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Designing Democratic Innovations: A Methodological Framework for Participation in Urban Planning and Governance

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Abstract
Purpose Cities are strengthening their role as arenas for political action, crucial for addressing crises in a context of rampant uncertainty. This emphasises the need to centre public participation in decision-making to accelerate changes and ensure social responsiveness. However, a gap persists between rhetoric and implementation of participation mechanisms, highlighting the importance of democratic innovations (DIs) in fostering inclusive governance, especially in urban planning. This paper introduces the Democracy Radar Framework (DRF), a tool to guide and evaluate urban planning and governance DIs. It supports institutional design by guiding decisions around participation, comparing approaches across urban environments, and facilitating knowledge exchange between cities.
Methodology The DRF was developed through a critical literature review. It establishes four participation objectives: (1) transferring decision-making power to those affected, (2) distributing socio-spatial justice, (3) strengthening trust and community ties, and (4) promoting inclusion. These are combined with three structural dimensions: *What* to participate in? *How*? *Who* participates? It includes twelve analytical criteria organised according to these objectives and was applied in a qualitative comparative analysis of DIs in Lisbon.
Findings The case study findings highlight the potential of well-designed DIs to bridge civil society and government, fostering collaboration between social and political movements to transform institutional structures. This alignment between urban planning, local governance and participatory objectives supports the emergence of new forms of direct democracy.
Originality/value This research contributes to a novel framework for guiding, evaluating and comparing DIs, supporting learning and knowledge transfer across initiatives, contexts and cities. As an open framework, it invites contributions and further adaptation, enabling advancements in comparative research.
Keywords democratic innovations, institutional design, participatory governance, urban planning
Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction

In the post-pandemic period, marked by transversal crises (Rode *et al.*, 2022) and worsening socio-spatial inequalities (Fainstein, 2014; Sciuva, 2024), cities, hubs of power, knowledge, and collective action are the main arenas for confronting these adversities (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Althorpe and Horak, 2023; Bua and Bussu, 2021). The multifaceted nature of these democratic, environmental, socioeconomic, and urban challenges requires deep urban planning and governance changes, reasserting the need for a new paradigm that rescues the right to the city (Harvey, 2008; Lefebvre, 2008; Althorpe and Horak, 2023). Claiming this right encompasses full access to the existing city and meaningful decision-making power over urban transformation, demanding collective effort and collective political rights around social solidarity (Harvey, 2008; Althorpe and Horak, 2023).

Rethinking the “city as a political actor” (Castells and Borja, 1996) emphasises the urgency to bring people to the centre of the debate and political disputes over cities as they face rapid and intense transformations (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Falanga, 2020; Fung, 2015). Since participation in urban planning is a common practice in the interaction between civil society and government (Healey, 1997; Innes and Booher, 2004), we need to approach it from the perspective of transforming traditional planning instruments and methodologies, which have proved incapable of containing the growing socio-spatial inequalities and environmental imbalances accompanying urban and territorial development (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020). Given their severity and required changes, increased and strengthened citizenship is part of the solution, and this must be sought by intensifying participation in urban policies and local governance. It is urgent to rethink participation by placing citizens at the heart of political decision-making, forging a new decision-making model more responsive, transparent, and aligned with global challenges, such as social inequalities, housing, mobility, and climate change.

Democratic innovations (DIs), understood as processes or institutions that expand citizens' roles in governance (Smith, 2009; Elstub & Escobar, 2019), have the potential to tackle this issue. The last two decades have seen an increase in DIs worldwide, varying in scale and design to meet different objectives (Fung, 2003, 2006; Lüchmann, 2020; Pogrebinschi, 2023; Smith, 2009). Enhancing opportunities for participation, deliberation, and influence is crucial for fostering inclusive governance, particularly in urban planning, where citizen engagement is critical to addressing contemporary challenges (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007).

Global agendas have increasingly emphasised public participation in urban issues. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11) focus on creating more "inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and communities" (United Nations, 2016). The New Urban Agenda and the New European Bauhaus stress the importance of participatory governance in addressing social challenges (European Union, 2022; United Nations, 2017). The OECD's "Innovative Citizen Participation" initiative explores collective intelligence to enhance democratic institutions (OECD, 2020).

Although citizen participation is playing a growing role in global agendas, indicator 11.3.2 related to SDG11, which measures the "proportion of cities with a direct participation structure of civil society in urban planning and management that operates regularly and democratically" (United Nations, 2016), faced potential abolition due to a shortage of data (UN-Habitat, 2024). This underscores a gap between political rhetoric and reality on the ground (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2017; Holdo, 2024; Jacquet *et al.*, 2023). Jacquet *et al.* (2023) propose three reasons for this shortfall: firstly, theoretical idealism among democratic scholars; secondly, a focus on the successes of DIs neglecting their failures; and third, a need for a robust analytical framework in the field of comparative research to understand the dynamics of DIs, and the impact of different institutional designs on the decision-making on urban and socio-spatial challenges. Similarly, Sanya (2016) stresses the need for intersubjective and trust-based approaches in participatory design processes, often overlooked in institutional analyses.

