



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

DOTTORATO DI RICERCA IN
PSYCHOLOGY

Ciclo 38

Settore Concorsuale: 11/E3 - PSICOLOGIA SOCIALE , DEL LAVORO E DELLE ORGANIZZAZIONI

Settore Scientifico Disciplinare: M-PSI/05 - PSICOLOGIA SOCIALE

DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIONS: RESOURCES,
PROCESSES, AND OUTCOMES

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Esame finale anno 2026

Abstract

Participatory processes are widely promoted by public institutions as mechanisms for democratic innovation, but their implementation often reflects tensions between formal policy objectives and the everyday practices of public administration. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, these processes have become increasingly intertwined with digital tools and new forms of remote or hybrid engagement, which have been often described as a way to promote inclusion. However, challenges such as the digital divide limit the access to digital participation initiatives. The present work examines how digitalisation and inclusion are perceived and enacted in participatory projects supported by the Emilia-Romagna Region in the post-pandemic period, with a specific focus on the relationship between the regional policy framework and participatory practices developed at the local level. The research adopts a qualitative design, using document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Specifically, Study 1 is based on a document analysis of 143 official reports from participatory projects funded between 2020 and 2023, analysing forms and levels of participation, the use of digital tools, inclusion strategies, attention to intersectionality, and the quality of demographic reporting; while Study 2 complements this analysis through semi-structured interviews with 41 professionals involved in the design and implementation of participatory projects, exploring how participation is understood and how inclusion and digitalisation are approached in participatory initiatives. The results of the document analysis show that participatory projects supported by the Emilia-Romagna Region are characterised by a wide variety of practices, formats, and tools, and that most of them has chosen a hybrid format, combining in-person activities with some use of digital tools. Additionally, there seems to be an interest towards inclusion, but only a limited about of projects target specific minority groups or provide targeted solutions. At the same time, the design of the official report only allows for a summary of the demographic characteristics of the participants.

When it comes to the project managers' opinions, participation is generally described as an important and meaningful part of public decision-making, often linked to ideas of involvement, shared responsibility, and active engagement. In contrast, inclusion and digitalisation appear less consistently defined and operationalised: while both are frequently mentioned, they are addressed in different ways across participants and are not always translated into explicit strategies. For instance, digital tools are mainly used to support communication, coordination, or data collection, while more advanced or empowering uses remain limited. Similarly, attention to inclusion varies across initiatives and tends to focus on specific groups or issues when encouraged by the funding framework. These findings indicate that participatory governance takes shape through the interaction between formal policy frameworks and the everyday practices and interpretations of those implementing participatory processes. However, although participation is widely valued, inclusion and digitalisation remain unevenly defined and operationalised in practice. To address this gap, public administrations may benefit from more explicit guidance on how to translate inclusion into concrete practices (e.g., targeted outreach, accessibility measures, and sustained engagement strategies) and from a more strategic use of digital tools beyond communication and data collection. In this sense, greater attention to reflexive practice, targeted training for public officials, and sustained institutional support could help strengthen the inclusiveness and quality of participation. Finally, integrating clearer criteria for inclusion and digitalisation within funding frameworks, along with more systematic monitoring of who participates and how, could support more consistent and equitable implementation across projects.

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“Novemila anime, alle porte di Reggio Emilia. Il sindaco è stato eletto con una maggioranza di sinistra, senza centro, da fare invidia ad Enver Hoxha e Kim Il Sung. Avevano chiuso il cinema e molti hanno deciso che Cavriago non poteva non avere il suo. Hanno fatto un circolo, due progetti, e in un anno ecco una multisala in pieno centro, con film di prima visione, che viene gente anche da fuori a vederli. Cooperativa Cinema Teatro Novecento. I soci sono centinaia, tutti volontari, come alla festa dell'Unità, e delle sere a strappare i biglietti c'è un assessore, delle sere Jukka Reverberi, delle sere Federica, la figlia del sindaco, una giovane compagna, molto bellina.¹”

(OFFLAGA DISCO PAX, “PICCOLA PIETROBURGO”)

¹ *Author's translation from Offlaga Disco Pax, Piccola Pietroburgo.*

Nine thousand souls, at the gates of Reggio Emilia. The mayor was elected with a left-wing majority, without a centre, enough to make Enver Hoxha and Kim Il Sung envious. They had closed the cinema and many decided that Cavriago could not be without its own. They created an association, two projects, and within a year there was a multiplex in the town centre, with first-run films, attracting people from outside as well. The Cinema Teatro Novecento cooperative. The members are in the hundreds, all volunteers, as at the Festa dell'Unità, and on some evenings there is a councillor tearing tickets, on some evenings Jukka Reverberi, on some evenings Federica, the mayor's daughter, a young comrade, very pretty.

Digital Empowerment in Public Administrations: Resources, Processes, and Outcomes

Over the last decades, participation has been increasingly incorporated into public governance frameworks as a way to improve democratic quality, legitimacy, and accountability in public decision making (Fung, 2006). Across the existing literature and institutional frameworks, participatory processes are often framed as inherently positive, as they are expected to strengthen citizens' involvement, improve policy outcomes, and rebuild trust between institutions and communities (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). At the same time, participation is also frequently associated with inclusion and therefore understood as the broadening of access and voice in decision making (Arnstein, 1969; Gaventa, 2004). More recently, digital technologies have been expected to broaden access and reduce barriers to engagement; however, empirical evidence continues to highlight persistent limitations in achieving truly inclusive participation (Feeney & Welch, 2012; De Siqueira et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a critical moment for participation, as restrictions on physical interaction accelerated the use of digital tools in participatory processes, changing how participation was organised. While the use of digital tools allowed many participatory initiatives to take place during the pandemic, it also brought longstanding issues to the surface, such as those related to digital divides, accessibility, and exclusion (Feeney & Welch, 2012; van Dijk, 2020). This is particularly relevant in the Italian context, where recent research has highlighted persistent digital divides within regions such as Emilia-Romagna (Zola, 2025).

As a result, participation, inclusion, and digitalisation became tightly intertwined, raising new questions about whether digitally mediated participation actually broadens democratic access or instead reproduces existing inequalities in different forms.

Within this landscape, public administrations play a key role in shaping inclusive, digitally mediated, participatory processes. In fact, participation is shaped by laws, policy guidelines, funding schemes, organisational routines, and institutional cultures (Gaventa, 2004; Fung, 2006), as well as by people. Professionals such as public officials working in public administrations, third sector organisations, and even educational institutions often act as intermediaries between policy intentions and participatory practices. Therefore, their interpretations of participation and how it should be implemented inevitably influence how participatory processes are designed and put in place (Migchelbrink & Van de Walle, 2022a; Durman, 2020). In this sense, ensuring that digitalisation genuinely promotes inclusive participation requires that those responsible for designing and implementing participatory processes recognise both the potential and the limitations of digital tools, as well as the importance of organisational and contextual factors in shaping participation outcomes (Feeney & Welch, 2012; Steinbach & Süß, 2018; Shin et al., 2024).

Despite the extensive literature on participatory democracy, relatively little attention has been paid to how participation is understood and enacted by those who are directly responsible for implementing it. In fact, much of the existing research focuses on institutional designs, participatory mechanisms, or citizens' experiences, while the perspectives of public officials and project leaders remain comparatively underexplored (Berner et al., 2011; Källström & Smith, 2023). Yet, these actors exercise considerable discretion in practice, particularly when deciding how much influence citizens should have, which digital tools to use, and how (or whether) inclusion is actively pursued.

The existing literature shows that participation is often treated as a technical or procedural requirement, rather than as a situated practice shaped by meanings, values, and constraints (Arnstein, 1969; Gaventa, 2004); inclusion is frequently assumed to be an automatic outcome of participation, rather than a process that requires deliberate choices,

resources, and reflexivity (Smith, 2009; García-Espín, 2025); and digitalisation is often presented as a neutral solution to problems of access and efficiency, despite growing evidence that digital tools can both enable and hinder inclusive participation depending on how they are designed and used (Feeney & Welch, 2012). An integrated analysis that combines digitalisation and inclusion in participatory environments with an examination of the beliefs and understandings of those who implement participation is still lacking.

This work addresses these gaps by approaching participation as an institutional practice, shaped both by policy frameworks and by the meanings attributed to it by those who implement participatory processes.

The empirical focus is on the Emilia-Romagna Region, a context characterised by a long-standing commitment to participatory governance and a structured institutional framework supporting participation through dedicated legislation, annual calls for proposals, and evaluation mechanisms (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023), which provides a particularly useful case for examining how participation, inclusion, and digitalisation are operationalised within public administration in the post-COVID era.

Given the exploratory nature of this work, the research was carried out by adopting a qualitative approach. Study 1 consists of a document analysis of regional participatory projects funded between 2020 and 2023, offering a descriptive overview of how participation, digitalisation, and inclusion are formally framed and reported within institutional documentation. This analysis highlights recurring patterns, shifts over time, and gaps in how these dimensions are operationalised. Study 2 draws on in-depth qualitative interviews with professionals responsible for designing and implementing these projects, focusing on how they understand participation, how they interpret inclusion, and how they perceive the role of digital tools in participatory practices.

By combining these two levels of analysis, the present work contributes to a more grounded understanding of the relationship between policy and practice in participation initiatives taking place in public administrations.

Rather than evaluating participation solely in terms of outcomes, it focuses on processes, meanings, and institutional practices as key elements shaping the democratic quality of participation. In doing so, it shows that participation, inclusion, and digitalisation are not self-evident concepts, but are continuously negotiated at the intersection of institutional frameworks, organisational constraints, and professional interpretations.

Ultimately, this work argues that the democratic potential of participatory governance depends not only on formal procedures or technological solutions, but on how participation is understood and enacted by those responsible for translating policy into practice. Paying attention to these meanings and practices is essential for developing participatory approaches that are not only formally compliant, but also inclusive of minority groups and responsive to the diverse conditions under which citizens engage with public institutions.

Theoretical Background

What Is Participation?

Participation is a fundamental requirement for the proper functioning of democratic societies, serving a variety of purposes across formal decision-making processes in shared governance (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). It enables individuals to express their voices, contribute to public decision making, and hold elected representatives accountable (Verba et al., 1995), while also enhancing democratic legitimacy and the quality of policy outcomes (Fung, 2015).

Despite its widespread use, participation is not a uniform concept and cannot be reduced to a single definition: it encompasses a wide range of practices that differ in their purposes, the actors involved, and the degree of influence granted to participants (Cornwall, 2008; Fung, 2006). In this sense, participation can be understood as a multidimensional construct, shaped by variations in the distribution of power between citizens and institutions, the extent to which participation is oriented toward consultation or co-decision, and the processes through which interaction and deliberation take place (Arnstein, 1969). These differences are not merely procedural but have important implications for how participation is experienced and for its potential to influence public decision-making.

Even though it can take multiple forms, citizen participation is commonly understood as the involvement of individuals in decision making processes (Feeney & Welch, 2012), encompassing voluntary actions aimed at influencing public decisions and the management of collective affairs (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

As public expectations for transparency and accountability have grown, so has the interest in involving citizens more directly in administrative processes (Bovaird, 2007). In fact, citizens bring unique knowledge, lived experience, and diverse perspectives that can

contribute to making public policies more responsive to societal needs (Fung, 2006).

Additionally, beyond improving the quality of policies itself, citizen involvement can also reshape relationships between citizens and institutions. For instance, when individuals perceive that their voices matter, they are more likely to trust public institutions, contribute ideas, and accept difficult or contested decisions (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

Participation has been associated with a range of positive outcomes, including higher individual and social well-being, greater social cohesion (Keyes, 1998), positive effects on the environmental, social, and economic conditions of communities (Mannarini et al., 2010), as well as increased political efficacy and a stronger disposition towards future involvement (Fernandes Jesus et al., 2012).

However, participatory processes do not guarantee positive experiences or outcomes. For instance, when participation is perceived as ineffective, such as when citizens feel that their contributions are ignored or fail to influence decisions, it can generate feelings of exclusion and disempowerment, undermine trust in institutions, and even lead to negative psychological and social consequences (Ferreira et al., 2012; Froncek & Rohmann, 2019).

These mixed outcomes highlight that participation alone is not sufficient to ensure democratic quality or positive experiences, drawing attention to the conditions under which participation becomes inclusive, and the processes themselves.

Participation in Public Administration

Within the public governance literature, participation is often defined as the set of formal opportunities created by institutions to enable citizens to contribute to decision making processes. The different forms of participation, that reflect distinct dimensions of democratic life, can be divided into indirect participation and direct participation: indirect participation includes activities such as voting or supporting advocacy groups that act on

behalf of citizens, whereas direct participation involves individuals being personally and actively engaged in decision making processes (Nabatchi, 2012; King, Feltey, & Susel, 2015).

In public administration, participation can be operationalised through a variety of formats: consultative processes, such as surveys, public hearings, and stakeholder meetings, are commonly used to gather information and feedback from citizens, while deliberative processes, including citizens' panels and co-design workshops, involve more active engagement and are particularly suited to complex or contested issues, where incorporating diverse perspectives can enhance both the legitimacy of decisions and the quality of outcomes (Fung, 2006; Smith, 2009).

However, participation in public administration is not solely concerned with improving efficiency or service delivery, but it also raises fundamental questions about power and influence within decision making processes.

In this sense, participation can be conceptualised as the meaningful involvement of people in decision-making, planning, and implementation, moving beyond mere consultation towards shared control and genuine influence (Arnstein, 1969). In fact, when effectively designed and implemented, participatory processes have the potential to challenge bureaucratic hierarchies and open up space for more democratic forms of governance (Gaventa, 2004).

The Different Forms of Participation

Public participation is a wide concept that encompasses a range of practices and forms, which vary in how much power and influence citizens have on the final decision. The literature on citizen participation describes several ways in which participation can take place, from the simplest forms such as consultation to involvement in deliberation.

A well-known framework to describe the levels of participation is Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, a model that shows a progression from low to high levels of public influence. At the bottom are forms defined as non-participative, such as manipulation and therapy, which aim to cure or educate the participants, and the job of participation is only to achieve public support through public relations. A little further up on the ladder there is a section labelled tokenistic which includes informing, consultation, and placation. These are practices that are considered to be participatory, but at the lowest level, as they frequently emphasize one way flow of information, only a limited number of possibilities to choose from, and retain for power holders the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of the advice received. The section on top of the ladder is about citizen control, and it contains partnership, delegation, and citizen control. These practices show a redistribution of power through negotiation between citizens and power holders, citizens have delegated powers to make decisions, and can even handle the entire job of planning, policy making and managing a programme.

One of the most common forms of participation is consultation, which typically involves asking citizens for feedback through surveys, public hearings, or other forms of discussion. Public consultation allows citizens to express their views on policies and projects, ensuring their input is considered in decisions it enhances transparency by explaining the reasoning behind decisions, increases accountability by making decision-makers responsive to public feedback, and fosters social acceptability by involving citizens in shaping outcomes (Bherer, Dufour, & Montambeault, 2016). While it can inform policymaking, consultation often provides little influence on final decisions, and is therefore often criticised for being selective, one-directional, and easily ignored by decision-makers (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

More advanced participatory approaches are grounded in deliberation, where citizens are not only asked for opinions but also given the opportunity to reflect and discuss together (Carpini, Cook & Jacobs, 2004). Deliberation involves careful analysis of issues and a fair process that allows participants to express their opinions and engage in meaningful dialogue (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002), offering citizens a greater voice and impact on the decisions that are taken by local administrations, and it can be defined as a political system based on citizens' free discussion of public issues (J. Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999). Methods such as citizens' juries, deliberative polls, and citizens' assemblies are structured to foster this kind of engagement (Fung, 2006; Smith, 2009). Deliberation differs from consultation in both depth and intent: it aims not only to collect opinions, but to transform them through informed discussion.

Between consultation and deliberation lies a range of other forms, including participatory budgeting, co-design processes, and collaborative governance mechanisms, where citizens have more influence, though often still mediated by institutions (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

The Challenges of Participation

Despite its democratic promise, participation also presents significant challenges, as many public institutions remain structured around hierarchical, expert-driven models of decision-making, making participatory practices difficult to implement in practice. Involving citizens requires time, resources, and specific skills, such as facilitation, negotiation, and the capacity to engage with non-expert voices, which are not always readily available within public administrations (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). As a result, participatory processes can be time-consuming, costly, and complex to manage, particularly when aiming to ensure the inclusion of diverse and marginalised groups (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

Beyond these practical constraints, participation also carries the risk of being implemented in a symbolic or tokenistic manner. In fact, participatory processes may be formally introduced without being genuinely connected to decision-making, resulting in limited or no influence on actual outcomes. When participation is poorly designed, lacks transparency, or is treated as a procedural requirement rather than a substantive democratic practice, it risks remaining superficial (Cornwall, 2008).

These limitations are further reinforced by the continued autonomy of administrative actors to interpret rules and shape outcomes, which can result in citizen input being filtered or overridden in practice. Even when participatory initiatives are in place, outcomes may be pre-defined or ultimately shaped by institutional actors, reducing citizens' capacity to meaningfully influence decisions (Young & Tanner, 2023). In such contexts, participation risks functioning more as a legitimising tool than as a mechanism for redistributing power.

Participation in Community Psychology

While public governance provides essential institutional and procedural frameworks for citizen engagement, it can benefit from integration with perspectives that attend more closely to the experiential and relational dimensions of participation. In this regard, community psychology offers a valuable complementary approach, contributing conceptual models, methods, and tools that help align participatory processes with citizens' perceived needs and lived realities (Christens, 2012). Within this framework, participation is conceptualised as the process of having a meaningful influence on issues that affect individuals' lives and communities (Zimmerman, 2000), involving both individual agency and the availability of structural opportunities, which are shaped by power dynamics and contextual conditions (Prilleltensky, 2008; Wallerstein et al., 2019).

A central concept in community psychology is the sense of community, defined as a feeling of belonging, mutual influence, fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It has been identified as a key factor associated with civic and community engagement: when individuals perceive themselves as part of a supportive and meaningful collective, they are more likely to engage actively in collective actions and decision-making processes (Talò et al., 2014).

However, the relationship between sense of community and participation is not unidirectional. While a stronger sense of community can foster engagement, participatory processes themselves can contribute to building and reinforcing this sense of belonging. Through interaction and collective action, participation can strengthen social ties, increase mutual trust, and enhance individuals' perception of influence within their community. Participation and sense of community can therefore be understood as mutually reinforcing processes, linked through mechanisms such as empowerment, shared identity, and collective efficacy. In particular, participation can foster psychological empowerment by increasing individuals' perceived control, critical awareness, and capacity to influence collective decisions (Zimmerman, 2000), which in turn can strengthen their sense of belonging and engagement within the community.

From this perspective, participation is understood not merely as formal involvement in decision-making, but as a relational and transformative process through which public concerns, needs, and values are meaningfully incorporated into collective decisions (Wandersman & Florin, 2000). Emphasis is therefore placed on the quality, inclusiveness, and empowering potential of participatory processes, rather than on participation as a purely procedural or instrumental activity.

Inclusive Participation

Inclusive participation seeks to ensure that all individuals, regardless of background or circumstances, have opportunities to engage in democratic processes, thereby strengthening the legitimacy and effectiveness of institutions (Young, 2000; Smith, 2009).

Specifically, inclusion in participatory democracy is commonly conceptualised along two interrelated dimensions: presence and voice. Presence refers to who is able to attend and be recognised within participatory spaces, while voice concerns perceived equality in deliberation and influence over outcomes (Smith, 2009; García-Espín, 2025). Achieving inclusive participation requires attention to both dimensions. Opening participatory spaces alone is insufficient: meaningful inclusion depends on targeted mobilisation, inclusive institutional design, and supportive cultural and material conditions.

E-Participation

With the onset of digital technologies, governance practices have evolved, opening new opportunities as well as challenges for citizen involvement (Kim & Lee, 2012).

