

From participation to pathways for change

What six European case studies reveals about co-creating sustainable transitions?

Purpose

The deliverable 3.1 presents how CO-SUSTAIN tested a **deliberative approach** across **six case studies** in **five European countries**. The cases cover:

- **Involvement** through energy communities in Alpujarra and Barcelona (Spain);
- **Civic engagement** through Food Solidarity in Turin (Italy);
- **Formal political participation** through small modular reactors in Espoo (Finland) and climate-resilient urban greening in Tartu (Estonia);
- **Activism** through the Westbahnhof-Areal in Vienna (Austria).

The deliverable examines how citizens, collective initiatives and public authorities can jointly understand sustainability challenges, identify leverage points and develop pathways for change. It records the **deliberation panels** and provides the **empirical basis for the project's impact assessment, cross-case comparison and policy recommendations**.

Alpujarra Energy Community



La traginera Energy Community



Westbahn area



Figure 1: example of the deliberation process



Intended audience

The deliverable is intended for local policymakers, public administrations, civil society organisations, community initiatives, participation practitioners and researchers. It is especially relevant for actors designing participatory processes around sustainability transitions, seeking to involve diverse groups, or trying to strengthen cooperation between grassroots initiatives and established institutions.

Main activities

Each case study first analysed its local context and mapped relevant stakeholders. Particular attention was given to vulnerable and underrepresented groups. Researchers distinguished between community-based “niche” actors and established “regime” institutions, while also identifying actors able to connect both spheres. Recruitment approaches were adapted locally, including practical measures to reduce barriers to participation.

The deliberative process combined **Participatory System Mapping**, **Causal Loop Diagrams** and **Theory of Change** (see key concepts below). The first two panels explored community and institutional perspectives separately. Their system maps were then brought together. In the third panel, participants identified leverage points and co-created possible actions and pathways for change. External experts or additional participants subsequently reviewed the emerging results.



Figure 2: example of the deliberation panel III in Turin (Italy), where participants moved towards shared pathways and actions.

Key concepts

- **Participatory System Mapping (PSM):** participants collectively map the factors and relationships shaping a system.
- **Causal Loop Diagram (CLD):** a visual map of cause-and-effect relationships and feedback loops.
- **Theory of Change (ToC):** links desired long-term change to the actions and conditions needed to achieve it.

Key results

Across all six cases, **meaningful participation was strongly shaped by context**. Stakeholder composition, existing relationships, institutional conditions, available resources and the issue under discussion influenced the process and its outputs. The common methodology therefore worked best when facilitators could adapt it to local realities without losing its core purpose.

Participation numbers were sometimes lower than planned. This reduced the diversity of perspectives in some cases, yet smaller groups could also create more speaking time and deeper discussion. **The findings therefore stress participation quality, representation and facilitation rather than numbers alone**. Actors able to bridge community initiatives and institutions were especially valuable for connecting perspectives and supporting co-created solutions.



Across the cases, participants repeatedly emphasised **collaboration, communication and capacity building**. Proposed actions included awareness campaigns, training, multilingual and accessible information, community events, advocacy plans and new ways to involve residents in decision-making. Many proposals focused less on technical solutions than on strengthening relationships, organisational capacity and information flows. Theory of Change helped translate leverage points into practical pathways for action.

Key Findings

- **Context matters:** a common method needs flexibility across local realities.
- **Representation matters:** who participates shapes the understanding and solutions.
- **Bridging actors** connect community initiatives and institutions.
- **Theory of Change** turns leverage points into concrete actions.

Examples from the case studies

- **Alpujarra (Spain):** participants highlighted organisational capacity and resilient networks as central to sustaining local collective action.
- **Barcelona (Spain):** political support, stakeholder coordination and demonstrating a viable model emerged as interconnected leverage points.
- **Turin (Italy):** proposed pathways centred on more stable time and resources, permanent spaces for co-design and collective learning, and stronger information flows and data integration.
- **Tartu (Estonia):** participants connected social participation with the quality of public space. Intergenerational and multicultural encounters, multifunctional meeting places and stronger collective ownership were prioritised.
- **Espoo (Finland) and Vienna (Austria):** the processes showed the importance of adapting deliberation to sensitive topics, creating trust and common ground, and ensuring that decision-makers are sufficiently represented alongside community actors.

Research and practice implications

For researchers, the cases show the value of **combining deliberation with systems thinking**. The process connected individual experiences with wider institutional and social dynamics. It also exposed a methodological challenge: participants often engaged more easily with lived experiences, practical examples and role-playing than with abstract system maps. Future applications should combine analytical tools with accessible facilitation and participant-led interpretation.

For practitioners, D3.1 shows that **participation must be actively designed**. Recruitment should consider who may otherwise remain absent, especially vulnerable and less active groups. Formats need to be accessible, convenient and meaningful, with skilled facilitation throughout. Participants also need a credible connection between their contribution and possible future action. Continued relationships and follow-up are therefore important beyond one-off events.

“Meaningful participation requires more than inviting many stakeholders.”



Policy implications

The findings suggest several implications for public authorities. Participatory processes benefit from sustained spaces for dialogue between institutions, residents and collective initiatives. Recruitment can address practical barriers affecting vulnerable and less active groups, while accessible and multilingual information can widen involvement. The cases also highlight bridging actors that connect grassroots initiatives with institutions. Clear follow-up and credible links between participation and subsequent decisions can strengthen motivation to engage.

Conclusion

Deliverable 3.1 shows **both the potential and the difficulty of building democratic pathways for sustainable transitions**. Structured deliberation can connect different perspectives, reveal system dynamics and identify leverage points for change. Across very different contexts, participants moved from understanding problems to defining concrete actions. Yet successful participation depends on local context, representation, facilitation, resources and credible opportunities for influence. These findings provide the foundation for CO-SUSTAIN's impact assessment, cross-case comparison and final policy recommendations.

Key takeaways

- There is no universal model for participation.
- Inclusion requires active effort.
- Bridging actors matter.
- Good facilitation is essential.
- Participation needs credible follow-up.
- Deliberation can turn shared understanding into pathways for change.



Acknowledgements

This summary is based on [Deliverable 3.1](#) 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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