encourages scholars to move beyond procedural accounts of participation and to examine more
32 directly how participatory designs structure the difficult trade-offs inherent in collective decision-
33 making.
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RESPONSE TO REVIEWER

Manuscript ID: TG-01-2026-0046.R2

Title: From Consultation to Collective Choice: Decision-Oriented Participation and Territorial Policy Capacity in Place-Based Governance

We would like to sincerely thank the Reviewer for the careful reading of the manuscript and for the constructive comments provided throughout the review process.

Reviewer Comment 1

“Remove repetition in Sections 5, 6 and 7.”

Response:

Thank you for this observation. We carefully reviewed Sections 5, 6 and 7 to reduce redundancy and improve the progression of the argument.

Several passages reiterating the concepts of prioritisation, trade-offs, strategic simplification, and territorial policy capacity were streamlined or consolidated. In particular, Sections 5 and 6 were revised to ensure that implications, limitations, and future research directions perform distinct analytical functions rather than restating conceptual arguments developed earlier in the paper. The Conclusion was also revised to focus on synthesising the paper’s contributions rather than repeating previous discussions.

Reviewer Comment 2

“Provide more detailed guidance on how future empirical studies could operationalise territorial policy capacity across different governance contexts.”

Response:

We fully agree with this suggestion.

To address this point, we substantially expanded Section 6.5 (Research Agenda) by introducing a more explicit discussion of how territorial policy capacity may be operationalised empirically.

In particular, we added a discussion of observable governance dimensions associated with territorial policy capacity, examples of measurable design features, including prioritisation procedures, aggregation rules, cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms, implementation influence, and institutional commitment, and a dedicated comparative summary table (Table 2) presenting illustrative dimensions and potential empirical indicators for future research.

The objective was not to propose a definitive measurement framework, but rather to provide a clearer bridge between the conceptual framework and future empirical applications across different governance settings.

Reviewer Comment 3

“Distinguish decision-oriented participation from related concepts such as collaborative governance and deliberative governance.”

Response:

The revised manuscript now includes a dedicated discussion in Section 3.3 explicitly distinguishing decision-oriented participation from collaborative governance and deliberative governance with the aim to clarify the specific governance function addressed by the proposed framework. The revised text clarifies that collaborative governance primarily focuses on joint problem-solving, coordination, and implementation, deliberative governance emphasises public reasoning, legitimacy, and communicative inclusion, and decision-oriented participation differs in its analytical focus on prioritisation, aggregation, strategic simplification, and the production of collectively binding priorities.

Reviewer Comment 4

“Consider adding a short comparative summary table of the different concepts addressed across the paper.”

Response:

Thank you for this suggestion.

We have introduced a new comparative summary table (Table 1) in Section 3.3.

Reviewer Comment 5

“Third round of language editing to be more concise and less dense in some of the theoretical passages.”

Response:

We carefully revised the manuscript to improve readability and conciseness.