Participatory activities have increasingly extended into the digital realm, creating online participation, commonly referred to as “e-participation” (Coleman & Moss, 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift, prompting increased investment in digital technologies within public administrations. In this context, governments experimented with new digital media as part of democratic processes and promptly put in place or reinforced already existing digitalisation initiatives (Krejnus et al., 2023; Meijer & Webster, 2020).

The availability of online technologies for civic and political participation, such as social media and dedicated e-participation platforms, has expanded the range of opportunities and forms of political action available to citizens (Ruess et al., 2023). For instance, online

participation platforms have demonstrated the potential to enhance the collection of citizens' proposals and foster more inclusive and sustained forms of discussion, creating spaces where more direct and deliberative democratic practices can take place (Borge, Brugué, & Duenas-Cid, 2022). For example, the continuous updating and adaptation of governmental portals to the needs of the population can represent a concrete strategy for improving governmental responsiveness and efficiency (Doran et al., 2023).

This has benefits for both the administration and the citizens: for local government managers, the use of digital technologies has been identified as an important opportunity to strengthen local democracy (Feeney & Welch, 2012), and for citizens, these tools have the potential to make decision making processes more accessible by enabling them to contribute to debates and decisions remotely.

Inclusion and Digital Participation: Potential and Risks

It is well known that digitalisation holds the potential to reduce barriers to participation by alleviating constraints related to time, physical distance, and bureaucratic complexity (Shin et al., 2024), as online platforms can facilitate access to information, consultations, and interactions with public administrations, potentially widening opportunities for civic engagement.

However, digital participation can also generate new forms of inequality, with the digital divide representing one of the most significant obstacles (Norris, 2003; Van Dijk, 2020). In fact, while some social groups, such as younger people, may be more inclined to engage in online forms of participation (Thijssen & Van Dooren, 2016), others, including older people and individuals with intellectual disabilities, may encounter substantial barriers (Chadwick, 2003; Cumbie & Kar, 2016).

Moreover, when deliberative processes are mediated through digital tools, existing asymmetries can be intensified, reinforcing rather than mitigating social inequalities (Strandberg & Grönlund, 2014). These inequalities, commonly referred to as “digital divides”, extend beyond mere access to the internet and encompass broader dimensions of social stratification, including ethnic origin, gender, and socio-economic status (Elstub et al., 2021). Empirical research has shown that online deliberative spaces often attract a relatively narrow segment of the population, typically younger, male, white, and ideologically moderate users (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Delli Carpini, 2012).

It is worth noting that barriers to inclusive participation do not stem solely from individual constraints, such as limited digital skills or unreliable internet access, but also from the design and accessibility of digital platforms, as well as from the participatory models adopted by public institutions. In many cases, public administrations remain embedded in hierarchical and expert-driven decision-making structures, rendering inclusive participation particularly challenging. Ensuring that diverse voices are meaningfully heard, especially those of marginalised groups, requires sustained investment in time, resources, and professional skills, alongside a genuine institutional commitment to inclusivity (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

The Meaning of Participation

The concept of participation is not universal. At a theoretical level, different scholarly perspectives, such as public governance and community psychology, adopt distinct definitions and emphases. However, variation also emerges at the individual and institutional level. Empirical studies drawing on first-hand data from public officials show that participation is understood in multiple ways, ranging from minimal forms of involvement, such as being informed, to more intensive practices, including co-creation of policies or

solutions (Källström & Smith, 2023; Berner et al., 2011). These interpretations are shaped by the intended purposes of participation, such as building networks or fostering shared visions, as well as by how actors perceive the role of citizens within decision-making processes.

These differences are not merely semantic but point to broader variations in how the purpose and role of participation are conceptualised. In some cases, participation is framed in more instrumental terms, as a means to gather information, improve policy efficiency, or enhance legitimacy. In others, it is understood as a more substantive process, aimed at enabling meaningful influence over decisions and fostering collective agency.

Officials' support for participatory practices is also affected by institutional and organisational constraints. For instance, when participatory processes are perceived as inefficient, overly demanding, or hindered by bureaucratic procedures, officials may limit the scope or depth of citizen involvement, reinforcing narrower and more instrumental understandings of participation in practice (Migchelbrink & Van de Walle, 2022b). In this sense, meanings of participation are not only conceptually diverse, but are also shaped and stabilised through everyday administrative practices and constraints.

Public Officials' Perspectives

The meaning of participation varies not only across theoretical frameworks, but also among the actors responsible for its implementation. In fact, even when participation is clearly defined at a policy level, its interpretation can differ substantially among public officials, shaping how participatory processes are designed and enacted in practice.

While much of the literature on participatory democracy focuses on citizens, institutional frameworks, or digital tools, research has increasingly begun to examine the role of public officials in shaping participatory governance, highlighting their central role in mediating between policy intentions and practical implementation (e.g., Migchelbrink & Van

de Walle, 2022). These actors play a pivotal role in determining how participation is implemented, perceived, and sustained within public administrations. Their experiences, constraints, and strategies are therefore critical for understanding the organisational and cultural conditions that enable or limit more inclusive and effective participation.

Empirical research shows that public managers' attitudes towards citizen participation are shaped by a combination of individual characteristics, process design, organisational norms, and broader contextual factors (Migchelbrink & Van de Walle, 2022; Durman, 2020). In particular, officials' administrative roles and institutional positions influence how participation is defined and the degree of citizen involvement considered appropriate, with regulatory, executive, or oversight responsibilities shaping expectations and practices (Durman, 2020).

With regard to digitalisation, existing studies indicate that public officials often view digital technologies as promising tools for enhancing participation, while simultaneously expressing concerns about their inclusivity (Feeney & Welch, 2012). Although digital platforms may streamline engagement and improve service delivery, officials highlight risks related to digital divides, including disparities in access, skills, and usability, which may limit meaningful participation for marginalised groups.

The Context: the Emilia-Romagna Region²

Emilia-Romagna is a region located in Northern Italy, with a population of approximately 4.4 million inhabitants (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2025a), which is administratively divided into provinces and municipalities and is characterised by a mixed

² In this thesis, the term “Emilia-Romagna Region” is used to refer to the institutional actor unless otherwise specified.

urban and rural territorial structure, including several medium-sized cities such as Bologna, Modena, and Parma.

The term “Emilia-Romagna Region” refers to the regional governing institution, which exercises legislative and administrative functions within the framework of the Italian decentralised system. Its competencies include areas such as health, social services, spatial planning, and local development.

An example of how public participation is embedded in administrative practice is provided by the Emilia-Romagna Region, which has institutionalised citizen involvement as a regular part of policymaking at regional and local levels with the approval of Regional Law 15/2018 on participation (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2018a). This law not only provides a legal basis for participation but also allocates resources and technical support to promote participatory processes across municipalities and policy areas. Within the regional policy framework, participation is framed as a foundational practice of democracy, supported through legislative commitment, financial investment, and institutional training. This institutional vision presents participation as a potential driver of social, ecological, and institutional transformation.

Additionally, through Regional Law 15/2018 (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2018b), the Region formally recognised participation not only as a legal right, but also as a shared responsibility between institutions and citizens, framing participation as a process that enhances active citizenship and supports the co-design of public policies. Emilia-Romagna Region adopts a policy perspective grounded in horizontal subsidiarity, with the stated aim of fostering shared decision making and co responsibility in matters of public interest (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2018b). Specifically, within the regional framework, participation is intended to open up governance processes, strengthen trust between institutions and communities, and improve the quality and inclusiveness of public decision making. The

Region aims to ensure that participation contributes to social cohesion, institutional innovation, and the ecological and digital transitions. Within the regional discourse, these processes are presented as central to citizen involvement, with a particular focus on including younger generations and amplifying underrepresented voices (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2025b).

The Emilia-Romagna Region offers a compelling case for examining how digitalisation can support inclusive citizen participation, as it has actively pursued policies that integrate technology with democratic engagement. A key initiative is “PartecipAzioni”, a regional platform designed to promote civic involvement through telematic participation in local policymaking (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2022), which forms part of a broader regional strategy aimed at making governance more accessible and responsive. However, despite its attempts towards in digital innovation, Emilia-Romagna Region faces persistent territorial disparities in digital access: research shows that municipalities vary significantly in their levels of digitalization, revealing the need for targeted interventions to close these gaps (Zola, 2025).

Additionally, Emilia-Romagna Region has established structured initiatives aimed at developing participatory skills among public servants, as well as close training and supervision regarding the phases related to the yearly call for proposals: in preparation for it, during the drafting, and during the execution and final evaluation. The Region has also planned a Participation Training Plan (2025–2027), which is integrated into the regional training system and offers open badge certifications to public employees, practitioners, and civil society members. It covers the following objectives: opening governance, inter-sectoral dialogue, territorial empowerment, democratic innovation, and integrated communication, and it covers specific thematic areas, such as democratic innovation, territorial policy, participatory methods, and communication strategies (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2025b).

The regional framework includes mechanisms for monitoring and transparency, such as the Observatory on Participation, which collects and disseminates data, tracks participatory experiences, and supports the evaluation of the law's implementation. The Law 15/2018 also introduced a so-called “evaluative clause” that mandates a review of the law's outcomes every three years (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2020).

A more detailed discussion of the regional participatory framework in Emilia-Romagna is provided by Casula (2015), who examines the institutional development of participatory policies and the role of the Region in supporting and structuring participatory processes within a historically rooted governance framework.

The SPID system

These regional process of digitalisation mirrors the national trends, particularly, an example of which is Italy's Sistema Pubblico di Identità Digitale (Public Digital Identity System) commonly known as SPID. Launched in 2016, SPID provides citizens with a unified digital identity that enables secure access to public services and aligns with the European eIDAS regulatory framework (AgID, 2023).

While the system has improved usability and streamlined interactions between citizens and public institutions, its implementation has also revealed significant barriers to access. The registration process often requires a sufficient level of digital literacy, stable internet access, and, in some cases, in person identity verification. These requirements can exclude older adults, digitally underserved populations, and individuals living in remote areas. Moreover, SPID can be used only by individuals aged 18 and over, meaning that minors can only access digital public services through parental mediation. This raises concerns regarding inclusivity, autonomy, and opportunities for early civic engagement in digital participatory spaces.

Initiatives such as the SPID system at the national level, alongside regional e-participation platforms in Emilia-Romagna, illustrate both the opportunities and the structural limitations of digitalised citizen participation. While digital tools can enhance access and efficiency, they may also reproduce or intensify existing inequalities when institutional design does not adequately account for diverse capacities and life situations. It is worth noting that some of the regional online initiatives and tools require SPID mediated authentication.

The call for proposals

The annual calls for proposals provide a structured and consistent institutional framework for participatory governance in the Emilia-Romagna Region. They define participation as a decision-oriented and time-limited process, embed explicit priorities related participation and inclusion, and specify procedural and quality requirements that shape how participation is designed and implemented at the local level (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023).

Between 2018 and 2019, the Emilia-Romagna Region allocated over one million euros to support participatory processes (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2020), and with the 2025-2027 programme, the Region has committed a further 670,000 euros annually, demonstrating a sustained and growing institutional investment in democratic innovation and citizen engagement (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2025b).

Through its Participation Office and dedicated funding schemes, the Region operationalises its approach to participatory governance primarily through annual calls for proposals issued under Regional Law 15 of 2018. These calls define the regional vision of participation, establish eligibility requirements, and set the framework within which local

authorities and other eligible actors are expected to design and implement participatory processes (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023).

Each call explicitly identifies thematic priorities and target groups that guide project selection and evaluation. For instance, across the calls issued between 2020 and 2023, particular emphasis is consistently placed on the involvement of young people, with projects targeting youth participation receiving enhanced consideration during the evaluation process. Youth engagement is framed as a strategic priority for strengthening democratic participation and fostering early civic involvement (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023). In addition to youth participation, the calls place strong emphasis on inclusion and accessibility. In fact, even though the call differs each year, applicants are required to demonstrate attention to specific themes, such as differences related to demographic groups (e.g. gender, age, ability, language), environmental issues, or strategies for involving groups that are traditionally underrepresented in participatory processes. Thematic priorities recur across calls and include social and health policies, environmental and territorial planning, sustainable development, and digital transformation. Projects addressing these areas are expected to adopt participatory methods that are coherent with the characteristics of the target population and responsive to local contexts. In this framework, participation is consistently defined as a structured process of dialogue and deliberation aimed at informing public decision making and linked directly to concrete administrative decisions (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023).

Eligible applicants include local authorities, other public bodies, and private legal entities, provided that a public authority formally responsible for the decision endorses the project. Participatory processes are generally required to be time bound, with a standard duration of up to six months and the possibility of extension for projects considered particularly complex. Funding supports activities related to facilitation, communication,

coordination, and participatory methods, while capital expenditures are excluded (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2020).

Funded projects vary considerably in scope and content, encompassing a wide range of activities, practices, and target groups. Examples include projects involving young people in the regeneration of unused public spaces, initiatives supporting older adults in developing digital skills, and participatory redesign processes aimed at adapting public services or cultural spaces to citizens' needs. Additional initiatives include community gardens, urban green space revitalisation, participatory cultural events, neighbourhood planning meetings, and collaborative environmental projects.

The participatory tools and practices adopted across these initiatives also vary widely and include participatory budgeting, citizen panels, consultation workshops, co design sessions, online platforms, and interactive surveys. These choices reflect both the specific objectives of individual projects and the characteristics of their intended target groups. From 2021 onwards, the calls further formalise evaluation procedures through the certification of participatory quality by a designated technical authority, with increasing encouragement for the use of digital participation tools alongside in person methods (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2021, 2022, 2023).

The Present Research

The present work examines how participation, inclusion, and digitalisation are conceptualised and implemented within participatory projects promoted by the Emilia-Romagna Region, which supports participatory projects through a well-established institutional framework, including dedicated guidelines, annual calls for proposals, and a structured evaluation system. This framework provides methodological and operational

support to project managers and is intended to steer both the quality and inclusiveness of participatory processes (Casula, 2015).

Given that access to regional funding requires local administrations to design initiatives aligned with specific guidelines on participation, this thesis investigates the relationship between institutional policy intentions, the ways participatory processes are documented and structured, and the meanings attributed to participation by those responsible for implementing it.

The research focuses on participatory projects implemented in the post-COVID period, when digitalisation became a central feature of participatory practices.

To address these aims, the research is organised into two complementary studies: Study 1 adopts a document analysis approach to examine how participation, digitalisation, and inclusion are operationalised within funded participatory projects. By analysing 143 project reports related to initiatives funded between 2020 and 2023, the study provides a systematic overview of the forms of participation adopted, the role of digital tools, the inclusion strategies described, and the attention to demographic reporting. Rather than evaluating project outcomes, Study 1 focuses on institutional practices and reporting patterns, offering insight into how participatory governance is formally framed and documented within the regional framework.

Study 2 builds on these findings by focusing on the meanings attributed to participation, inclusion, and digitalisation by the professionals responsible for designing and implementing participatory projects. Through qualitative interviews with individuals who played a central role in project development (e.g., project managers, coordinators), the study explores how participation is understood in practice and how inclusion and digital tools are interpreted and enacted in everyday work. This perspective is particularly relevant because the ways in which project leaders conceptualise participation directly shape the methods they

adopt, the degree of citizen involvement they enable, and the extent to which their practices align with regional policy objectives.

Taken together, the two studies allow for an integrated analysis of participation, bridging the gap between what participation is meant to be at the institutional level and how it is understood and practiced by those who work with it. While Study 1 maps how participation, inclusion, and digitalisation are formally structured and reported within funded projects, Study 2 sheds light on how these dimensions are understood and translated into practice by those responsible for making participation work on the ground.

Study 1 – A Document Analysis of Participatory Projects in Emilia-Romagna: Participation, Digitalisation, and Inclusion

The objective of this study is to examine how participation, digitalisation, and inclusion were conceptualised and operationalised in publicly funded participatory projects in the Emilia-Romagna Region during the post-COVID period.

To achieve these aims, the study analyses 143 official project reports relating to participatory projects funded between 2020 and 2023, using a structured document analysis approach. By systematically examining project characteristics, participatory techniques, levels of participation, digitalisation, empowerment measures, inclusion strategies, and the quality of demographic data, the study provides an empirically grounded overview of how participatory governance was implemented and documented within a regional institutional context following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

This study employed a qualitative document analysis to examine how participation, digitalisation, and inclusion were conceptualised and implemented in participatory projects funded by the Emilia-Romagna Region.

The dataset consisted of official project reports related to participation projects funded through regional calls between 2020 and 2023. Data were retrieved from the official regional observatory of participation for Emilia-Romagna, which provides access to participatory project records by year, funding status, and other characteristics (Osservatorio Partecipazione Emilia-Romagna, n.d.). These reports were produced by project managers as part of the mandatory evaluation and report procedures required by the yearly call for proposals, which included detailed descriptions of project objectives, participatory activities, tools used and reported outcomes. The selected time frame captures the post-COVID period, during which participatory processes increasingly incorporated digital tools.

The documents were analysed using a structured evaluation grid, developed specifically for this study, to ensure consistency and comparability across projects. The evaluation grid was organised into five main sections:

(A) Project Characteristics. Basic identifying information were collected, such as including a unique project code (combining year and project number), official project title, and year of the call for proposals. Projects were then classified according to their primary thematic focus into one of four categories, which were drawn from the 2023 call for proposals: (1) social, health, environmental, urban, and landscape policies; (2) allocation of real estate confiscated from organised crime; (3) ecological transition initiatives; (4) digitalisation, or other themes, which were specified when applicable.

(B) Participation. Both the forms and intensity of participatory practices were documented. First of all, participatory techniques were noted, which ranges from workshops,

co-design workshops, focus groups, online forums, surveys, public meetings, and other techniques specified in the documents. Second, the level of participation was classified using an ordinal scale inspired by Arnstein's ladder of participation, ranging from (1) informing to (2) consultation, (3) partnership, (4) delegation, and (5) citizen control. Classification was based on the role attributed to participants in decision making processes as described in the reports. Finally, the grid recorded the presence and type of support or training activities related to participation, such as facilitation support, formal or informal training sessions, guidance materials, or coaching aimed at enhancing participant empowerment on the topic of participation. Training related to the theme of the project but not related to participatory practices was not considered.

(C) Digitalisation. The extent and function of digital tools within participatory processes was documented. Digital tools were coded according to their primary purpose, distinguishing between tools used for information (e.g., websites, newsletters), communication (e.g., email, WhatsApp), engagement (e.g., videoconferencing platforms or interactive tools), and participatory platforms (e.g., dedicated digital participation platforms). Based on this information, each project was assigned a level of digitalisation using a four-point ordinal scale: (1) fully offline, (2) minimal digital tools, (3) hybrid (combining in-person and online activities), or (4) advanced (use of interactive platforms or advanced digital participatory tools). The grid also recorded whether support or training related to digital tools was provided, such as technical assistance during events or the presence of help desks.

(D) Inclusion. The intended beneficiaries and the strategies adopted to reduce participation barriers were documented. Target groups were identified as reported in the documents (e.g., youth, elderly people, migrants). Inclusion strategies and methods were coded qualitatively, including measures related to physical accessibility, language accessibility, timing flexibility, or childcare provision. In addition, projects were classified

according to their degree of attention to intersectionality, using a three-level scale (low, medium, high). This classification considered whether inclusion efforts addressed single or multiple, intersecting forms of vulnerability and whether strategies were tailored accordingly.

Digitalisation and inclusion were recorded in the evaluation grid only when they were concretely integrated into the participatory process (e.g., through tools, methods, or strategies); when they were mentioned exclusively as project themes or discussion topics, they were excluded from the analysis.

(E) Demographic. documented the demographic profile of actual participants involved in participatory activities was noted, including variables such as age, gender, nationality, education, and socio-economic status, when available. The quality of demographic data was assessed using a three-level scale (low, medium, high), based on the completeness, coherence, and clarity of reported demographic information. This distinction allowed the analysis to account for variation not only in participation outcomes but also in reporting practices.

