



Cross-case analysis of the triggers, management and impact of latent and manifest forms of political participation

Purpose

The work detailed in Deliverable 2.2 presents an integrated cross-case analysis of **Collective Action Initiatives (CAIs)** across six European countries, exploring how diverse forms of political participation emerge, operate, and influence sustainability transitions. The report situates these forms of participation within socio-technical systems and examines how bottom-up initiatives interact with formal institutions over time.

Combining **qualitative** (interviews, textual analysis, ethnography) and **quantitative** (network analysis, system mapping) methods within the **Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) framework**, the deliverable offers a comparative synthesis connecting everyday citizen mobilisations to structural democratic innovation. It explores how triggers (such as crises, inequalities, or policy gaps) generate new political engagement formats, how these are managed organisationally, and the forms of lasting change they produce.

The deliverable supports CO-SUSTAIN's overarching aim to identify practical, evidence-based ways to strengthen democratic governance in climate transitions.

Intended audience

The analysis provides not only evidence on successful participation dynamics but also critical lessons on **barriers, power asymmetries, institutional co-optation**, and the enabling conditions of democratic resilience. By synthesising evidence across multiple countries, D2.2 targets actors who wish to replicate participatory mechanisms while adapting them to context-specific governance cultures.

Main users

- **Local and regional policymakers** seeking to support community-driven initiatives in climate and energy transitions.
- **Civil society organisations, cooperatives, and community activists** who design or facilitate environmental or social CAIs.
- **Civil society organisations and practitioners** aiming to understand successful modes of collective mobilisation.
- **Researchers and evaluators** interested in the intersection of political participation, social innovation, and transition theory.
- **European and national funding bodies** supporting open and participatory models of climate policy.



3 Main activities

The study applies a **multi-method research design** integrating **semi-structured interviews**, **textual analysis**, **social network analysis**, and **system mapping**, all framed within the **Multi-Level Perspective (MLP)** on sustainability transitions.

The research combined multiple methodologies to ensure triangulated insights into political participation processes:

- **Semi-structured interviews** captured in-depth experiences from community leaders, local officials, and activists.
- **Textual analysis** examined policy documents, media discourses, and internal CAI materials to understand narrative shifts and legitimation strategies.
- **Social Network Analysis (SNA)** mapped stakeholder constellations, revealing relational power structures and collaboration patterns.
- **System Mapping (SM)** and **Causal Loop Diagrams (CLDs)** analysed the feedback dynamics between niche initiatives, regimes, and landscape-level contexts.

Eighteen **Historic Examples (HEs)** from six European countries—Austria, Spain, Italy, Poland, Finland, and Estonia—illustrate four categories of political participation —*involvement*, *civic engagement*, *formal participation*, and *activism*— as follows:



Figure 1: CO-SUSTAIN 18 Historical examples



Each example was analysed for **contextual triggers, organisational trajectories, and multi-dimensional impacts**, connecting societal motivations with policy effects.

Key results

1. Understanding triggers of collective mobilisation

Participation often arises from overlapping crises—environmental hazards (floods, air pollution), socio-economic inequities (energy poverty), or governance voids (lack of citizen representation). In many cases, crises served as *windows of opportunity*, enabling new narratives of empowerment and solidarity. For instance, the 2011 Genoa floods and the 2008 financial crisis catalysed networks that blended social justice and ecological consciousness.

2. Managing collective action and navigating tension

CAIs balance local autonomy with institutional collaboration. Success factors include transparent coordination, adaptive governance, and trusted intermediaries (municipal offices, cooperatives). However, many cases expose tensions between **grassroots spontaneity** and **regulatory compliance**, highlighting a need for supportive frameworks and equitable access to resources. The Vienna Climate Team exemplifies successful institutional integration, whereas the Granada energy-poverty movement exposes persistent inequalities in stakeholder dialogue.

3. Multi-level impacts

- **Social effects:** Enhanced community cohesion, empowerment of women and youth, and inclusion of vulnerable groups.
- **Political effects:** Expansion of participatory budgeting, recognition of citizen councils, and shifts towards co-governance arrangements.
- **Environmental effects:** Diffusion of renewable energy practices, improved air quality, circular-economy innovations, and local resilience mechanisms.

CAIs evolve from emotional, crisis-driven engagement to long-term deliberative processes, becoming **semi-institutionalised spaces** within public governance. This progression reflects a deepening of democratic cultures where experimentation, reflection, and co-production foster societal learning.

4. Narrative evolution and institutional transformation

The research traces a discursive shift from moral urgency (activism) to **technical** and **legal framing**, signalling institutional mainstreaming. Over time, vocabulary once used for protest—like "justice" or "empowerment"—becomes embedded in policy language, demonstrating bottom-up influence on governance paradigms.

5. Barriers and enabling conditions

Barriers include fragmented legislation, financial instability, burnout among volunteers, and inadequate recognition by authorities. Enablers include active municipal partnerships, cross-national learning networks, gender-balanced representation, and digital participation tools.



Policy implications

Institutional bridges: Governments should move beyond consultation to co-creation by embedding citizen-led innovations within formal policy cycles.

Scaling participation: EU and national programmes can amplify impact through funding schemes that reward long-term collaboration between CAIs and municipalities.

Equity and inclusiveness: Prioritising representation of women, migrants, and low-income groups enhances legitimacy and sustainability of civic transitions.

Learning ecosystems: Establishing structured evaluation frameworks—such as the CO-SUSTAIN Impact Assessment Framework (IAF)—supports cumulative learning and replication.

Institutionalising participatory evaluation itself transforms democracy into a reflective system capable of constant adaptation in crises

Conclusion

Deliverable 2.2 demonstrates that **Collective Action Initiatives** are both indicators and instruments of sustainability transitions. By activating citizens as agents of change, they reshape governance through empowerment, solidarity, and experimentation. The findings establish clear pathways linking emergent participation to institutional transformation, offering empirically grounded recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

Ultimately, D2.2 shows that climate governance becomes more effective when it is also more democratic—rooted in participation, reciprocity, and social justice—and that empowering local collective action is essential to achieving Europe’s sustainability goals.



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This summary sheet was based on [Deliverable 2.2](#) of the CO-SUSTAIN project. CO-SUSTAIN aims to define and test new democratic pathways for a sustainable transition, enabling local policymakers to support various and novel forms of political participation and empowering citizens to act.

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