An overview of the projects is presented in Table 1.

The analytical procedure followed a deductive coding approach: all project reports were systematically read and coded according to the predefined categories of the evaluation grid. Ordinal classification scales were used for key dimensions such as levels of participation, digitalisation, intersectionality, and quality of demographic data, enabling structured comparison across cases. When necessary, brief qualitative notes were added to clarify ambiguities in the documentation.

The analysis was aimed at identifying recurring patterns, variations, and gaps across projects and over time.

Table 1

CODE	YEAR	TITLE	TOPIC ³	LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION	PARTICIPATION EMPOWERMENT	LEVEL OF DIGITALISATION	DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT	INCLUSION STRATEGIES
2020_01	2020	ECO-VICINI: GIOVANI ATTIVI PER LA SOSTENIBILITA' AMBIENTALE	1	2	YES	3	NO	NO
2020_02	2020	EcCO2 Attivazione ECOMuseali ECOlogiche	1	2	NO	2	NO	NO
2020_03	2020	SIAMO ANZOLA Social place	1	3	NO	2	NO	NO
2020_04	2020	Il futuro con un piano	1	3	NO	3	NO	NO
2020_05	2020	Rega, clicchiamoci su!	4	2	YES	2	NO	NO
2020_06	2020	Calendasco 2030	1	1	NO	3	NO	NO
2020_07	2020	QUIèORA	1	3	NO	1	NO	NO
2020_08	2020	Avanti c'è spazio!	1	3	YES	2	NO	NO
2020_09	2020	C'è spazio per te	1	3	NO	2	NO	NO
2020_10	2020	Crevalcore verso la mobilità scolastica sostenibile	1	3	NO	3	NO	NO
2020_11	2020	Rilanciamo Parco di Vittorio 2	1	2	YES	3	NO	Targeted outreach
2020_12	2020	A.P.P.I. Farm un distretto produttivo sostenibile	1	4	No	4	NO	Accessible time; Accessible location
2020_13	2020	Gambettola Green Community	1	3	YES	3	YES	NO
2020_14	2020	(s)Muoviti - Mobilità Sostenibile a Granarolo	1	2	NO	1	NO	NO
2020_15	2020	Maranello likes green young	1	1	NO	3	NO	Transport support
2020_16	2020	MERCATO TRIFASE	4	2	NO	4	YES	NO
2020_17	2020	Biblioteche Giovani Agorà Digitali	1	4	NO	4	YES	Digital support
2020_18	2020	NOVITÀ a Teatro	1	3	NO	3	YES	Targeted outreach; Accessible time; Accessible location; Digital support
2020_19	2020	Le chiavi di San Pietro	1	3	NO	2	NO	NO
2020_20	2020	ParcOfficina di comunità	1	3	NO	3	NO	Targeted outreach; Language mediation

³ “Topic” refers to the overarching theme of the project. Numerical labels (1–4) are used as coding categories in the analysis and correspond to the following thematic areas: (1) social, health, environmental, urban, and landscape policies; (2) allocation and reuse of real estate confiscated from organised crime; (3) ecological transition initiatives; and (4) digitalisation.

2020_21	2020	LAB R2 Due beni, due Comuni, una visione	1	2	NO	2	NO	Targeted outreach
2020_22	2020	Giovani imprenditori slow	1	1	NO	2	NO	Cultural mediation (was not planned)
2020_23	2020	SPRIGIONATI... le Ex-Carceri che vorresti!	1	2	NO	3	NO	NO
2020_24	2020	#Vignolapartecipa	4	4	NO	4	NO	Digital support; Accessible time
2020_25	2020	Zola Si Rifiuta - riduco, riuso, riciclo	3	1	NO	3	NO	NO
2020_26	2020	Forestazione Urbana, insieme per una città sostenibile	1	3	YES	3	NO	Digital support
2020_27	2020	Reset Reset	1	2	NO	3	YES	NO
2020_28	2020	Un Clima di partecipazione	3	1	NO	3	NO	NO
2020_29	2020	Next Generation Concordia	1	3	NO	3	NO	NO
2020_30	2020	Cervia on Air	1	3	NO	3	NO	NO
2020_31	2020	L'agenda digitale del Nuovo Circondario Imolese	4	2	NO	3	NO	NO
2020_32	2020	Ciao Darwin! Dal parco. Nel parco. Per il parco	1	3	NO	1	NO	NO
2020_33	2020	BOLOGNA MONTANA. In cammino	1	2	NO	3	YES	Accessible time; Digital support
2020_34	2020	Idee ricostituenti	1	3	NO	4	NO	NO
2020_35	2020	Terre di Castelli Sostenibile	1	2	NO	3	NO	NO
2020_36	2020	Giovani animatori digitali	4	2	NO	3	NO	Digital support
2021_01	2021	COMUNITA' SOSTENIBILI Attiviamoci per rendere inclusivi, sicuri, resilienti e sostenibili i nostri paesi	1	2	NO	1	NO	Targeted outreach
2021_02	2021	Accogliamo la natura!	1	1	NO	2	NO	NO
2021_03	2021	SOS – SOSSte Officinali SOSTenibili	1	2	NO	3	NO	NO
2021_04	2021	Percorso Primario, infrastruttura di comunità	1	2	NO	1	NO	NO
2021_05	2021	FRATTASTICA	1	3	NO	2	NO	Childcare support
2021_06	2021	Playful Design Lab - Immaginare la Castenaso dei giovani	1	3	NO	2	NO	NO
2021_07	2021	DAD Generation	4	3	NO	2	NO	NO
2021_08	2021	Biblioteca diffusa	1	2	NO	1	NO	NO
2021_09	2021	Climax - Patto locale per il clima per rendere Bertinoro un luogo ecologico, equilibrato, evolutivo	1	3	NO	3	NO	NO

2021_10	2021	Trebbo si fa bella (e sostenibile) - Cittadini in (fr)Azione	3	3	NO	1	NO	NO
2021_11	2021	C!Part - Bilancio partecipato della Città di Cervia	1	3	NO	3	NO	NO
2021_12	2021	Un contenitore dinamico di idee alle porte del borgo.	1	3	NO	1	NO	Accessible location
2021_13	2021	Medesano: istruzioni per il ri-uso	3	1	NO	1	NO	Accessible location
2021_14	2021	Mercato Trifase 2.0	1	2	NO	4	NO	Accessible time; Accessible location
2021_15	2021	Un faro in Appennino	1	2	NO	2	NO	Online tools
2021_16	2021	Uno spazio al centro per le valli Setta e Sambro	1	2	NO	3	NO	Accessible time; Online tools
2021_17	2021	Rigeneriamo l'Ex Caseificio Sociale: un percorso di partecipazione	1	3	NO	1	NO	NO
2021_18	2021	La Rastignano di domani	1	3	NO	2	NO	Targeted outreach
2021_19	2021	P.L.A.C.E. up	1	3	NO	1	NO	NO
2021_20	2021	Reggio Emilia, Città dei sentieri	1	2	NO	1	NO	NO
2021_21	2021	Ritorno all'Astoria	1	2	YES	1	NO	NO
2021_22	2021	Topo Nero: un parco della sostenibilità a Sarmato	1	3	NO	1	NO	NO
2021_23	2021	C.O.N.CENTRO+ Condividere Opportunità Nuove per un CENTRO storico PIU' vitale	1	2	NO	1	NO	NO
2021_24	2021	Facciamo un Patto! Attiviamoci per la cura dei luoghi di Spilamberto	1	3	NO	1	NO	NO
2021_25	2021	TRESIGN-AMO!!! Indicativo presente plurale	1	3	NO	3	NO	Accessible time; Online tools
2021_26	2021	Fuoricampo	1	2	NO	1	NO	NO
2021_27	2021	Il suolo per lo sviluppo di comunità: sviluppo sostenibile e gestione partecipata del territorio	1	2	NO	2	NO	NO
2021_28	2021	Una comunità digitale, sostenibile e solidale. Il bilancio partecipativo e non solo	1	4	NO	4	NO	NO
2021_29	2021	G.A.P. - GenerAzione Parco	1	3	YES	2	NO	Accessible location
2021_30	2021	Verso un Contratto di Fiume per Ferrara	1	3	NO	2	NO	NO

2021_31	2021	Monitoraggio partecipato della biodiversità in agricoltura biologica e nel territorio	1	1	NO	1	NO	NO
2021_32	2021	RIN9RÀ	1	2	NO	2	NO	NO
2021_33	2021	Welfare e agenda digitale locale	4	2	NO	3	NO	NO
2021_34	2021	CompostiAMO - Percorso partecipativo per compostiere di comunità	1	2	NO	1	NO	NO
2021_35	2021	Digitale Bene Comune	4	3	YES	4	YES	Hybrid format
2021_36	2021	Costruiamo Case della Comunità... digitale	4	3	NO	2	YES	Targeted outreach
2022_01	2022	FACCIAMO SOSTENIBILITÀ' Impegni e pratiche di comunità per la sostenibilità economica, sociale e ambientale	1	2	NO	2	NO	Childcare support
2022_02	2022	Casa dei Talenti	1	2	YES	3	NO	Hybrid format; Accessible location; Flexible scheduling
2022_03	2022	Santa Vittoria Museo D.O.P. (Diffuso di Origine Popolare). Dalla storia all'attualità delle tradizioni	1	2	YES	3	NO	Accessible location; Transport support; Hybrid format
2022_04	2022	CAMPOTTO: accordi di comunità verso un nuovo piano di stazione	1	2	NO	1	NO	Accessible location; Language mediation
2022_05	2022	Berceto: la comunità al centro	3	2	NO	1	NO	NO
2022_06	2022	Energie di Comunità	3	2	NO	1	NO	Accessible location; Language mediation; Childcare support
2022_07	2022	Modelli partecipati di gestione per l'Istituzione della C.E.R. di Compiano	3	2	NO	2	NO	Hybrid format
2022_08	2022	GIOVA-FA Bilancio partecipato dei giovani	1	3	NO	2	NO	NO
2022_09	2022	Parole Passi Sogni	1	2	NO	3	NO	Accessible time; Accessible location; Language mediation; Hybrid format
2022_10	2022	Un faro in Appennino 2023	1	3	NO	2	NO	Accessible time; Accessible location

2022_11	2022	Accendiamo le idee - Energia per la comunità	3	2	NO	2	NO	Accessible time; Accessible location; Language mediation; Hybrid format
2022_12	2022	Comunità Energetiche a Palagano	3	1	NO	3	NO	Accessible time; Accessible location; Language mediation; Hybrid format
2022_13	2022	Laboratori di quartiere a Piacenza. Un modello partecipativo per lo sviluppo sostenibile	1	2	NO	2	NO	Accessible location; Hybrid format; Childcare support
2022_14	2022	SUPERR - Scuola di Urbanistica Partecipata per Ragazze e Ragazzi	1	2	YES	1	NO	Accessible location
2022_15	2022	#IdeaGiovani Fase2	1	4	NO	2	NO	Language mediation; Hybrid format
2022_16	2022	#CISEI#CISTAI#CIFAI	1	2	NO	1	NO	Accessible location; Hybrid format
2022_17	2022	Percorso partecipato per la costituzione di una comunità energetica rinnovabile a San Possidonio	3	1	NO	1	NO	NO
2022_18	2022	GiochiAmo a Sarmato: bilancio partecipativo per parchi pubblici accessibili e sostenibili	1	3	NO	4	NO	Accessible location; Cultural mediation; Childcare support
2022_19	2022	Il cepparello: buone pratiche per il futuro della sostenibilità a Sestola	1	2	NO	2	NO	Accessible location
2022_20	2022	Traversetolo, città sostenibile: percorso partecipativo per una co-progettazione sostenibile	3	2	NO	1	NO	Accessible time; Childcare support
2022_21	2022	Bilancio Partecipativo 2023: persone - progetti - beni comuni	1	3	YES	4	YES	Flexible scheduling; Accessible location; Hybrid format
2022_22	2022	Grisù energia blu: verso una Comunità energetica di quartiere	3	2	NO	2	NO	NO
2022_23	2022	Supercultura - Una comunità culturale collaborativa	1	3	NO	3	YES	Flexible scheduling

2022_24	2022	Energia e Comunità nelle Terre del Sandalo	3	3	NO	2	YES	Accessible time; Hybrid format
2022_25	2022	Tutti insieme, tutti green	3	3	NO	3	NO	Accessible time; Accessible location; Language mediation; Childcare support
2022_26	2022	Parco e comunità: la progettazione condivisa del Piano Territoriale per il Parco del Frignano	1	3	NO	3	YES	Flexible scheduling; Hybrid format
2022_27	2022	Bologna è Cura	1	3	NO	2	NO	Accessible location
2022_28	2022	PEEP4LL Uno sguardo di comunità sul quartiere di tutti, da tutti, per tutti	1	3	NO	2	NO	Targeted outreach
2022_29	2022	Via Giuliana 32	2	3	NO	3	YES	NO
2022_30	2022	Comunità energetica rinnovabile Monzuno	3	3	NO	2	YES	Targeted outreach; Accessible time; Accessible location; Childcare support
2022_31	2022	Comunità energetiche a Russi	3	2	NO	3	NO	Accessible location; Language mediation; Hybrid format
2022_32	2022	Cervia prossima. Dintorni solidali per futuri sostenibili	1	3	NO	2	NO	Hybrid format; Targeted outreach; Accessible location; Language mediation
2022_33	2022	Planning by Bike	1	3	NO	3	YES	Accessible time; Accessible location; Language mediation; Hybrid format
2022_34	2022	Più sai meno rischi	1	2	NO	3	YES	Accessible time; Accessible location; Language mediation
2022_35	2022	QR-Code per la narrazione partecipata del territorio dell'Unione	4	3	NO	3	YES	Accessible location; Hybrid format

2023_01	2023	Cervia R.I.U.S.A: Rigenerazione, Inclusività, Utilità, Sostenibilità, Attivismo	3	2	NO	3	NO	Accessible time; Targeted outreach; Hybrid format
2023_02	2023	PARTECIPANZA SONORA, verso un ecomuseo del paesaggio della Partecipanza Agraria di Cento	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING
2023_03	2023	L'ECO di Montecreto - Un percorso verso lo sviluppo ecologico di comunità	1	3	NO	2	NO	Flexible scheduling; Targeted outreach; Flexible scheduling
2023_04	2023	Libera le idee	2	2	NO	1	NO	Targeted outreach
2023_05	2023	CENTRO CIVICO SAN QUIRICO, Da cantiere sociale a spazio di comunità	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING
2023_06	2023	Ogni scuola è paese	1	1	NO	2	NO	NO
2023_07	2023	La transizione agro-ecologica per la cultura e per il territorio	3	2	NO	2	NO	NO
2023_08	2023	Rappresentare l'uguaglianza	Equality	2	NO	3	NO	NO
2023_09	2023	La biblioteca fuori di sé. La biblioteca che vorrei	1	3	NO	1	NO	NO
2023_10	2023	La transizione ecologica e climatica: consapevolezza ed educazione	3	2	NO	2	NO	NO
2023_11	2023	Paesaggi Resilienti	3	2	NO	3	NO	NO
2023_12	2023	Verso la Piazza del Sapere	1	2	NO	1	NO	Accessible time; Accessible location
2023_13	2023	Verso il Crowdmapping femminile: la mappa digitale per leggere Castenaso in ottica di genere	1	2	NO	2	NO	Language mediation
2023_14	2023	Cantiere MuDiCa: officina di partecipazione	1	2	NO	1	NO	NO
2023_15	2023	Formigine città della longevità	1	2	NO	2	NO	Hybrid format
2023_16	2023	Un Bosco in Comune - Costruiamo il futuro Verde di Gambettola	1	3	YES	3	YES	Accessible location
2023_17	2023	RI-ABITARE L'ENTROTERRA. Il manifesto dei giovani per le aree interne	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING
2023_18	2023	PAROLE PASSI SOGNI 2024	1	2	NO	2	NO	Reduced authentication barriers

2023_19	2023	Una rete di punti di prossimità nei quartieri per ridurre lo spreco, favorire il riuso e contrastare la povertà	1	3	NO	2	NO	Accessible time; Accessible location
2023_20	2023	Piacenza Partecipa	3	4	NO	4	YES	Hybrid format; Language mediation; Digital support
2023_21	2023	Comunità in azione	1	3	YES	2	YES	NO
2023_22	2023	RI.T.MO RIccione in Transizione verso una MOBilità sostenibile	3	2	NO	3	YES	Accessible location; Accessible time; Hybrid format
2023_23	2023	Rimini Marina stAzione culturale	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING	MISSING
2023_24	2023	Relazioni in movimento	1	3	NO	3	NO	NO
2023_25	2023	Partecipa e stai al passo. Processo partecipativo per l'ampliamento del polo sportivo di Persiceto	1	2	NO	2	NO	NO
2023_26	2023	La scuola che vorrei	1	3	YES	2	NO	Assistance and support for special needs
2023_27	2023	Percorsi condivisi per la creazione di comunità energetiche rinnovabili	3	2	YES	2	NO	NO
2023_28	2023	#Vignolapartecipa 2024. Il Bilancio Partecipativo si apre ai patti di collaborazione	4	3	YES	4	YES	Digital empowerment; Hybrid format
2023_29	2023	La partecipazione tiene banco	1	3	YES	4	YES	Hybrid format; Accessible location; Language mediation
2023_30	2023	Regoliamoci! Costruiamo insieme il Regolamento del Liceo	1	3	YES	2	NO	NO
2023_31	2023	La città dei matti: verso il laboratorio sulla storia della psichiatria imolese	1	1	NO	2	NO	NO
2023_32	2023	Tegge Festival 2024: al lavoro per il mondo che desideriamo	1	3	NO	2	NO	NO
2023_33	2023	Verderara - una nuova area verde a Calderara	1	3	NO	2	YES	Language mediation; Cultural mediation
2023_34	2023	IntERactions	1	3	YES	4	YES	Accessible time; Accessible location
2023_35	2023	L'Officina delle idee	1	3	YES	2	NO	Targeted outreach

2023_36	2023	Piu' sai meno rischi	1	3	YES	3	NO	Language mediation
2023_37	2023	CONNETTERE VISIONI, PLASMARE SPAZI. Un percorso per i Centri Giovanili del futuro	1	3	YES	2	NO	Language mediation
2023_38	2023	Trasformazione e rifunzionalizzazione di Palazzo Marescalchi	1	3	NO	1	NO	Accessible instruments and language
2023_39	2023	Verso la Comunità Energetica Rinnovabile Alta Val Nure	3	2	NO	3	YES	Hybrid format
2023_40	2023	Un Bene di tutti: partecipazione verso un identity hub	1	3	YES	4	YES	Targeted outreach

Results

The initial dataset comprised 147 participatory projects funded between 2020 and 2023. Final reports were missing for four projects, all funded in 2023, resulting in a final analytical sample of 143 projects. The number of projects funded each year was similar, with 36 projects in 2020, 36 in 2021, 35 in 2022, and 40 in 2023, four of which were excluded due to missing documentation.

Regarding the theme of the project, they were predominantly focused on the theme “social, health, environmental, urban, and landscape policies” (105 projects; 73.4%), followed by ecological transition initiatives (24 projects; 16.8%), digitalisation (11 projects; 7.7%), allocation of real estate confiscated from organised crime (2 projects; 1.4%), and other themes such as equality (1 project; 0.7%).

When dividing by year, some differences emerge:

In 2020 ($n = 36$), the large majority of projects addressed social, health, environmental, urban, and landscape policies (29 projects). A smaller number focused on digitalisation as a project theme (5 projects), while ecological transition initiatives accounted for 2 projects.

In 2021 ($n = 36$), a similar pattern emerged. Most projects again focused on social, health, environmental, urban, and landscape policies (30 projects). Digitalisation-themed projects accounted for 4 projects, and ecological transition initiatives for 2 projects.

In 2022 ($n = 35$), thematic diversification increased. While social, health, environmental, urban, and landscape policies remained the most frequent theme (21 projects), a substantial proportion of projects focused on ecological transition initiatives (12 projects). One project addressed the allocation of real estate confiscated from organised crime, and one other project focused on digitalisation.

In 2023 ($n = 36$), projects continued to be mainly centred on social, health, environmental, urban, and landscape policies (25 projects). Ecological transition initiatives accounted for 8 projects, while allocation of real estate confiscated from organised crime and digitalisation were each represented by one project, while one addressed equality-related themes.

When it comes to participation, projects commonly employed multiple participatory techniques, indicating that participation was generally organised through a combination of methods rather than a single format. The most frequently reported techniques included questionnaires, workshops, focus groups, and co-design workshops, often used together within the same project. Other techniques, such as participatory budgeting and world café, were mentioned only sporadically.

The most common level was partnership (Level 3), identified in 64 projects (44.8%), followed closely by consultation (Level 2), observed in 60 projects (42.0%). Together, these two levels accounted for 86.8% of the analysed projects. Lower levels of participation were comparatively rare. Informing-only processes (Level 1) were identified in 11 projects (7.7%), with one additional project using informing exclusively for citizens and partnership methods for the professionals and representatives. Higher levels of participation were uncommon: delegation (Level 4) was observed in 6 projects (4.2%), and no projects reached the level of full citizen control. One project (0.7%) was classified at an intermediate level (Level 3.5) due to ambiguous reporting on decision making authority.

Regarding participation-related empowerment, 24 projects (16.8%) explicitly reported the presence of participation-related empowerment activities aimed at supporting participants' knowledge and abilities regarding participation. However, the way empowerment was documented varied considerably. In some cases, support activities were described in detail, while in others they were mentioned only briefly or implicitly.

When it comes to digitalisation, digital tools were used to varying degrees across the analysed projects. Overall, 112 projects (78.3%) incorporated some form of digitalisation, while 31 projects (21.7%) were conducted entirely offline. The most common configuration involved minimal digitalisation (51 projects; 35.7%), typically limited to basic communication or organisational purposes. A further 46 projects (32.2%) adopted a hybrid format, combining in-person and online activities. Advanced digitalisation was relatively rare, being identified in only 15 projects (10.5%), which employed interactive platforms or more sophisticated digital participatory tools. Overall, digitalisation was most commonly implemented through online questionnaires, which represented the primary digital tool used within participatory processes together with online calls.

Interestingly, of the 15 projects classified as exhibiting advanced digitalisation, five adopted participatory budgeting as a participation technique, while the remaining projects relied on other formats. Additionally, when looking specifically at participatory budgeting projects ($n = 7$), five projects were characterised by advanced levels of digitalisation, with only one project relying on minimal digital tools and one adopting a hybrid format.

When it comes to the different yearly calls, digital tools were most extensively integrated into participatory processes in 2020, particularly through hybrid configurations, while subsequent years show a shift toward either minimal digitalisation or a return to offline formats, rather than a steady increase in advanced digital participation. Specifically:

In 2020, digital tools were widely integrated into participatory projects. Only 3 projects were conducted fully offline, while hybrid formats predominated (20 projects). Minimal digitalisation was observed in 8 projects, and advanced digitalisation in 5 projects.

In 2021, reliance on offline formats increased substantially, with 16 projects conducted fully offline. Minimal digital tools were used in 11 projects, hybrid formats declined to 6 projects, and advanced digitalisation remained limited (3 projects). Taken

together, 2020 and 2021 show extensive but uneven use of digital tools, largely shaped by pandemic-related constraints.

In 2022, a shift in digitalisation patterns was observed. Minimal digitalisation was most common (14 projects), followed by hybrid formats (12 projects). Offline projects accounted for 7 cases, while advanced digitalisation was rare (2 projects). Compared to previous years, digital tools in 2022 appeared less driven by emergency conditions and more selectively integrated into participatory design.

In 2023, projects most frequently relied on minimal digital tools (18 projects). Hybrid formats were used in 8 projects, while both offline and advanced digitalisation accounted for 5 projects each. This pattern indicates a stabilisation of limited and pragmatic uses of digital tools, rather than a continued expansion of advanced digital participation.

Regarding digital empowerment, explicit support or training activities related to the use of digital tools were reported in only a minority of projects: 116 (81.1%) did not include any form of digital empowerment, even when digital tools were used within the participatory process, while 27 projects (18.9%) reported digital empowerment measures, such as technical assistance during online activities, guidance on the use of digital platforms, or help-desk support.

Regarding intersectionality, the majority of projects were classified as exhibiting a low level of intersectionality (Level 1), accounting for 77 projects (53.8%). These projects addressed inclusion in general terms, without explicitly considering multiple or intersecting forms of vulnerability. A medium level of intersectionality (Level 2) was identified in 57 projects (39.9%), where specific target groups were acknowledged, but inclusion strategies remained limited in scope or focused on single dimensions of vulnerability. Only 9 projects (6.3%) demonstrated a high level of intersectionality (Level 3), explicitly addressing multiple, intersecting vulnerabilities through tailored inclusion strategies.

Clear differences emerged over time in the level of attention to intersectionality across projects:

In 2020, the vast majority of projects exhibited a low level of intersectionality (29 projects), with 6 projects at a medium level and only 1 project classified as high.

In 2021, low intersectionality remained prevalent, with 22 projects classified at Level 1 and 14 at Level 2. No projects reached a high level of intersectionality. Together, these two years establish a low baseline of attention to intersecting vulnerabilities.

In 2022, a marked shift occurred. Projects with medium intersectionality became the most frequent (20 projects), while low intersectionality declined substantially (8 projects). Notably, 7 projects demonstrated a high level of intersectionality, representing the highest level of intersectional attention across the period analysed.

In 2023, projects were more evenly distributed between low and medium levels of intersectionality, with 18 projects classified at Level 1 and 17 at Level 2. Only one project reached a high level of intersectionality, indicating a partial decline compared to 2022.

The main differences that emerged over time were related to the extent to which projects explicitly targeted youth and women. Overall, while youth were frequently targeted in earlier years, the explicit inclusion of women or gender-related groups was limited and emerged only in 2022.

A year-by-year description shows that:

In 2020, youth were the most frequently addressed group, being explicitly mentioned in 25 projects, while no projects identified women or gender-related groups as a specific target.

In 2021, explicit attention to youth declined substantially, with 14 projects targeting young people. As in the previous year, no projects explicitly focused on women or gender-related groups.

In 2022, the proportion of projects targeting youth remained comparable to 2021 (13 projects). However, women were explicitly identified as target groups in 2 projects, representing the only year in which a specific focus on women emerged.

In 2023, explicit targeting of youth decreased further, with 7 projects mentioning young people as a target group, while no projects explicitly focused on women or gender-related groups.

Regarding inclusion strategies, concrete accessibility-related measures (e.g. physical accessibility of venues) were explicitly mentioned in 25 projects, language accessibility strategies, such as the use of simplified language or translated materials, were reported in 18 projects, timing-related measures (e.g. flexible scheduling) were identified in 18 projects, childcare or babysitting services were rarely explicitly reported, being clearly identifiable in only a very small number of projects, while in other cases family-related inclusion measures were mentioned in more implicit or non-specific terms.

Similar to the level on inclusion, the trend of explicit and concrete inclusion strategies were most clearly articulated in 2022, while other years relied more heavily on generic or implicit approaches to inclusion. Specifically:

In 2020 and 2021, inclusion strategies were predominantly general or implicit, with relatively few projects explicitly reporting concrete measures such as physical accessibility, language support, or flexible scheduling.

In 2022, inclusion strategies were articulated more explicitly and concretely. A greater number of projects reported physical accessibility measures, language accessibility strategies, and timing-related adaptations. This year also included the only explicit reference to childcare or babysitting services as an inclusion measure, indicating a more structured approach to reducing participation barriers.

In 2023, inclusion strategies continued to be reported, but were more often described in non-specific terms, with fewer clearly articulated measures compared to 2022.

With regard to specific target groups, only one project explicitly mentioned the LGBTQ+ community among its intended beneficiaries, which is also the only project that made explicit reference to trans or gender-diverse people in the demographic section.

The quality of demographic data reported in the project documentation varied considerably across the analysed projects. Medium-quality demographic data (Level 2) were most frequently observed, accounting for 68 projects (47.6%). These projects reported some demographic variables, such as age or general participant profiles, but with incomplete coverage or limited detail. Low-quality demographic data (Level 1) were identified in 44 projects (30.8%). In these cases, demographic information was either very limited, vaguely described, or restricted to a single variable, making it difficult to assess the composition of participants in a systematic way. Only 30 projects (21.0%) provided high-quality demographic data (Level 3), including multiple demographic variables with clear categories and counts (e.g. age and gender distributions). One project (0.7%) did not report any demographic information. Moreover, demographic information on participants' migratory background was almost entirely absent, and gender was often implicitly assumed rather than explicitly reported.

When it comes to the intersection between participation and digitalisation, interesting trends emerge. For instance, higher levels of digitalisation were more frequently associated with partnership and delegation, whereas lower levels of digitalisation were predominantly associated with consultative participation.

Specifically, projects conducted fully offline (Level 1 digitalisation) were predominantly characterised by consultative forms of participation, with 18 projects classified at consultation (Level 2) and 10 at partnership (Level 3), while no cases reached

delegation; informing-only processes were rare (3 projects). Projects relying on minimal digital tools (Level 2) showed a similar but slightly more diversified pattern, with most cases situated at consultation (19 projects) and partnership (27 projects), and only one project reaching delegation. In hybrid projects (Level 3 digitalisation), participation levels were more evenly distributed between consultation (21 projects) and partnership (19 projects), with five informing-only processes and a single intermediate case (Level 3.5). By contrast, projects exhibiting advanced digitalisation (Level 4) displayed a distinct pattern, with partnership (8 projects) and delegation (5 projects) predominating, consultation being rare (2 projects), and no informing-only processes identified.

Differences were also observed in the relationship between digitalisation and intersectionality. Fully offline projects were predominantly characterised by low intersectionality (19 projects), with 11 projects at a medium level and only one project reaching high intersectionality. Projects using minimal digital tools showed a similar pattern (27 low, 22 medium, 2 high). In hybrid projects, attention to intersectionality increased, with 16 projects classified at a medium level and 5 projects at a high level, alongside 25 projects remaining at low intersectionality. Among projects with advanced digitalisation, medium intersectionality was most frequent (8 projects), followed by low intersectionality (6 projects), while high intersectionality remained rare (1 project). Overall, higher levels of digitalisation were associated with a shift from predominantly low to medium levels of intersectionality, although high intersectionality remained uncommon across all digital configurations.

Few projects reported employing structured methods to assess participants' satisfaction, with only occasional references to informal feedback mechanisms, such as conversations with participants outside formal activities.

Finally, it is worth noting that a number of inconsistencies were observed in relation to both the interpretation of inclusion and compliance with reporting guidelines. In several project reports, inclusion was described primarily in terms of engagement strategies, such as outreach activities or communication efforts, rather than as a distinct set of inclusion-specific measures. Similarly, although the section dedicated to Negotiation Tables explicitly instructed project promoters not to name individual members, several reports nevertheless included this information.

Discussion

Despite the central role that digital tools assumed in participatory processes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings show that only a small proportion of projects were explicitly framed around digitalisation as a project theme. Even in the immediate post-pandemic years, digitalisation-related projects remained marginal compared to those addressing broader social, environmental, or urban policy domains.

These findings indicate that digitalisation was primarily treated as an operational necessity rather than as a substantive object of participatory reflection. While digital tools were widely adopted to ensure the continuity of participatory processes under pandemic constraints, they were rarely problematised or explicitly addressed as a participatory challenge within project design. This is particularly striking given the extensive literature highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation while simultaneously amplifying inequalities in access, skills, and participation. Instead of prompting systematic reflection on digital inclusion or digitally mediated participation, the pandemic appears to have normalised the instrumental use of digital tools only. This interpretation is reinforced by the limited diffusion of advanced digital participation formats and the scarcity of structured digital empowerment initiatives, suggesting a predominantly

pragmatic approach to digitalisation with limited attention to its transformative potential or exclusionary risks.

Overall, the analysis shows considerable variation over time in the use of digital tools across participatory projects. The year-by-year patterns suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a temporary catalyst for digitalisation, particularly in 2020, when hybrid formats were widely adopted to ensure the continuity of participation under mobility restrictions. However, this intensified use was not sustained in subsequent years, as projects increasingly returned to offline or minimally digital formats, indicating that digital tools were primarily mobilised as a pragmatic response to the pandemic rather than consolidating into a stable or transformative participatory model.

The analysis highlights noticeable differences over time in the ways inclusion and intersectionality were addressed across projects, with a particularly significant shift occurring in 2022. In that year, a greater number of projects demonstrated explicit attention to specific target groups and intersecting vulnerabilities, a trend that coincided with the introduction of dedicated incentives in the call for proposals, particularly related to youth participation and gender equality. This institutional framing appears to have encouraged project promoters to more clearly articulate inclusion priorities and to adopt more structured strategies. The subsequent decline in high levels of intersectionality in 2023 suggests that these changes were closely linked to funding criteria, rather than reflecting a sustained transformation in participatory approaches. Overall, the findings point to the influential role of policy design in shaping how inclusion is operationalised within participatory projects.

In fact, these patterns are closely linked to the institutional incentives embedded in the calls for proposals. Youth participation was most prominent in earlier years, particularly in 2020, while explicit attention to women or gender-related groups emerged only in 2022. This shift coincided with the introduction of dedicated incentives in the 2022 call for proposals,

suggesting that institutional priorities played a decisive role in shaping which groups were explicitly targeted and how inclusion was articulated. The subsequent decline in explicit gender targeting and in high levels of intersectionality in 2023 further indicates that these changes were closely tied to funding criteria rather than reflecting a sustained transformation in participatory practices. Overall, the findings highlight the central role of policy design in structuring both the content and the depth of inclusion within participatory projects.

The limited quality of demographic data may be partly explained by ambiguities in the reporting form itself; for example, demographic categories (e.g. number of participants, gender, and age group) were requested within a single field, leading project promoters to report only an aggregate figure (e.g. “22”) without disaggregated information. To improve the quality and comparability of demographic data, future reporting frameworks should include separate, clearly structured fields for each demographic variable (e.g. gender, age groups, nationality), accompanied by brief instructions or examples to avoid aggregated or ambiguous responses.

The findings also point to substantive limitations in the way participant demographics were conceptualised within the reporting framework. Information on participants’ migratory background was almost entirely absent, and gender was often not explicitly requested, resulting in it being implicitly assumed rather than systematically collected. These gaps significantly constrain the assessment of who actually participated and limit the possibility of evaluating the inclusiveness of participatory processes, particularly with respect to marginalised or underrepresented groups.

Notably, none of the project reports referred to the so-called Green Pass⁴ as a possible barrier to participation, even though it was in force during part of the period under study.

⁴ The Italian “Green Pass” (officially *certificazione verde COVID-19*) was a COVID-19 health certification system introduced in 2021 that attested vaccination, recovery, or a negative test result, and was used to regulate access to workplaces, travel, and public activities.

While this does not allow conclusions about its actual impact on participation, its absence from project reporting suggests that some contextual factors affecting access may not have been explicitly considered or documented within institutional accounts of participatory processes.

Overall, patterns suggest that higher levels of digitalisation were more often associated with more intensive forms of participation and greater attention to inclusion, although digitalisation alone was not sufficient to produce consistently high levels of intersectionality.

Specifically, the observed association between higher levels of digitalisation and more intensive forms of participation suggests that digital tools may facilitate participatory arrangements that go beyond consultation, particularly when they enable ongoing interaction, coordination, or shared decision-making. While offline and minimally digital projects were predominantly consultative, projects characterised by advanced digitalisation more frequently reached partnership and delegation levels. However, this pattern should not be interpreted as a direct causal effect of digitalisation; rather, it indicates that projects designed to share decision making authority may be more likely to adopt advanced digital tools as part of their participatory architecture, probably because of the usefulness of the platform itself.

Similarly, the descriptive association between digitalisation and intersectionality suggests that higher levels of digitalisation may support a more articulated consideration of inclusion, particularly at a medium level. Hybrid and highly digitalised projects more frequently moved beyond generic approaches to inclusion, possibly because digital tools facilitate targeted outreach, flexible participation formats, or differentiated engagement strategies. However, the persistence of low intersectionality across all levels of digitalisation and the rarity of high intersectionality indicate that digital tools alone are insufficient to produce fully intersectional participatory practices. In fact, digital tools seem to be used as

alternatives to paper-based instruments, such as online versions of questionnaires or forms, without substantially modifying the structure or depth of the participatory process.

The limited attention to the assessment of participants' satisfaction represents a further weakness of the projects, as most reports did not document any structured evaluation methods and relied, at most, on informal feedback such as conversations with participants outside formal activities. A possible way to address this gap would be to provide project managers with a short, standardised survey, already integrated into the existing digital platform, which could be shared with participants to simultaneously assess both satisfaction and basic demographic characteristics.

Study 2 – Meanings of Participation, Inclusion, and Digitalisation among Project Managers in Emilia-Romagna

This study focuses on the meanings of participation, inclusion, and digitalisation as perceived by professionals responsible for implementing participatory projects within the policy framework promoted by the Emilia-Romagna Region. The Region supports participatory initiatives through a well-established institutional framework, including specific guidelines, dedicated calls for proposals, and a structured evaluation system. This framework provides methodological and operational support to project managers and is intended to steer both the quality and inclusiveness of participatory processes.

Investigating how project leaders interpret and implement these guidelines offers valuable insight into the relationship between policy intentions, the visions of those responsible for implementation, and actual participatory practices. The present study provides one of the first qualitative examinations of how local officials in Emilia-Romagna interpret and operationalise participation, inclusion, and digitalisation within publicly supported participatory projects.

Through qualitative interviews with professionals who played a central role in the design and implementation of participatory projects (e.g., project managers, coordinators, digital strategists), the study explores how participation, digital tools, and inclusive practices are understood and interpreted, and how these understandings reflect regional objectives and policy guidelines.

These perspectives are particularly relevant because the ways in which project leaders conceptualise participation, inclusion, and digitalisation significantly shape how participatory processes are designed and carried out. Their interpretations influence the methods adopted, the degree of citizen involvement enabled, and the extent to which accessibility and equity are addressed in practice. Examining their views therefore provides a key to understanding how participation is translated from policy into practice by those responsible for its implementation.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews, which were conducted between the 7th of November 2024 and 6th of December 2024 via MS Teams, each lasting around one hour.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Bologna (Protocol No. 0313577, 11/10/2024). Before each interview, participants received detailed information about the study and provided written informed consent. All interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim.

Participants

A total of 131 potential participants were contacted based on a list provided by the Emilia-Romagna Region, which included individuals who had managed participatory projects between 2020 and 2024. The participants were interviewed by a researcher not directly

affiliated with Emilia-Romagna, and they were assured that the content of the individual interviews would only be shared among the researchers, while the anonymised and aggregated data would be shared with Emilia-Romagna as well.

Given their demanding roles, a response rate of about one-third was expected. This expectation was based on their previous work with project managers of participatory projects, who have very busy working lives, and many commitments related to their roles which would make it difficult for them to spare one hour for an interview on a workday. In some cases, the initial contact redirected the invitation to a colleague more directly involved in participation activities; occasionally, two colleagues joined together when both contributed substantially to the project.

In total, 41 individuals were interviewed, which represented the 31.2% of the invited participants ($n = 131$), the majority of which ($n = 29$) were managers, while the rest ($n = 12$) held other significant roles within the project team or were colleagues who had been closely involved but not as the primary manager. The participants represent a total of 35 participating projects. Most of the participants were project managers of only one project in the chosen time frame, while 5 of them managed between 2 and 4 projects between 2020 and 2024. In 6 cases two people from the same projects were interviewed. Among the 6 projects for which two colleagues participated in interviews, in two cases the official project manager was not present in the interview and other team members represented the project, in two cases the colleagues were from the same institution, while in the other two cases, they represented different organizations collaborating on the same project. Even in the case of colleagues, Individual interviews were preferred, but when unavoidable due to personal preference of the subjects two-people interviews were organised. The demographic of the participants involved is depicted in Table 2.

Among the 41 interviewees, 24 identified as women and 17 as men, with an age range from 29 to 72 years ($M = 49$; $Mdn = 48$). Most participants ($n = 23$) were employed in public administrations, while others worked in associations ($n = 5$), cooperatives ($n = 4$), foundations ($n = 3$), secondary schools ($n = 2$), private companies ($n = 2$), and one in a voluntary organization. The majority managed projects implemented within municipalities, classified into four size categories based on population, following an adaptation of the Ministry of the Interior's criteria (Ministero dell'Interno, 2007): four in small municipalities, 11 in medium-small, 15 in medium-large, and seven in large municipalities. Three participants coordinated projects situated in educational settings rather than in municipal contexts. Participants reported a wide range of professional experience in the field of participation, from 0 to 30 years (mean = 12.5). Around 34% of participants ($n = 14$) were relatively new to the sector, with less than 5 years of experience, 46% ($n = 19$) had between 5 and 10 years, and 20% ($n = 8$) had more than 10 years of experience in participation. This distribution highlights the presence of both early-career professionals and long-standing experts within the sample, contributing to a nuanced understanding of participatory practices across different career stages. Participants worked across three main organizational types: (1) Public sector, which mostly included municipalities, (2) private sector and third sector such as social cooperatives, non-governmental organizations, associations, and independent foundations, and (3) schools.

Table 2

Participant ID⁵	Gender	Age	Organisation	Municipality Size⁶
ID01_M_TS	Man	34	foundation	large
ID02_W_PA	Woman	45	public administration	large
ID03_M_PA	Man	30	public administration	large
ID04_M_TS	Man	72	voluntary organization	large
ID05_W_PA	Woman	61	public administration	large
ID06_W_PA	Woman	57	public administration	large
ID07_W_PC	Woman	61	private limited company	large
ID08_W_PA	Woman	54	public administration	medium large
ID09_M_TS	Man	46	cooperative	medium large
ID10_W_PA	Woman	57	public administration	medium large
ID11_W_PA	Woman	48	public administration	medium large
ID12_W_TS	Woman	29	cooperative	medium large
ID13_M_TS	Man	45	foundation	medium large
ID14_M_PA	Man	59	public administration	medium large
ID15_W_PA	Woman	56	public administration	medium large
ID16_W_PA	Woman	30	public administration	medium large
ID17_W_PA	Woman	49	public administration	medium large
ID18_W_PA	Woman	48	public administration	medium large
ID19_M_PA	Man	51	public administration	medium large
ID20_M_PA	Man	49	public administration	medium large
ID21_M_TS	Man	45	association	medium large
ID22_W_TS	Woman	65	association	medium large
ID23_W_TS	Woman	66	cooperative	medium small
ID24_W_PA	Woman	48	public administration	medium small
ID25_W_PA	Woman	54	public administration	medium small
ID26_W_PC	Woman	46	private limited company	medium small
ID27_M_TS	Man	64	foundation	medium small
ID28_W_PA	Woman	31	public administration	medium small
ID29_W_PA	Woman	34	public administration	medium small
ID30_W_PA	Woman	46	public administration	medium small

⁵ **Participants ID** is made up of a sequential number (e.g., ID03), followed by a letter that signals the gender of such participant (“M” for men and “W” for women), and a code linked to the type of organization they work for (PA = Public Administration; TS = Third Sector Organization; PC = Private Limited Company; SC = School).

⁶ **Municipality size** was categorised according to population size, following a classification inspired by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, which classifies municipalities into twelve demographic classes based on population size [33], but merging each three categories into one, getting a total of four. Municipalities are categorised as small (fewer than 2000 inhabitants), medium small (2000–9999), medium large (10,000–99,999), and large (more than 100,000 inhabitants).

ID31_M_PA	Man	56	public administration	medium small
ID32_M_PA	Man	29	public administration	medium small
ID33_M_PA	Man	43	public administration	medium small
ID34_W_TS	Woman	46	association	small
ID35_M_TS	Man	56	association	small
ID36_M_PA	Man	63	public administration	small
ID37_W_TS	Woman	42	cooperative	small
ID38_M_PA	Man	44	public administration	medium small
ID39_M_SC	Man	57	high school	N/A
ID40_W_SC	Woman	59	high school	N/A
ID41_W_TS	Woman	34	association	N/A

Data collection

A semi-structured interview guide was designed to investigate how public officials and project managers understood the meaning of participation in participatory processes, and the relationship between inclusion and digitalisation within participatory practices.

This instrument was organised into four thematic sections, each with targeted open-ended questions and prompts to elicit both conceptual reflections and concrete examples, while ensuring coverage of key research themes: background, participation, digitalisation, and inclusion.

The introductory part invited participants to introduce themselves and their role as well as their professional background and previous experience in participatory initiatives. The second section focused on participation, with questions about the participant's professional background (e.g., "Can you introduce yourself and describe your current role?"), it then addressed the meaning and forms of participation. Participants were first asked to reflect on the concept of participation (e.g., "In your view, what does 'participation' mean?") and to describe the main forms in which participation takes place in their professional context ("What are the main forms through which participation is expressed?"). The interview then focused on the regional context, with questions such as, "Based on your definition, how do you see the participatory projects supported by the Emilia-Romagna Region?" and "What is

your perception of the effectiveness of these projects?” Participants were encouraged to provide concrete examples and to discuss both strengths and limitations of regional participatory initiatives. The third section delved into the use and impact of digital tools in participation. Participants were asked about digital instruments used in projects funded by the Emilia-Romagna Region and to provide examples. They were then invited to discuss the role and impact of these tools in participatory initiatives. Further questions explored which digital tools they considered most useful for fostering participation and why, as well as the specific circumstances and participant groups involved (“In which circumstances and with which participants do these tools help foster participation?”). Finally, participants were asked to reflect on the effectiveness of the digital tools currently used by the Region to support participation (“What is your opinion on the effectiveness of the digital tools currently used by the Region to support participation?”). The fourth section focused on inclusion. Participants were asked to define what inclusion means in the context of participation and what makes participation inclusive (“What does inclusion mean in participation?”; “What makes participation inclusive?”). They were then invited to reflect on whether the initiatives supported by the Emilia-Romagna Region could be considered inclusive for minority groups and to specify which ones (“Do you consider these initiatives inclusive for minority groups? For which groups?”). Follow-up questions asked for examples and for the main challenges to inclusion within their own contexts and in the Region’s participatory initiatives (“Can you provide some examples?”; “What are the main challenges to inclusion in your context?”). Finally, participants evaluated the effectiveness of current inclusion policies and practices, particularly in relation to digitalisation (“How do you assess the effectiveness of inclusion policies and practices in Emilia-Romagna, especially regarding digitalisation?”).

The guide was designed to be flexible, allowing the interviewer to explore emerging themes in greater depth while ensuring consistency across interviews. This structure enabled

participants to discuss both conceptual understanding and concrete practices related to inclusion and digitalisation in public participation.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining inductive and deductive coding. Initial categories reflected the interview structure and existing literature on participation, while new codes were generated from recurring ideas and narratives within the data.

Specifically, the analysis was conducted through six phases: (1) familiarisation with the data, involving repeated reading of the interview transcripts; (2) generation of initial codes, informed both by the research questions and emerging patterns in the data (e.g. Responsibility Towards the Common Good; The Illusion of Inclusion); (3) creating themes by grouping codes into broader categories (e.g., Being Part of a Community; Innovative Practices for (Digital) Inclusion); (4) reviewing themes in relation to the coded data and the entire dataset; (5) defining and naming themes, leading to analytically distinct but interconnected thematic areas (e.g., Contributing to and Being Responsible for Collective Decisions; Structural Barriers and the Risk of Reinforcing Inequality; Digitalisation as an Opportunity); and (6) producing the report through the selection and interpretation of illustrative extracts.

The analysis focused on how participants conceptualised participation, inclusion, and digital engagement, and on the nuances of their professional experiences. NVivo software was used to support systematic coding and cross-case comparison. Additionally, relevant examples of good practices were selected. These were drawn directly from the interviews and were chosen because they clearly illustrate how participants perceive and experience participation, inclusion, and the use of digital tools in regional projects.

Results

The analysis explored how those responsible for implementing participatory projects within the Emilia-Romagna Region understand and give meaning to the concept of participation. Interviewees described a variety of interpretations, which seemed to be shaped by the institutional frameworks of Emilia-Romagna, as well as the on-field experience they had in their career as well as their beliefs.

The themes and sub-themes have been structured and described as follows:

1. The Meaning of Participation

Regarding participation, the analysis identified a set of interconnected meanings articulated across several thematic areas.

(a) Contributing to and Being Responsible for the Collective Decisions

Participation was primarily understood as contributing to and being responsible for collective decisions that affect the community. This theme was articulated through two closely related dimensions:

(a.1) Responsibility Towards the Common Good

Participation is described by emphasising the aspect of care for shared resources and collective well-being, beyond individual interests.

(a.2) Responsibility of Political Choices

Participation was also described as informed engagement, active involvement in decision-making, as well as the rejection of passive delegation to institutions.

(b) Co-Responsibility and Horizontal Governance Between Citizens and Public

Administration

A second meaning framed participation as co-responsibility and shared governance between citizens and public administrations. Participants described participation as a horizontal

relationship aimed at redistributing power and fostering collaboration between both institutional and civic actors.

(b.1) Give up a Part of Our Decision Making Power

Some referred to the action done by both institutional actors and citizens of consciously sharing authority, responsibility, and control over decisions and processes.

(c) Being Part of a Community

Participation was also described as a relational process rooted in community belonging. In this perspective, participation involves bringing people together, strengthening social ties, and fostering a sense of collective identity.

(c.1) A Shared Direction: Working Toward a Common Goal

Sometimes participation was also described as working toward common objectives and collective projects that give direction and purpose to individual contributions.

(d) Empowerment and Activation

Another prominent meaning framed participation as a process of empowerment and activation. Participants described participation as enabling individuals to move from passive roles to active contributors, reclaiming agency and the capacity to influence decisions. This understanding emphasises participation as a political and transformative practice that supports voice, protagonism, and collective action.

(d.1) The Effective Exchange of Information

A crucial way to promote empowerment and activation is through information. In this sense, participation was further understood as a process grounded in the effective exchange of information between citizens and institutions. Communication, transparency, and mutual understanding are seen as foundational conditions for

participation, as they enable citizens to engage meaningfully while letting institutions better understand local needs and perspectives.

(e) The Complexity and Difficulty of Participation

Participants also recognised participation as a complex and demanding process, reflecting awareness of institutional resistance, organisational constraints, and the cultural unfamiliarity of participatory practices, which make participation difficult to implement and sustain in everyday administrative contexts.

(e.1) The Hollow Meaning of Participation

The practical difficulties of participation are reflected in the theoretical side as well. Some participants highlighted the risk of participation becoming hollow or merely symbolic, as they reflected on how the term “participation” can be overused or instrumentalised, losing its substantive meaning when it is reduced to formal compliance or rhetorical commitment rather than genuine power-sharing.

2. Inclusion

Regarding inclusion, the analysis identified a set of meanings that capture the tension between normative commitments to openness and the practical difficulties of translating inclusion into concrete participatory practices.

(a) The Meaning of Inclusion

Inclusion was generally understood as the principle of “leaving no one behind” and ensuring that participation is open to all. Participants often framed inclusion in broad and normative terms, associating it with equality of access, fairness, and openness, while differing in how concretely they defined who should be included and how.

(b) Inclusion Lays in the Process

A second meaning framed inclusion as something embedded in the design and management

of participatory processes. In this view, inclusion depends on procedural conditions such as accessible information, appropriate tools, timing, and facilitation, rather than being an automatic outcome of participation itself.

(c) The Illusion of Inclusion

Several accounts revealed a taken-for-granted understanding of inclusion, where participation was assumed to be inclusive by default. In these cases, inclusion was rarely problematised, and limited attention was paid to who might be excluded, resulting in a gap between inclusive intentions and actual accessibility.

(d) The Struggle for Inclusion: Who's Missing?

A more reflexive perspective highlighted the difficulty of engaging marginalised or underrepresented groups. Participants identified recurring absences, particularly young people, individuals with migratory backgrounds, and people with disabilities, acknowledging that inclusion often emerges reactively rather than through deliberate design.

(e) A Matter of Target: The Paradox of Inclusive Designs

Inclusion was also discussed in relation to the tension between universal and targeted approaches. While some argued that specific targeting is necessary to avoid reproducing the participation of “the usual participants,” others expressed concern that targeting may unintentionally reinforce boundaries or exclusions.

(f) Structural Barriers and the Risk of Reinforcing Inequality

Finally, inclusion was understood as constrained by structural and contextual barriers, such as socio-economic inequalities, time constraints, language barriers, and institutional routines. These factors were seen as contributing to the reproduction of existing inequalities, limiting the capacity of participatory processes to reach beyond already engaged groups.

3. Digitalisation

Regarding digitalisation, the analysis identified a set of meanings that reflect its ambivalent role within participatory practices, simultaneously enabling new forms of engagement and reproducing existing inequalities.

(a) Digitalisation as an Opportunity

Digital tools were primarily understood as instruments to increase efficiency, manage participation more easily, and extend reach. Participants described digitalisation as useful for collecting inputs, sharing information, and organising participatory activities, particularly through online questionnaires, platforms, and social media.

(b) Digital Divides and Inclusion

A second meaning highlighted the unequal effects of digitalisation. While digital tools were often perceived as accessible and inclusive, participants also recognised persistent digital divides related to age, education, socio-economic status, language, and cultural background, which can limit effective participation for certain groups.

(c) Hybrid Participation and the Value of Presence

Digitalisation was frequently framed as most effective when combined with in-person engagement. Hybrid forms of participation were seen as a way to balance flexibility and accessibility with the relational and deliberative qualities of face-to-face interaction, which many participants considered essential for meaningful participation.

(d) Barriers of Authentication, Design, and the Italian SPID System

Participants identified institutional and technical barriers linked to platform design and authentication systems, particularly the Italian SPID system. These barriers were described as discouraging participation due to complexity, lack of anonymity, and limited accessibility for specific groups, such as older citizens and minors.

4. Innovative Practices for (Digital) Inclusion

Regarding inclusive practices, the analysis highlighted a set of concrete strategies and approaches through which participants attempted to address barriers to participation in everyday project implementation.

(a) Small Adjustments, Meaningful Change

Inclusive practices were often described as small, deliberate adjustments rather than large-scale interventions. These included changes in language use, meeting formats, or facilitation styles, which participants viewed as capable of making participation more accessible without fundamentally altering project structures.

(b) Personalised and Community-Based Outreach

Several participants emphasised the importance of personalised and community-based outreach practices. Inclusion was pursued through direct contact, informal communication channels, and collaboration with trusted local actors, particularly when institutional communication was perceived as insufficient to reach marginalised groups.

(c) Peer Support and Practical Empowerment

Inclusion was also enacted through peer-based and practical forms of support. Participants described practices aimed at strengthening participants' capacities to engage, such as mutual support, accompaniment, and informal learning, which helped reduce barriers linked to skills, confidence, or familiarity with participatory processes.

(d) Family-Friendly Participation

Some inclusive practices focused on addressing care-related constraints. Participants described initiatives designed to enable the participation of parents, particularly women, by adapting schedules, providing childcare, or creating spaces that allowed children to be present during participatory activities.

(e) Accessibility First Approaches.

Accessibility emerged as a concrete dimension of inclusive practice. Participants referred to efforts aimed at reducing physical and sensory barriers, such as attention to mobility, spatial design, and usability of venues, often becoming visible only when specific needs were encountered.

(f) Language and Cultural Mediation.

Finally, inclusive practices included language and cultural mediation strategies. Participants described the use of simplified language, translation, and collaboration with community mediators to facilitate participation among people with a migratory background, recognising language as a key barrier to engagement.

Together, these findings show that participation, inclusion, and digitalisation are deeply interconnected and shaped by institutional frameworks, design choices, and everyday practices. The following sections present these themes in detail through the experiences and voices of those directly involved in participatory processes.

1. The Meaning of Participation

Across the interviews, participation is primarily understood as contributing to and being responsible for the decisions that affect the community. This understanding encompasses multiple dimensions, including individual civic responsibility, collective agency, empowerment, and the role of public administrations in facilitating meaningful engagement. Participants consistently described participation not merely as being present or consulted, but as actively shaping decisions, co-producing outcomes, and taking ownership of the political and social processes that affect collective life. This conception reflects both a normative vision of participatory governance, as promoted by the Emilia-Romagna Region,

and practical experiences across gender, professional roles, and organizational contexts. The following subsections detail how this understanding of participation manifests through responsibility toward the common good, shared political decision-making, co-governance with institutions, community belonging, empowerment, information exchange, and the inherent complexities of participatory practices.

(a) Contributing to and Being Responsible for the Collective Decisions

The main meaning of participation seems to be contributing to and being responsible for the decisions of the community, which is reflected in two dimensions that emerged across the interviews. For eight participants, participation involves actively taking part in shaping decisions that affect the community; the key points that emerged are: the individual's civic responsibility, the limits of representative democracy, and the role of public administrations in enabling meaningful participation:

“Participation [. . .] is creating spaces, opportunities, and freedom of expression, for people to co-construct the vision of a problem that matters to them [the citizens] in their everyday life; as making citizens aware of this opportunity can truly be a meaningful path toward building the common good” (ID25_W_PA)

These perspectives describe participation as a process anchored in responsibility, collective agency, and shared vision. It is not only about being consulted or present, but more about being empowered to influence decisions that respond to the needs and voices of the broader community. This conceptualization, which is aligned with the normative vision promoted by the Emilia-Romagna Region, appears consistently across gender and professional roles. This idea of contributing to and being responsible for the decisions of the community, is then declined into two subsections.

(a.1) Responsibility Towards the Common Good

One of the core dimensions concerns the idea of participation as a form of responsibility toward the common good. For three interviewees in particular, women working in different environments, specifically a PA, a Third Sector Organization, and a School, taking part means contributing not only to individual interests but to shared goals that benefit the broader community. As one interviewee explains, participation means investing time and energy in something that belongs to everyone, without expecting a personal return:

“To me [. . .] it always boils down to the concept of common good, that is something that is not mine, nor yours, it belongs to everyone, but it is not ‘public’: it is ‘common’ in so far as you take care of it, you invest time and energy in it, without expecting anything in return on a personal level” (ID40_W_SC)

Two more participants view participation as a collective assumption of responsibility for shared spaces or issues, grounded in everyday relationships rather than institutional roles. The emphasis on shared responsibility challenges the idea that participation can be delegated entirely to public institutions, suggesting a shift toward distributed responsibility, where citizens themselves become co-actors in the care and construction of the common good. This understanding of participation as shared responsibility opens up reflections on the role of individuals and communities in taking ownership of political choices and contributing to the direction of collective life.

(a.2) Responsibility of Political Choices

This understanding of participation as shared responsibility also includes a specific focus on political decision-making. Six participants, mostly women working in public administration, emphasised that participation entails not only contributing to shared goals but taking an active role in shaping political choices: not just being heard, but contributing

actively to the collective decision making and therefore refusing passive delegation. From this perspective, participation means co-producing public decisions, being informed, and rejecting the expectation that institutions will decide on their own. Participation is a way of taking part in shaping decisions, rather than simply reacting to them. Another interviewee builds on this idea by connecting participation more directly to the relationship between citizens and institutions, stating that *“Participating is a way not to delegate”* (ID08_W_PA), and then expands on this link between participation and political responsibility, suggesting that to truly influence decisions, one must engage directly and take ownership of political processes, therefore going from mere delegation to active participation in politics.

As one participant argues, participation is a political act that challenges passive attitudes and invites citizens to take ownership of the issues that affect them:

“In my view, it means that people are called to be responsible for the things that concern them. [. . .] This means people are also called to be more informed, to be more actively involved in the issues that affect them, and therefore to give up the delegation and the expectation that someone else will think and act in their place” (ID09_M_TS)

Two participants in particular, both women, highlighted the importance of involving citizens from the very beginning of the policy or project cycle. Early engagement allows those who will be affected or benefit to actively shape the process, ensuring that initiatives respond to the real needs of the community by engaging those who will be directly impacted. This involvement can take the form of participatory assessment as well as deliberative practices that complement traditional electoral participation. Another participant frames participation as the involvement of citizens in shaping public decisions, emphasizing the role of public bodies in fostering shared governance:

“From the point of view of a public body, [. . .] it is the involvement of citizens in public decisions, or at least their input, which enables a public administration to act in a shared way” (ID29_W_PA)

However, another participant also acknowledges the role of elected officials within representative democracy. In fact, despite the various levels of participation, the ultimate responsibility for decisions rests with those who were formally elected. In addition to individual responsibility and collective engagement, the next theme broadens this concept by emphasizing collaborative governance and shared power between institutions and citizens. Here, participants reflect on the structural and procedural dimension of participation, where decision making is intentionally distributed and grounded in horizontal relationships.

(b) Co-Responsibility and Horizontal Governance Between Citizens and Public Administration

Among the participants, the notion of participation as co-responsibility and shared governance emerged as a central theme, showing balanced representation across genders and being particularly prominent among officials from large municipalities. This theme reflects broader theoretical understandings of participatory governance that emphasize power sharing and horizontal decision-making. Six participants described participation as a *“shared responsibility between the citizens and the administration”* (ID02_W_PA). This comprehensive approach underlines the collaborative nature of participation, in which public and private actors jointly shape not only solutions but also the criteria for their success. A senior public administrator also detailed this co-responsibility as central in the entire project cycle, from problem definition through co-design and implementation to joint evaluation: *“aiming for equal levels of governance responsibility throughout all phases of a project’s life cycle”* (ID05_W_PA).

This approach to participation emphasizes the sharing of decision making power and the establishment of horizontal relationships between administrations and communities. As a public official notes, this reflects the constitutional principle of horizontal subsidiarity, a principle, present in the Constitution, which refers to the distribution and sharing of decision making power across different actors at the local level, rather than concentrating it solely within public institutions:

“Sharing the decision making power of the administration that holds power in a given territory. Sharing certain decisions, on certain topics, for public policy; as the Constitution defines it: horizontal subsidiarity” (ID33_M_PA)

Horizontal subsidiarity is a concept that is found directly in the documents issued by the Emilia-Romagna Region. This quote, on the one hand underlines horizontal responsibility, but also highlights the fact that it must be on certain topics only. This orientation toward horizontal relationships is also reflected in more operational accounts, where participation is described as a deliberate effort to involve local communities in shaping decisions and avoiding top-down impositions: *“no longer imposing projects or decisions from the top down but trying to make this relationship as horizontal as possible”* (ID01_M_TS).

These perspectives illustrate how participatory processes seek to flatten traditional hierarchies, fostering more equal and shared governance relationships between citizens and public administrations. Beyond shared decision-making, two more participants reflected on the proactive role of public administrations in supporting and stimulating participation. This role can be understood in two complementary ways: as an enabler, creating inclusive opportunities for engagement, and as a catalyst, actively encouraging citizens to take initiative and contribute to community life. Specifically, one of them described the enabling function as the ability to reach not only organised groups but also individuals who are

typically less engaged, yet interested in contributing to specific aspects of public life. It is also worth noting that men participants tended to highlight the concept of power more frequently than women did.

(b.1) Give up a Part of Our Decision making Power

While participation is often associated with empowerment and voice, six participants also described it as involving a conscious act of sharing or even giving up a portion of one's own decision making power for the benefit of the collective. This idea applies not only to citizens, but to institutional actors as well, and is seen as a prerequisite for any genuine participatory process. One participant summarizes the concept as:

“we are all there to give up a small part of our decision making power and to share it with others. This applies to everyone, to both administrators and citizens” (ID34_W_TS)

This redistribution of power requires a strong commitment to transparency and to share information, which underlines the necessity to mediate between diverse needs and expectations, especially when consensus is not easy to obtain. Closely linked to this is the idea that participation demands a shift from speaking from a personal point of view to speaking on behalf of the community. It is not only about expressing individual opinions, but about carrying the voice of the community into shared processes. A participant adds:

“Participation also means taking on responsibilities for one's role in relation to others: not only speaking with one's own individual interests in mind, but being the voice of the community” (ID19_M_PA)

Building this kind of collective vision involves both critical thinking and openness to difference. For two participants, collaboration is not simply about alignment, but about shaping ideas and practices through dialogue and co-construction. They describe a vision of participation that goes beyond individual empowerment, which becomes a shared space

where responsibilities, decisions, and perspectives are negotiated, mediated, and constructed collectively. Alongside collaboration and co-responsibility, some participants also described participation as a form of collective reasoning. It is not only about outcomes or decisions, but about the process of publicly thinking together, where different perspectives are brought into dialogue and confronted in a shared space. This emphasis on reasoning is closely tied to the idea of sharing time, experience, and personal perspective, within a collective project.

Participation becomes a relational act, rooted in openness and reciprocity. A noticeable difference emerged in how men and women talked about active participation. Many men participants, especially those working in medium or large municipalities, described participation as something that involves giving up part of their power, time, or control to serve the wider community. In their vision, participation was often framed as a responsibility or a way to contribute to the common good by stepping back from individual interests. On the other hand, women tended to speak about participation as something rooted in relationships, with the emphasis being more often placed on building connections, sharing responsibility, and working together to create something meaningful. Rather than focusing on what must be given up, they highlighted the importance of care, dialogue, and collaboration.

(c) Being Part of a Community

In addition to responsibility and co-governance, a more relational understanding of participation, focused on community belonging, connection, and shared purpose, emerged particularly among male participants working in small to medium municipalities. In this view, participation is about bringing people together, supporting collective projects, and being part of a community, emphasizing participation as a process of engaging people around ideas and shared design, with the aim of generating value for the local context. A younger participant reflects on the importance of participation as a space for connection and

expression, especially for those who might otherwise remain on the margins. While acknowledging the political dimension, he prioritizes the creation of inclusive and meaningful relationships:

“Participation is also about connecting people and ensuring that they, even those with vulnerabilities, find a context where they can express themselves” (ID32_M_PA)

(c.1) A Shared Direction: Working Toward a Common Goal

The idea of participation as oriented toward a common goal emerged in the reflections of three women working in both public institutions and the third sector. Their accounts highlight participation not simply as a process of involvement, but as a shared effort in which diverse contributions are directed toward collective aims. What matters is that everyone brings something of their own toward a shared objective. However, participation requires not only acting together, but imagining together, constructing a shared vision that is broad enough to include multiple perspectives and goals. This collective orientation also implies a form of being responsible not only for one’s own interests, but for the broader well being of others and the community. As a participant notes:

“[Participation] it is taking to heart the public good: one’s well being and that of fellow citizens” (ID10_W_PA)

(d) Empowerment and Activation

Across the interviews, participation is frequently described as a process that enables individuals to become active contributors to collective life. Eight participants point out that, rather than remaining passive recipients of decisions, being engaged in shaping the policies and actions that affect their communities is important. This understanding of participation is closely linked to notions of empowerment and activation, where individuals reclaim agency

through collaborative involvement. In this perspective, taking part means not only being heard, but gaining the capacity to influence, build, and transform. This idea is clearly expressed by one participant, who defines participation as an opportunity for citizens to take an active role in shaping policies that serve the collective interest:

“Giving citizens the opportunity to be active participants in the construction of policies for the community itself” (ID35_M_TS)

The possibility of becoming a co-protagonist of change is closely linked to the experience of overcoming a shared sense of powerlessness. One participant reflects on how the fragmentation of responsibilities, both within institutions and among citizens, can lead to a perception of disempowerment, where no one feels they have the capacity to effect change. Participation, in this view, becomes the process through which individuals reclaim agency by acting together:

“It is very reductive to see participation as a collection of advice, [. . .] in my opinion it’s quite the opposite. Because I believe that the specialisation of functions has created a simultaneous disempowerment, where citizens, but also those working in [public administration] offices, even those in positions of responsibility, end up feeling like they can’t influence anything, because they only have agency over a limited bit. And this perception of powerlessness changes when you come together with others and realize that together you can actually enact change. But this process, in my view, involves both a shared assumption of responsibility and a process of empowerment that go hand in hand: I can imagine a future that’s different from the present, because I can act to make it happen. Otherwise, it just becomes a source of great frustration” (ID37_W_TS)

Building on this notion, several participants, most of them men working in medium-large or large municipalities, emphasised that participation means being active. That is, having the opportunity to take part in decisions and processes beyond the limited scope of

formal voting, and rejecting passive or symbolic involvement. One of them specifies that being active also meant reclaiming a sense of belonging and voice in both personal and political life. Participation becomes a way of mattering, not because one's individual preference is always realised, but because one's voice is recognised within the process:

“Being [. . .] a protagonist in the life you live, both personally and within the social and political organizations you are involved with. [. . .] Participation, instead, is this idea that you can matter, not in the sense that what you say gets done, but in the sense that at least someone listens to you” (ID39_M_SC)

Three interviewees explicitly distinguished between active and passive forms of participation. The former involves contributing to and shaping decisions, while the latter is limited to presence or consultation without influence. However, reaching this level of activation is not easy, as participation is deeply rooted in political agency. In fact, participation is not just a technical or administrative tool, as it is a political act that enables individuals to reject subordination and reclaim their right to shape public life.

(d.1) The Effective Exchange of Information

One of the foundational dimensions of participation identified by interviewees concerns the exchange of information between institutions and citizens. Participants emphasised that participation is not only about keeping citizens informed, but also about enabling mutual understanding and active involvement. Communication is seen as the starting point for cultivating a sense of shared responsibility and for grounding decisions in the real needs of the territory. This theme was especially prominent in the thoughts shared by women working in medium to large municipalities, who often framed participation as a communicative process grounded in transparency, mutual understanding, and responsiveness to community needs. One participant explains that participation begins with providing access

to information that allows citizens to remain aware of what happens in their local context, while another one expands on this idea, emphasizing that information must flow in both directions: from institutions to citizens, and vice versa. This reciprocal exchange helps not only to build awareness of public decisions, but also to allow administrations to better understand local needs:

“Participation involves multiple aspects: first of all, the involvement of the community [...] so the municipality, which is at the service of the citizen, must try to foster and increase participation. This involvement is essential so that citizens can better understand the complexities of governing a city and become aware of the choices that an administration has to make” (ID15_W_PA)

Nine participants emphasised the fundamental role of the territory as a living context that informs and shapes participation. This relationship between governance and place fosters a continuous exchange of information and perspectives between citizens and institutions, highlighting that the territory offers essential feedback, shaping decisions through a dynamic exchange between institutions and the community:

“Participation is a modality that enables a more direct relationship between central governance and the citizens who live in a specific territory” (ID11_W_PA)

There is also an emphasis on the importance of collaboratively identifying and addressing community needs, balancing openness to citizens’ voices with practical feasibility. One participant highlights the value of informal engagement and faithful representation of citizens’ requests, while another participant stresses the need for grounded proposals that realistically respond to community needs. Overall, men tend to focus more on practical, project-based solutions that are grounded in realistic assessments of community needs:

“The proposal of ideas that are both feasible and project-based. Participation should not be a container where people just communicate what they’re missing, but rather an

attempt to carry out the most realistic possible analysis of reality, and then, based on that, to seek solutions and responses to [the citizens'] needs” (ID13_M_TS)

One participant offers an evocative reflection on what it takes for institutions to truly support the ideas that emerge from participatory processes, especially when working with youth. Participation, in her view, is not only about listening but about actively creating the conditions that allow others to take the lead. This involves stepping back, building trust, and offering concrete tools and guidance:

“Participation means making them [the citizens] protagonists, first and foremost, and ensuring that we, as the institution, are capable of silencing our own ideas in order to listen to theirs. Not only giving voice to their ideas, but also providing the tools they can use to realize those ideas. [. . .] You also need to have a bit of courage to hand over the tools” (ID17_W_PA)

Her emphasis on trust and facilitation is then further reflected in her description of youth-oriented focus groups, where participation depends on the adult’s ability to step back and create real space for others. It is worth mentioning that participants who worked with youth had a tendency to mention it, while the others did not mention the demographic characteristics of the group they worked with.

(e) The Complexity and Difficulty of Participation

Four participants also describe participation as a complex topic, a multifaceted process with a number of different dimensions, also tied to the fact that people are not used to it, and might therefore find it more difficult. In some cases, the challenge lies in the institutional culture itself. As one participant notes, participation often demands going beyond what is formally required, which can be met with resistance:

“The way public administration operates, and has always operated, is completely alien to, if not hostile toward, such a concept. That is, I do only what the law strictly requires. Participation [. . .] involves including actors you are not legally obliged to consult, engaging in experiences that are not necessary to complete your administrative acts or procedures”
(ID31_M_PA)

(e.1) The Hollow Meaning of Participation

Finally, a more critical perspective emerged around the term participation itself. Three participants reflected on how the word has become overused, to the point of losing its meaning.

“There are some words like “community” and “participation” that have now been used so much, for so many different purposes, that they have almost no meaning anymore”
(ID32_M_PA)

While another one pointed to the risk of participation being used as a political façade by the governing bodies, mostly elected politicians, which is only employed because it is fashionable rather than as a commitment to meaningful involvement.

2. Inclusion

Inclusion emerged as a central theme in participants’ understanding of participation. Interviewees conceptualised it both as a principle and as a practical challenge, highlighting the gap between aspirational goals and the realities of implementation. While some considered inclusion as a similar term to general participation or diversity, others reflected on structural and procedural factors that enable or hinder equitable engagement. The results reveal two broad patterns: (1) a tendency to assume participation is inherently inclusive, (2) and a more critical awareness of the difficulties in reaching marginalised or underrepresented

groups. Across these perspectives, inclusion was consistently framed as context-dependent, shaped by social, cultural, and institutional constraints, and often requiring deliberate strategies to translate ideals into practice.

(a) The Meaning of Inclusion

Participants commonly described inclusion as the practice of “leaving no one behind” and ensuring equitable access to participation. Eleven participants defined it simply as “including everyone.” Four of them clarified this as “everyone who wants to participate” (ID35_M_TS), while others provided concrete examples, most often referring to people with disabilities or vulnerable groups or characteristics like gender and age. As one participant summarised it:

“Inclusion means managing to involve even those participants who have more difficulties in taking part: due to physical disabilities, age, or because they are busy during certain time slots, such as workers who cannot attend meetings during working hours, or due to distance” (ID24_W_PA)

Some participants chose to define inclusion through synonyms or antonyms. A common response was “the opposite of exclusion”, which was mentioned by three participants, while four described it as “a synonym of participation”. In the latter case, some argued that “participation” should be the preferred term, as it is already inherently inclusive:

“Inclusion means that someone has to include someone else, so it’s already a somewhat hierarchical word. Participation is much more neutral. Perhaps it could be another way of saying the same thing” (ID37_W_TS)

One participant also reflected on the concept of “integration”, suggesting it as a more appropriate term, particularly when referring to people with a migratory background who have not been living in the area for long. Additionally, three participants reflected on the

relationship between participation and inclusion, stating that inclusion is a prerequisite for genuine participation: *“If it isn’t inclusive, then it isn’t participation”* (ID10_W_PA). One added the concept of continuity, defining inclusion as the continuity of the participatory process itself.

(b) Inclusion Lays in the Process

Eight participants linked inclusion to procedural fairness: ensuring accessible information, tools, and opportunities for all: *“Giving everyone the same base of information, skills, and knowledge so that all can be equally effective”* (ID12_W_TS).

Others framed it as a policy-driven goal, tied to institutional directives or evaluation criteria, such as age or youth engagement: *“There is a very strong focus on young people [...] even in the submission form, this was treated as a kind of rewarding aspect.”* (ID09_M_TS).

However, a recurring concern was the disconnection between inclusive rhetoric and practical accessibility, especially regarding disability or linguistic diversity. As one participant explained:

“I’ve never seen the Region communicate in more than one language [...] or provide sign language interpretation [...] There are no clear signals that accessibility is treated as a must. [...] There is no attention to people with psychological disabilities [...] I have seen a person in a wheelchair, but not a blind one, not a deaf one, not an autistic one, not even foreign participants, unless the meeting was dedicated exclusively to them.” (ID34_W_TS).

(c) The Illusion of Inclusion

In practice, inclusion often emerged as a taken-for-granted value. Sixteen participants who defined inclusion vaguely (e.g. “including everyone”) or using synonyms and antonyms (e.g. “the opposite of exclusion”, “a synonym of participation”) tended to assume their

processes were automatically inclusive, without critically reflecting on who might be excluded. As one explained:

“In our initiatives, everyone has always been able to participate. [...] We never really reflected on it, because we’ve never experienced any kind of exclusion” (ID15_W_PA).

This type of comment highlights a broader lack of awareness among participants, which puts their work at risk of unintentionally reproducing exclusionary dynamics without fully realizing it.

Several revealed a limited or distorted understanding of minority groups, sometimes describing “parents with young children” as minorities, while others deflected the question altogether, preferring to speak of “diversity” in general. As one participant explained:

“I don’t know what we mean by minority groups [...] for me, there isn’t a majority or minority group; there’s just a community” (ID38_M_PA)

And another added:

“There is attention to diversity. I’m not sure which type of diversity exactly, because I tend to think of everyone as different from each other. I believe this is the best way to approach inclusivity. So, I don’t know if there’s a group or category that received more or less attention. I think it’s a general attention to diversity.” (ID35_M_TS)

This conceptual vagueness often masked the lack of targeted strategies to engage underrepresented communities. Some participants reflected symbolically on inclusion, associating it with physical or symbolic openness of places. One recalled:

“Once upon a time, places like the parish hall used to feel inclusive: doors were open, anyone could walk in. Today, participation tends to happen by appointment, in closed spaces” (ID23_W_TS).

While others noted how symbolic barriers, linked to venue or affiliation, can be more exclusionary than physical ones:

“When we meet in the parish hall, we automatically exclude a whole set of people who will not come. [...] Symbolic barriers are more powerful than others [physical ones]” (ID34_W_TS).

(d) The Struggle for Inclusion: Who’s Missing?

A more reflexive group of sixteen participants acknowledged the ongoing struggle to ensure inclusivity in practice. They described inclusion as an aspiration rather than an achieved reality, admitting that accessibility and diversity were often addressed reactively rather than by design. As one participant explained:

“We struggled to be inclusive. [...] Sometimes we didn’t design activities with people in mind who might have, say, motor or linguistic difficulties. We only became aware of it afterwards” (ID10_W_PA).

Others echoed this reactive approach:

“We are open to including, but I don’t think about it until I need to include. [...] We didn’t do any preventive communication: we just opened it to all” (ID29_W_PA).

While some drew on regional examples of compensatory measures such as childcare or translation, but they acknowledged that such tools were rarely implemented locally.

Participants identified recurring absences: youth (11 mentions), foreigners or people with a migratory background (15 mentions, 3 of which talked specifically about migrant women), and people with disabilities (4 mentions). Some also highlighted missing groups such as adults with young children (3 mentions) or women constrained by domestic labour (2 mentions).

The typical participant, they noted, was *“someone who generally has the time, a job that isn’t exhausting, and a good level of education”* (ID23_W_TS). As another added:

“Participation usually tends to be dominated by experts, older people, well-informed individuals, and men” (ID09_M_TS).

Some kind of reflection was provided on the theme of the absence of said groups. For instance, three participants reflected on language, stating Italian was the only language used in the communication for their project, and this may have been one of the factors behind the lack of participation among people with a migratory background. One participant mentioned an effort towards inclusive language (e.g. feminine and masculine). Four participants reflected on the challenges of bringing together very different age groups within the same participatory process.

Some interviewees elaborated on barriers linked to youth participation, intergenerational hierarchies, and structural bias. As one participant explained:

“Adults sometimes adopt a paternalistic attitude towards the younger ones [...] even a young facilitator was seen as ‘the little girl,’ though she was 29” (ID10_W_PA).

Others described hostile group dynamics that discouraged youth engagement:

“If I walked into a room at 9 p.m. with eight seventy-year-olds who insulted participants, I’d probably have lasted half an hour and gone to have a beer with my friends” (ID02_W_PA).

Participants also discussed how everyday constraints shape inclusion: adults with young children rarely attend meetings, and even those who wish to do so struggle with timing or caregiving demands.

(e) A Matter of Target: The Paradox of Inclusive Designs

Participants diverged on whether inclusion should be targeted or universal. Project managers of targeted initiatives (e.g. for youth or people with disabilities) naturally framed

inclusion around their focus group, while others argued that specific targeting was essential to avoid reproducing the participation of “the usual people”, explaining that:

“If specific groups are not thought of, they won’t be included. [...] The usual participants take part: people already engaged and interested in the topic” (ID08_W_PA).

Conversely, some cautioned that excessive targeting risks reinforcing divisions:

“Saying, ‘I talk with foreigners about issues that concern foreigners,’ is wrong, because we should address them as citizens like everyone else” (ID37_W_TS).

One participant reflected critically on the exclusion inherent in project design itself:

“Once the target group was chosen, that choice already excludes someone. [...] Choosing a process mainly online still means risking the exclusion of those uncomfortable with digital tools. [...] Honestly, I don’t have any evidence of minority groups that may have been facilitated by our participatory processes.” (ID19_M_PA).

Others framed inclusion as a matter of outreach and communication, noting that even well-designed projects fail if they do not reach their intended audiences:

“The issue is always whether you can reach people and achieve inclusivity within the proposal itself. [...] You may have the most interesting content in the world, but if you keep it in a drawer, it’s only interesting to you” (ID05_W_PA).

(f) Structural Barriers and the Risk of Reinforcing Inequality

A recurring theme across thirteen interviews was that participatory initiatives tend to attract “the usual participants”: who is already active, educated, and civically engaged. This reproduces social inequalities rather than bridging them. As one participant observed:

“If I have to communicate that there is a participatory process, those who come are already the ones who have access to information or look for it. The others, by now, we lose track of” (ID13_M_TS).

Two participants explained the concept of people living in small municipalities in the outskirts of a bigger city who *“treat the municipality as if it was a dormitory”* (ID32_M_PA) and, therefore, spend all day in the bigger city and do not get involved in the municipality where they actually reside.

A small subset of two participants discussed disability more deeply, emphasising that awareness often arose only after issues surfaced in practice. One participant shared: *“It was very useful to have in the group a young man in a wheelchair [...] Having him there forces you to make the switch [...] At the beginning, you don’t think of it; then you find yourself saying, ‘Oops, how do I solve this?’”* (ID20_W_PA)

Another pointed to the systemic issue: *“People with disabilities and their families often do not see themselves as active subjects [...] Which, in a way, is convenient for us, because if they don’t participate, we don’t need to fix the room properly”* (ID09_M_TS).

3. Digitalisation

Digitalisation emerged as a central theme in participants’ reflections on how participatory practices have evolved in recent years. Interviewees described digital tools as both an opportunity to broaden access and a source of new barriers, often reinforcing existing inequalities. While many acknowledged the efficiency and reach of online platforms, they also highlighted issues of exclusion, technological dependency, and the loss of personal connection.

(a) Digitalisation as an Opportunity

Digital tools were mostly used to make participation more manageable and efficient. Online questionnaires, for instance, were used to collect citizens’ needs and proposals, while

online platforms mostly supported initiatives such as participatory budgeting. Both activities were sometimes complemented by paper versions. Municipal websites mainly served as repositories of information, ensuring transparency and accountability, even though they rarely attracted active engagement.

Social media, particularly Facebook and Instagram, were seen as key tools for sharing updates and creating dialogue. For instance, local neighbourhood pages proved especially effective for reaching residents with targeted information. WhatsApp groups also played a role when pre-existing relationships were in place. As one participant explained, people often replied on WhatsApp “*as if they were being messaged individually*” (ID37_W_TS). Another described how a group chat used casually among residents became a crucial coordination tool during a flood, showing how informal digital spaces can suddenly support active civic engagement.

When designed carefully, online meetings were considered effective, particularly when they incorporated interactive tools such as Mentimeter or breakout rooms. However, some participants noted that while digital meetings often drew higher attendance, they risked encouraging multitasking and superficial engagement.

Two participants argued that within public administrations, digitalisation often remains superficial, such as “*the dematerialisation of paper*” (ID14_M_PA) rather than a real transformation. Others linked this to a lack of digital culture and integration between administrative innovation and participatory aims.

(b) Digital Divides and Inclusion

Participants generally perceived digitalisation as widespread, describing society as “very digitalised” and everyday digital access as almost universal. For many, online tools seemed inherently inclusive:

“[Digital] participation was very democratic: from home, via computer or mobile phone. Practically very, very inclusive” (ID14_M_PA)

Yet others noted that this inclusivity was only partial. Six participants viewed digital tools as useful for overcoming logistical barriers such as time or distance: *“Digital tools are an excellent substitute when people have little time or face difficulties moving around a territory: sometimes it takes twenty minutes to cover just ten kilometres” (ID23_W_TS)*, but most agreed that they cannot replace the depth of face-to-face interaction.

Several participants also highlighted how digital tools could make discussions “more balanced,” enabling quieter participants or women to contribute anonymously. As one participant explained it:

“Otherwise, it’s always the same people speaking, often men who feel empowered, while those with less confidence or knowledge might stay silent [...]. Allowing anonymous responses to certain questions helps make participation more equitable” (ID033_M_PA).

However, thirteen participants pointed out that older people often struggled with digital processes, while younger people were more comfortable with them. Two described which tools could work with different groups, such as more computer-based tools for older people and smartphone-based one for younger people, or certain apps can attracts specific groups (e.g. Discord for young gamers). Two suggested that online participation simply reversed traditional barriers, privileging the young and digitally literate rather than the elderly and available.

Despite this, digital engagement with youth was not always successful. Three participants argued that online channels often failed to reach young people, as social media pages were mostly read *“by parents, educators, and other adults” (ID18_W_PA)*. Two participants added that young people’s constant exposure to digital communication might reduce their interest in civic content. According to them, this overload may diminish their

ability to process information and can generate irritation, making conventional digital platforms ineffective.

Some interviewees also reflected on gender and cultural factors. One participant observed that online surveys often received a higher proportion of women's responses, probably due to their limited time and the flexibility offered by short digital formats, explaining that *"they take advantage of that quick channel where in five or ten minutes they can still input their points of view, even though they can't make it to the meeting"* (ID07_W_PC). Additionally, migrant women from Pakistan and Bangladesh were described as facing multiple barriers, such as lack of personal devices, language difficulties, and partner and family control, while women from Eastern Europe were seen as more digitally active.

Foreigners in general were said to face linguistic challenges, as online forms were usually only available in Italian, as a participant explains:

"Foreigners might not feel as comfortable using these tools, not necessarily because they can't use them, but because reading and interpreting written text is different from hearing it spoken. This makes it harder for them to understand exactly what the question on the platform is asking" (ID03_M_PA)

Ultimately, participants agreed that digitalisation is not inclusive by default. It is a matter of engaging each group with the right tool, strategy, and location:

"It's not the tool itself that guarantees participation... There's always preparatory work to make people want to participate." (ID37_W_TS) *"What really matters is the topic's relevance for the target group"* (ID34_W_TS)

(c) Hybrid Participation and the Value of Presence

Reflecting on different phases of digitalisation (pre-COVID, during lockdown, and post-COVID) most participants agreed that digital tools were useful but could not fully

replace in-person engagement. Thirteen participants doubted that a participatory process could succeed entirely online.

As one explained, *“part of participation is also the socialisation between people”* (ID02_W_PA), while another noted that *“attention drops much sooner online, and you lose the physical presence: the chance to talk to each other at the end of a meeting [...] I find it hard to imagine an entire participatory process being carried out online”* (ID32_M_PA)

Additionally, three participants have pointed out that sometimes digital tools can be perceived as colder than physical presence, as they allow for a connection that may feel less personal.

Successful approaches often mixed online and in-person strategies. For instance, two participants described a strategy where QR codes and social media posts were combined with direct contact in local venues to reach citizens.

As one of them observed, *“people won’t fill out an online questionnaire just because you ask... you need someone they trust saying ‘look, there’s this thing, do it’”* (ID37_W_TS). Another confirmed that *“word of mouth works... local influencers, not online ones, make the difference”* (ID18_W_PA).

While another one described a situation where older people met up in person to attend together an online participatory process.

In this sense, online environments were considered best suited to complement, rather than replace, face-to-face encounters:

“Online can integrate, it can support, and in some cases it is indispensable. But it is not the same as meeting face-to-face” (ID37_W_TS)

(d) *Barriers of Authentication, Design, and the Italian SPID System.*

The Italian Public Digital Identity System (SPID) emerged as a key issue. Twelve participants described it as both a symbol of progress and a source of exclusion. Most found it overly complex and noted that it discouraged participation, especially among older citizens and those under 18, who cannot have a SPID. Specifically, three participants stressed age-related differences: two observed that older people were less likely to have activated SPID or to possess the necessary skills to use it effectively, which is in line with the findings on digital divide, and one underlined that people younger than 18 are unable to have a SPID of their own.

Nine participants observed that SPID-restricted initiatives tended to attract fewer participants, while five mentioned that its lack of anonymity reduced openness and created a sense of “*social control*”.

Most participants focused on usability concerns, as ten participants considered the system overly complex, stressing the importance of simplifying access to digital services. From their perspective, SPID appeared somewhat outdated, as its multiple steps hindered accessibility.

Some participants suggested simple remedies, such as collective nicknames to preserve privacy, or training sessions to strengthen citizens’ digital skills. As one explained, such initiatives helped people learn “*how to register, log in, vote on proposals, and use SPID*” (ID11_W_PA).

Related concerns emerged around the regional participation platform, which many described as “rigid,” “complex,” and “inconvenient”. While it met legal requirements, its design discouraged use. Beyond technical issues, participants also mentioned privacy sensitivity, which is sometimes seen as excessive but still legitimate.

4. Innovative Practices for (Digital) Inclusion

While many interviewees acknowledged the difficulties of creating genuinely inclusive participatory processes, several also shared examples of concrete practices that had proved effective in their local contexts. These initiatives, often modest in scale but high in impact, demonstrated how inclusion can be advanced through creativity, sensitivity, and attention to everyday barriers. The following examples illustrate different strategies: ranging from linguistic and logistical adjustments to targeted outreach and participatory design.

Interestingly, although digitalisation is often cited as a key enabler of inclusive participation, many of the innovative practices reported by participants did not make direct use of digital tools. Instead, they relied on alternative, low-tech solutions, such as face-to-face outreach, personalised contact, peer support, or environmental adaptations, addressing barriers to participation in creative and context-sensitive ways.

This highlights the fact that inclusion in digitalisation is not automatically realised in practice, and effective strategies often combine relational, cultural, and logistical innovations with, rather than through, technology.

These examples allow us to examine how inclusion and digitalisation intersect, showing that while digital tools hold potential, genuinely inclusive participation depends on the thoughtful design and implementation of practices that are responsive to local needs. These approaches, whether low-tech or digitally mediated, demonstrate that even small, deliberate adjustments can have a meaningful impact on participation, paving the way for concrete examples of inclusive practices.

(a) Small Adjustments, Meaningful Change

Several participants highlighted how small, deliberate actions can make participatory processes more inclusive. Examples included gender-inclusive language in communications

(e.g., use of both feminine and masculine nouns and pronouns when talking to a group of people) and targeted initiatives for underrepresented communities such as the LGBTQ+ population. Although these adjustments were appreciated, most agreed that achieving full inclusion across all social groups remains a distant goal.

(b) Personalised and Community-based Outreach

One assessor described an especially creative approach: she built a personal WhatsApp broadcast list to inform community members about upcoming initiatives: especially immigrant women, seniors, cultural participants, and volunteers. Using trusted contacts, local leaders, and informal interactions (such as with migrant women renewing documents), she ensured that information reached people often excluded from institutional communication channels.

(c) Peer Support and Practical Empowerment

Another participant recounted a European project on gender equality that successfully engaged women from North Africa and Eastern Europe. The initiative combined practical and social forms of support: Italian women taught participants to ride bicycles to overcome transport barriers, while multilingual peer groups helped translate materials and clarify complex content. This model, grounded in mutual aid and empowerment, was regarded as highly effective in promoting inclusion within training contexts.

(d) Family-friendly Participation.

Some municipalities introduced inclusive solutions for parents. In one case, a children's area was set up alongside participatory workshops, with staff offering games and reading sessions. This allowed parents, especially mothers, to participate fully without

childcare concerns. Although these arrangements required extra planning and resources, they demonstrated how thoughtful design can expand participation.

(d) Accessibility First Approaches.

Accessibility was another recurring concern. One notable example was the “*barriere zero*” (zero-barriers) desk, managed by volunteers, which offered consultations on accessibility and space adaptation. Practical interventions, such as verifying sidewalk width for wheelchairs and strollers, were combined with awareness-raising efforts inside local administrations, integrating technical improvements with inclusive practice.

(e) Language and Cultural Mediation.

Several participants stressed that language is central to inclusion. Some projects paired recently arrived foreign youth with familiar educators who provided language support and reassurance. Others adopted multilingual approaches, translating materials into French, Arabic, and English, and collaborating with local associations or mosques. Participants agreed that partnership with trusted community organizations was far more effective than translation alone.

Discussion

This study explored how public officials, third sector actors, and school professionals who served as project managers in participatory projects funded by the Emilia-Romagna Region understand and implement participation, inclusion, and digitalisation within local governance. The aim was to examine whether, and to what extent, the meanings attributed to participation, inclusion, and digitalisation align with the goals and principles promoted by regional policy. Participants’ accounts highlight both the potential and the tensions inherent

in institutional participatory practices, particularly when these aim to be inclusive and technologically mediated.

The findings shed light on how participation is understood by those responsible for designing and implementing participatory initiatives within the regional framework. Interviewees articulated a wide range of meanings and interpretations that cannot be traced solely to regional guidelines but are also shaped by contextual factors, such as the size of the municipality, professional role, gender identity, and accumulated experience. Participation therefore emerges not as a singular or stable concept, but as a situated and evolving construct.

Overall, the study shows that participants' understandings of participation reflect both alignment with the regional vision and a rich diversity of interpretations, often pointing to deeper questions concerning voice, agency, and responsibility. Several key dimensions identified in the community psychology literature as foundational to meaningful participation, such as sense of community, empowerment, and shared responsibility, also emerged clearly from the data.

Taken together, the analysis of project officials' representations of participation reveals both convergence with and divergence from the guidelines promoted by the Emilia-Romagna Region. On the one hand, many participants emphasised co-responsibility, empowerment, and active citizen engagement, closely mirroring the principles outlined in the regional framework and reinforced through training aimed at supporting consistent project implementation. These accounts suggest that, in several cases, officials actively attempt to translate policy intentions into practice by fostering spaces where citizens can meaningfully contribute to decision-making and the co-creation of community initiatives.

On the other hand, the findings also highlight instances in which participation was described in more symbolic, limited, or hollow terms. Some participants reported forms of engagement that consisted primarily of information provision or the fulfilment of formal

requirements, with limited opportunities for citizens to influence outcomes. These divergences indicate that, despite the clarity of regional guidelines, the enactment of participation is shaped by local contexts, resource constraints, and individual interpretations of what participation entails.

These differences offer insight into the lived reality of participatory governance and reveal dimensions of citizen engagement that regional policies may not fully anticipate. Recognising these nuances creates opportunities for refinement. For example, systematically incorporating the experiences and perceptions of officials into policy development and training could help ensure that participation is not only formally implemented but also genuinely empowering, thereby strengthening alignment between policy intentions, practice, and community outcomes.

Differences also emerged in how women and men described participation. While both groups emphasised activity and responsibility, women more frequently highlighted relational and care-based aspects of participation, whereas men more often referred to power, activation, and political agency. These differences suggest that gendered experiences and expectations may shape how participation is imagined and practised. Such patterns may reflect broader gendered social norms, in which women are socialised to prioritise relational and collaborative approaches, while men are encouraged to value leadership, control, and individual agency (Gilligan, 1993; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Bem, 1993). Future research could explore how gender intersects with professional role, institutional context, and personal history in shaping understandings of democratic engagement.

A recurring theme across interviews was a limited awareness among public officials of how exclusion can be reproduced within participatory processes, even unintentionally. While participants often emphasised their commitment to openness and citizen engagement, many overlooked subtle mechanisms through which certain groups may remain marginalised,

whether due to digital barriers, organisational routines, or assumptions about who is able to participate. This lack of reflexivity places participatory practices at risk of inadvertently reinforcing existing inequalities.

Inclusion emerged simultaneously as a moral value and a practical challenge. Although many participants associated inclusion with openness and diversity, few described concrete strategies for making participation more equitable. Inclusion was therefore framed as an ongoing process, an important aspiration that remains only partially realised and is often constrained by institutional routines and everyday barriers.

For some participants, inclusion was described in vague or taken-for-granted terms. Claims that “everyone can participate” or that projects were already inclusive were frequently accompanied by limited reflection on who might be excluded. Awareness of exclusion often arose reactively, particularly when participants were prompted to reflect on the absence of specific groups such as young people or individuals with migratory backgrounds.

Two broad orientations toward inclusion were identified. The first was characterised by an assumed inclusivity, grounded in the belief that participation is inherently open and fair. The second reflected a more critical awareness of the difficulties involved in making participation genuinely inclusive. Participants in this latter group described deliberate efforts to reach marginalised populations but also expressed frustration with limited results.

These findings underline the need to strengthen public officials’ skills and awareness in relation to inclusive and digital participatory practices. Targeted training for officials and facilitators could play a crucial role, extending beyond technical competencies to include reflexive and relational dimensions, such as recognising invisible barriers, engaging marginalised voices, and using digital tools in ways that enhance dialogue between citizens and public administrations.

In many cases, inclusion was treated as a responsive measure rather than a guiding design principle. Accessibility issues were often recognised only when specific problems emerged, for instance when a person with a disability attempted to participate. As a result, initiatives were formally open to all but not actively designed to attract diverse participants.

The absence of young people was particularly striking. Youth were rarely involved unless they were explicitly targeted by a project. Adult-dominated group dynamics, as well as dismissive attitudes toward young facilitators, were reported as discouraging youth participation, reinforcing patterns in which participation remains concentrated among those who are already confident and civically engaged.

Digitalisation was widely recognised as offering opportunities to broaden participation and streamline communication, yet it was also described as reproducing existing inequalities and depersonalising interactions. Rather than transforming participation, digital tools often reinforced established patterns of access and exclusion. This confirms that digitalisation alone cannot function as an inclusion strategy unless accompanied by critical reflection and intentional design. Many participants described online interactions as colder and less engaging than face-to-face encounters, leading to a clear preference for hybrid participatory formats.

Digitalisation was frequently approached as a technical solution rather than as a participatory innovation. This reflects a broader lack of training in the critical and informed use of digital tools. While officials rely on digital technologies to structure participation, many lacked awareness of how design choices, platform features, and patterns of online engagement can reproduce exclusion. Strengthening critical digital literacy is therefore essential to ensure that digital tools are used in ways that genuinely support inclusion.

At the same time, some participants recognised that digital tools can support inclusion when thoughtfully integrated. Online formats facilitated participation for residents in remote

areas, parents with care responsibilities, and individuals with mobility challenges. However, these benefits were often counterbalanced by digital divides related to age, education, and socio-economic status.

Institutional digital readiness also emerged as uneven. Limited infrastructure, insufficient training, and unclear procedures often reduced digital participation to basic administrative functions rather than meaningful engagement. When participation was perceived as one-way communication, trust and motivation to engage were undermined.

These dynamics unfold within the institutional framework of the Emilia-Romagna Region, which provides guidelines, funding schemes, and evaluation mechanisms to support participatory processes. While this framework promotes quality and accountability, its effectiveness ultimately depends on the reflexive and digital competencies of those responsible for implementation.

Targeted training for public officials and facilitators could therefore play a key role in bridging the gap between inclusion and digitalisation. Such training should cultivate reflexive, relational, and critically informed competencies, enabling practitioners to recognise invisible barriers, engage marginalised voices, and design participatory processes that anticipate diverse needs rather than merely reacting to them. When approached in this way, digital technologies can enhance dialogue rather than amplify exclusion, contributing to more equitable and responsive democratic practices.

While these findings highlight important implications for both research and practice, they should be interpreted with caution, taking into account a number of limitations that shape the scope and applicability of the results.

First, the study focuses on a single region in Italy, and findings should therefore be interpreted within this specific institutional and cultural context. Future research could build on this work by conducting comparative studies across different regions or administrative

contexts, in order to explore how institutional settings influence the meanings and practices of participation.

Additionally, only 31% of invited participants took part in the study, raising the possibility of self-selection bias. Those who chose to participate are likely to be more interested in or engaged with participatory processes, potentially leading to an overrepresentation of more positive, informed, or motivated perspectives. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the views of less engaged or more critical actors. Future studies could address this limitation by adopting complementary recruitment strategies or integrating quantitative approaches (e.g., surveys) to capture a broader range of perspectives.

Third, the sample was imbalanced with respect to gender. Although gender was not the primary focus of this study, this imbalance may have influenced the perspectives captured. Future research could more explicitly examine gendered understandings of participation or adopt sampling strategies aimed at ensuring greater diversity across participants.

Finally, even though the use of qualitative methodology was crucial to gather personal understandings and perspectives, it must be considered that the findings are based on participants' accounts and interpretations, which may be shaped by their professional roles, prior experiences, and institutional positioning, as well as by how they present, justify, and make sense of their own actions and decisions within the participatory processes they have managed.

Taken together, these limitations call for caution in generalising the findings, while also identifying clear directions for future research to extend and deepen the insights presented.

In conclusion, the study shows that participation can be transformative not only for institutions but also for individuals and communities. When citizens feel heard and able to

contribute meaningfully, participation becomes a lived democratic practice rather than a formal requirement. The findings offer valuable insights for the Emilia-Romagna Region, particularly in relation to the development of training initiatives that support reflection on the meanings of participation, inclusion, and digitalisation. By strengthening reflexive capacities and fostering spaces for exchange among project officials, participatory policies can be more effectively translated into practices that are meaningful, inclusive, and empowering.

General Discussion

This work examined how participation, digitalisation, and inclusion are conceptualised and enacted within publicly funded participatory processes in the Emilia-Romagna Region, with particular attention to the relationship between regional policy frameworks and local participatory processes and practices.

By combining a document analysis of funded projects (Study 1) with an in-depth qualitative investigation of project managers' perspectives (Study 2), this work provides a comprehensive understanding of how participatory policy is translated into practice in the post-COVID period in the context of the Emilia-Romagna Region.

The findings highlight that regional participatory policies do not automatically result in inclusive or transformative participatory practices, despite clear normative commitments at the policy level. Instead, institutional frameworks are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted by public officials within the contexts they operate in.

Specifically, Study 1 shows that what Emilia-Romagna Region has developed (e.g. a structured participatory framework, articulated through regional law, annual calls for proposals, evaluation criteria, and reporting requirements) plays a significant role in shaping how participation is operationalised at the project level.

In particular, funding incentives and evaluation priorities emerge as powerful mechanisms for informing and steering practice, as demonstrated by the increased attention to youth participation and gender inclusion following the introduction of specific incentives in 2022. At the same time, the document analysis reveals that such effects are often contingent and time-bound, as these shifts tend to follow policy signals closely and are not always sustained once incentives change. This suggests that while policy design can successfully orient practice, it does not necessarily produce long-term transformations in how participation is conceived and enacted. These findings align with existing research showing that participatory governance is highly sensitive to institutional design, but also vulnerable to instrumentalisation when participation is framed primarily through procedural or funding requirements (Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa, 2004).

Additionally, digitalisation appears in Study 1 primarily as an operational feature rather than a substantive participatory theme. Despite the acceleration of digital tools during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, relatively few projects explicitly addressed digitalisation as a participatory challenge or reflected critically on its implications for inclusion. This suggests that digitalisation was largely normalised as an infrastructural necessity, rather than treated as an object of participatory processes.

Study 2 deepens this analysis by examining how public officials and project managers interpret and enact participation, inclusion, and digitalisation within the regional framework. The findings show broad alignment between officials' normative understandings of participation and the values promoted by regional policy, particularly with respect to co-responsibility, empowerment, and shared governance. These meanings resonate strongly with community psychology perspectives that conceptualise participation as a process of agency, belonging, and collective responsibility (Zimmerman, 2000; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Christens, 2012). However, the qualitative findings also reveal substantial variation in how

these principles are understood and operationalised, as officials' interpretations seem to be shaped not only by policy guidelines, but also by local contexts, organisational constraints, professional roles, gendered experiences, and accumulated practical knowledge. As a result, participation is sometimes enacted in more limited or symbolic ways, particularly when constrained by time, resources, bureaucratic routines, or perceived feasibility.

It is important to note that gaps between policy intentions and practice do not appear to stem from resistance or lack of commitment. On the contrary, they reflect the everyday mediation work carried out by officials who must balance normative ideals with practical constraints. From this perspective, divergences between policy and practice should be understood not as failures of implementation, but as insights into the lived realities of participatory governance.

Across both studies, inclusion emerges as a shared normative value but a fragile practical achievement, with overall limited awareness of what inclusion really is and how to implement it. Study 1 shows uneven and often limited attention to intersectionality, alongside significant gaps in demographic reporting, while Study 2 complements this by revealing that many officials assume participation to be inherently inclusive, without systematically reflecting on who is excluded or why. Interestingly, the results of Study 2 point out that awareness of exclusion often arises reactively, only once barriers become visible in practice, a pattern which reflects broader critiques in the literature, which warn against treating inclusion as an automatic outcome of participatory design rather than as a deliberate and ongoing process (Young, 2000; Smith, 2009).

These findings suggest that inclusion is frequently framed as a moral aspiration rather than as a guiding design principle, resulting in participatory spaces that remain formally open but socially selective. The persistent underrepresentation of young people, migrants, and

people with disabilities illustrates how participatory processes can unintentionally reproduce existing inequalities, even in contexts with strong institutional support.

Similarly, the use of digitalisation occupies an equally ambivalent position. In fact, both studies show that digital tools are widely perceived as useful for overcoming logistical barriers related to time, distance, and mobility, and can facilitate participation for certain groups, such as parents or residents in remote areas (Feeney & Welch, 2012; Shin et al., 2024), but also describe digital participation as a way of reproducing existing inequalities linked to age, digital literacy, language, and socio-economic status, which is in line with the existing literature on the topic (Norris, 2003; Van Dijk, 2020).

Additionally, the qualitative findings highlight that digitalisation is frequently approached as a technical solution rather than a participatory innovation. For instance, limited critical digital literacy among institutions and practitioners was described as limiting the potential of digital tools to support inclusive participation.

Digital divide was also noted as an issue, as authentication systems such as SPID, rigid platform design, and one-way digital communication further exacerbate exclusionary dynamics, confirming that digitalisation alone cannot function as an inclusion strategy, a concept that mimics part research on the topic (Strandberg & Grönlund, 2014).

Overall, the findings indicate that participation, inclusion, and digitalisation are shaped less by formal definitions than by how they are interpreted and enacted within specific organisational and territorial contexts. While regional policies provide a clear normative and procedural framework, the extent to which participatory processes become meaningful and inclusive depends on the everyday choices, constraints, and reflections, which are mostly in the hands of those implementing them.

Importantly, the results suggest that policy design does play a decisive role in orienting practice: when inclusion-related aspects are made visible and concrete within

funding calls, reporting templates, and evaluation criteria, project teams are more likely to reflect on them and address them in practice. Conversely, when certain dimensions of inclusion remain absent from reporting requirements, they tend to remain invisible in implementation as well.

From this perspective, introducing more explicit prompts within regional documentation, for example asking projects to report on the participation of specific groups such as migrants, LGBTQ+ people, or other underrepresented populations, as well as on the concrete actions put in place to include each group, could encourage greater awareness and more deliberate inclusion strategies. Not because inclusion can be reduced to ticking boxes, but because what is asked, counted, and reported shapes what is noticed, discussed, and ultimately acted upon in participatory processes.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Participation Team of the Emilia-Romagna Region for the close collaboration in every stage of this research. In particular, I thank Micaela Deriu, Laura Gamberini, Manuela Capelli, Federica Leone, Dora Sprovieri, and Stefania Caputo for their support and availability.

I also thank the Global Institute for Women's Leadership (GIWL) for providing guidance and insight during my six-month research stay at the Australian National University (ANU). In particular, I thank Professor Michelle Ryan for her supervision and Dr Jacko Jackson for methodological support.

Finally, I thank my supervisors, Professor Elvira Cicognani, Professor Cinzia Albanesi, and Professor Gabriele Prati for their support and guidance throughout this project.

Finanziato dall'Unione europea- Next Generation EU, Missione 4, Componente 2,
Investimento 3.3 (D.M. 117/2023) CUP J33C22001840002



Personal Acknowledgments⁷

On a personal note, I would like to thank the people who have been around for the duration of this journey. Some would say that I wouldn't have made it without you, but it wouldn't be entirely true: we are all fully aware that I could still fail the final defence.

I hope not, but it remains a possibility.

A (funded) PhD in Italy is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, as they literally won't fund it twice, and doing it on the topic of public participation is not for the weak, but, more importantly, it was not for me: it lasted for three years, felt like eight, and I realised I wanted to quit in month three, but kept going regardless. Remember? They won't fund it twice. But honestly? Thank God they don't. If the rule wasn't in place, I'd add it myself, just in case one day I turn completely insane and decide to apply to another one. This time for free.

Would I wish a PhD on my worst enemy? Not really. On the one hand because they would use the title to show off, but most importantly because most of them already have one.

But apart from the negative thoughts and feelings, I must admit that I did learn a few things. For instance, not many people know what a PhD in psychology is, and I am happy for them. Many think I have become a therapist, and they are not fully wrong: I did gain hands-on therapy experience, but mostly as a patient. I therefore thank my therapists (note the plural there) for their support and guidance.

I also thank my parents, Mauro and Monica, who I am sure would have preferred having a (much-needed) therapist in the house instead of a stubborn academic who won't shut up about inclusion. I am honestly sorry, but you must blame the university you paid for during my previous studies, not me directly. I also thank my sisters, Silvia and Giulia, who surely tried to push me to work harder by telling me that academia is not a real job. And in hindsight, they were probably right.

At this point, I would like to thank my ex-boyfriend, who supported me closely from the very beginning of this research, and then chose to have a non-academic on his side. Rightfully so, I must say, but choosing to do it at the very end of my third year was a questionable move and has thereby lost the privilege of being named in this short piece.

Similarly, I would prefer not to name my ex-bandmate, who did tell me to avoid doing a PhD. He was right about something.

On the contrary, it would be too soon to mention my new boyfriend in this piece. So, I won't mention him either. Maybe in the ne next thesis.

⁷ Note: this personal piece was created with the intent of providing a short humoristic ending to this formal document and show a little bit of the person behind the research. It was created with the aim of thanking the readers, entertaining, and hopefully even having a laugh looking back at these (not so) dreadful years I have spent working on this thesis.

On a more serious note, I would like to thank the friends who have always been by my side, mostly Sara and Beatrice, who are there for me when I need them. This list gets shorter at each thesis, it is definitely a sign that I shall stop writing them.

Then it is time to thank my Australian community, who closely supported me in a number of ways, such as by letting me fill the dinner table with small pieces of paper when I was doing document analysis. Thank you for having eaten on the sofa, and for the laughs, the travels, the nights in, and the good vibes. Most importantly I thank Shikhar, who never failed to share his positive outlook on life with me: I remember him replying to my work-related complaints and never-ending stories about how nothing worked with “all I can see is progress”. Every now and then I needed somebody who reminded me that things are going to be alright, as long as we keep going. Thank you.

A special mention goes to Denise, my academic bestie. If I was smarter, I would have done a PhD on her topic, but I am grateful that I chose the scholarship on public participation as it made me meet her: a great friend, gossip companion and fellow creative soul.

Talking about my (amazing) time in Australia, I thank Claudia, Teresa, Suhasini, Francisco, Trilse, Will, Leonardo, Clarice, Guendalina, Valentina, Mark, Michael, Ola, Talha, Zeef and the rest of the Italian and International team for the amazing experiences. Australia would have been amazing regardless, but you made it special. I went from participating in an event at the Italian Embassy in Canberra, to having lunch next to Julia Gillard, to witnessing my flatmate getting married to the love of his life in New Delhi.

Canberra and the people I met there will always have a place in my heart.

Academically, I once again thank Jacko and the whole team at the Australian National University, amazing researchers who showed me how working in academia can be fun, exciting, and in the right environment and support, you can truly feel at home.

Finally, I thank the University of Bologna for inviting Professor Michelle Ryan to give a talk about gender inequality, which made me end up at her lab in Canberra, Australia.

At the beginning of my PhD I would not have expected to write a sappy piece about Australia. But honestly, I also would not have expected to finish.

But here we are.

So thank you all for being a part of it.

Ringraziamenti⁸

Per concludere, vorrei ringraziare le persone che mi sono state accanto per tutta la durata di questo percorso. Alcuni direbbero il classico “non ce l’avrei mai fatta senza di voi”, ma non sarebbe del tutto vero: siamo tutti pienamente consapevoli che potrei ancora fallire alla discussione finale.

Spero di no, ma è ancora possibile.

Un dottorato (con borsa) in Italia è un’esperienza unica nella vita, nel senso che lo finanziano una volta sola. E farlo sul tema della partecipazione pubblica non è per tutti, ma soprattutto, non era per me: è durato tre anni, mi sono sembrati otto, dopo tre mesi ho capito di voler lasciar perdere, ma sono andata avanti comunque. Ricordate? Lo finanziano una volta sola. Ma onestamente? Per fortuna. Se questa regola non esistesse, la aggiungerei io, giusto nel caso un giorno impazzissi e decidessi di fare domanda per farne un altro. Questa volta gratis.

Augurerei un dottorato al mio peggior nemico? Non credo. Un po’ perché userebbe il titolo per vantarsene, ma soprattutto perché la maggior parte ce l’ha già.

A parte le cose negative, devo ammettere che durante questo percorso ho comunque imparato qualcosa. Per esempio, ho scoperto che quasi nessuno sa cosa sia un dottorato in psicologia, e onestamente sono felice per loro. Molti invece pensano che io sia diventata una terapeuta, e per certi versi è vero: ho acquisito esperienza pratica di terapia, ma soprattutto come paziente. Ringrazio quindi le mie terapeute (notasi il plurale) per il loro supporto.

Ringrazio anche i miei genitori, Mauro e Monica, che sicuramente avrebbero preferito avere in casa una terapeuta invece di un’accademica fissata con l’inclusione. Sarebbe anche stato più utile. Mi dispiace per voi, ma dovete dare la colpa all’università dove ho studiato prima del dottorato, che oltretutto avete pagato voi. Ringrazio anche le mie sorelle, Silvia e Giulia, che mi hanno spronata giornalmente a fare di più dicendomi che l’accademia non è un lavoro vero. E forse avevano anche ragione.

A questo punto, mi sembra il caso di ringraziare il mio ex ragazzo, che mi è stato vicino dall’inizio di questo percorso, poi ha deciso che fosse meglio per lui avere al suo fianco una persona che non lavora in accademia. Giustamente, devo dire, ma farlo proprio alla fine del terzo anno è stata una mossa discutibile; quindi, ha perso il privilegio di essere nominato in questi ringraziamenti.

Allo stesso modo, preferirei non nominare il mio ex compagno di band, che mi aveva detto di evitare di fare un dottorato. Su qualcosa aveva ragione.

Al contrario, menzionare il mio nuovo ragazzo in questo pezzo sarebbe prematuro. Quindi non nominerò neanche lui. Sarà per la prossima tesi.

⁸ Nota: questa nota finale è stata scritta con l’intento di offrire una breve chiusura umoristica a questo documento formale e mostrare un po’ della persona che sta dietro questa ricerca. È stato concepito per ringraziare i lettori, intrattenere e, si spera, strappare anche un sorriso ripensando a questi anni (non così) terribili che ho passato a lavorare su questa tesi.

Parlando più seriamente, vorrei ringraziare le amiche che mi sono sempre state accanto, soprattutto Sara e Beatrice, che ci sono state nel momento del bisogno. Questa lista si accorcia ad ogni tesi, forse è un segno che dovrei smettere di scriverle.

Dopo di che è il momento di ringraziare le persone che ho incontrato in Australia, che mi hanno supportata in vari modi, ad esempio lasciandomi riempire il tavolo da pranzo di pezzettini di carta per fare l'analisi documentale. Grazie per aver mangiato sul divano, e per le risate, i viaggi, le serate a casa e il supporto emotivo. Soprattutto ringrazio Shikhar e la sua positività: ricordo quando mi lamentavo del lavoro e del fatto che non funzionasse niente e lui rispondeva "io vedo solo progressi". Ogni tanto c'è bisogno di qualcuno che mi ricordi che va tutto bene, basta andare avanti un passo alla volta.

Una menzione speciale va a Denise, la mia persona preferita in accademia. Se fossi stata più intelligente avrei fatto il dottorato sul suo tema, ma alla fine sono contenta di aver scelto la borsa sulla partecipazione pubblica perché mi ha fatto incontrare una grande amica, compagna di gossip e attività creative di vario genere.

Parlando del mio (bellissimo) periodo in Australia, ringrazio Claudia, Teresa, Suhasini, Francisco, Trilse, Will, Leonardo, Clarice, Guendalina, Valentina, Mark, Michael, Ola, Talha, Zeef e il resto del gruppo sia italiano che internazionale per le esperienze incredibili. L'Australia sarebbe stata incredibile a prescindere, ma voi l'avete resa speciale. In sei mesi sono passata da un evento all'Ambasciata italiana a Canberra, a un pranzo accanto a Julia Gillard, per arrivare al matrimonio del mio coinquilino a Nuova Delhi.

Canberra e le persone che ho incontrato lì avranno sempre un posto nel mio cuore.

Dal punto di vista accademico, ringrazio ancora Jacko e tutto il gruppo dell'Australian National University, ricercatrici straordinarie che mi hanno mostrato come lavorare in accademia possa essere divertente, stimolante e, nel giusto ambiente e con il giusto supporto, ci si possa sentire a casa.

Infine, ringrazio l'università di Bologna per aver invitato la Professoressa Ryan a tenere un intervento sulla disuguaglianza di genere, che mi ha portata a fare il periodo all'estero nel suo laboratorio in Australia.

All'inizio del mio dottorato non mi sarei aspettata di scrivere un pezzo così sdolcinato sull'Australia. Ma, onestamente, non mi sarei nemmeno aspettata di finirlo.

E invece, eccoci qui.

Quindi grazie a tutti per averne fatto parte.