Contributing to bridging this gap, this work proposes the Democracy Radar Framework (DRF), a theoretical-methodological tool designed to guide the institutional design choices of DIs and evaluate participatory processes in urban planning and governance.

Developed from a critical literature review, the DRF enables comparative analysis of DIs across diverse contexts and cities, facilitating knowledge transfer and fostering learning between practices. It offers an adaptable framework open to contributions from researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and community stakeholders, advancing comparative research and practice in participatory urban governance.

The article is structured into five sections beyond this introduction. The second discusses the theoretical background, linking participation in planning since the 1960s. The third introduces the institutional design and development of the DRF. The fourth examines three DIs in Lisbon through a content analysis of their regulations considering the DRF. The fifth presents a discussion of the findings, and the sixth concludes with recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Participation in urban planning

The 1960s marked a paradigm shift in planning from technocratic approaches to advocacy planning (Mota, 2013). Criticism of planning impacts and lack of participation led governments to regulate professional practices and incorporate participation. This shaped legal procedures - public consultations and hearings - still in force in many countries (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011). Prevailing consultative approaches prioritised process over results, fostering reactive, polarised interactions between citizens and government without real influence (Innes and Booher, 2004).

In the 1980s, following the economic crisis, strategic planning emerged to guide economic development processes (Healey, 2003). This was a time of state deregulation and adopting entrepreneurial approaches like project plans and public-private partnerships (Mota, 2013). This change demanded new negotiation dynamics, considering multiple complex factors impacting planning practice. In such circumstances, participation implies sharing commitments and responsibilities and involving interested stakeholders in developing specific plans and projects, especially in urban centres (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011). "The interaction of planning interventions and development processes produced distributive injustices" (Healey, 2003, p. 104) as urban policies favoured private investment over state-dependent neighbourhoods.

Intertwined with strategic planning, communicative/collaborative planning emerged, assuming fairer processes yielded more inclusive results (Healey, 1997). Based on Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action, this current incorporated power relations (Gaventa, 2006), understanding planning as a continuous and complex collective process between stakeholders "in a common structure where everyone interacts and influences each other" (Innes and Booher, 2004, p. 422). The central arguments are that shared knowledge generates innovation, and informed debate builds consensus to address social issues. Critics, however, highlight the exclusion of vulnerable groups, elite appropriation of processes (Nogueira, 2010), undemocratic decision-making (Boonstra & Boelens, 2011), and the ineffectiveness of consensual solutions (Mota, 2013). They also stress the need to empower citizens for equal debate and strengthen technical-administrative staff for process sustainability. Despite its democratic potential, collaborative planning is criticised for serving neoliberal interests and reinforcing dominant power structures instead of challenging them (Boonstra & Boelens, 2011; Oliveira Filho, 2009; Purcell, 2009).

In the late 1990s and early 21st century, two approaches opposed to communicative planning emerged, rescuing Lefebvre's (1991) vision of urban space as a product of social interaction. The autonomist approach seeks a critical appropriation of “urban planning and management as tools for social justice” (Souza, 2003, p. 169) beyond the state and capital. It advocates a radicalisation of popular participation through self-management in a democratic and decentralised way, exercising the right to individual and collective autonomy (Lefebvre, 2008; Purcell, 2013, 2016; Souza, 2003). The emancipatory approach (Oliveira Filho, 2009) acknowledges leadership and the state as rights guarantors, proposing a hybrid model centred on "strengthening demodiversity" (Avritzer and Sousa Santos, 2002), considering the multiplicity of experiences that can (and should) coexist peacefully and/or in conflict. Both approaches recognise conflict as necessary for social transformation, aiming to challenge dominant power structures and build new social relations. While the autonomist approach calls for new frameworks, the emancipatory approach seeks to transform them. Both require political will, inclusion strategies and a solid institutional commitment (Rusconi, 2021).

In this work, the autonomist perspective is understood as a utopian model for producing (and living in) cities, while the emancipatory one is the path to achieve it.

In recent years, urban planning and governance have increasingly embraced DIs, reflecting a shift towards more participatory models. The Participatory Budgeting of Porto Alegre, Brazil, is often cited as a paradigmatic example. Others include citizen councils and participation in territorial management instruments (Avritzer, 2008; Lüchmann, 2020), deliberative assemblies, direct legislation, e-democracy (Pogrebinschi, 2023; Smith, 2009), and public-common partnerships (Milburn and Russell, 2021).

2.2 Democratic Innovations (DI)

There is no standard concept for DIs since they are context-dependent (Elstub and Escobar, 2019; Fung, 2003, 2006, 2015; Lüchmann, 2020; Pogrebinschi, 2023; Smith, 2009).

Fung calls “mini-publics” (2003, p. 339) forums of enhanced public spheres that unite citizens in organised public deliberations. Cornwall and Coelho (2007) consider “new democratic spaces” as places of ongoing government-civil society interaction and distinguish between “invited spaces” constituted by the government and “popular spaces”, such as those self-organised by social

movements. Avritzer refers to “participatory institutions” as "different ways of incorporating citizens and civil society associations into policy deliberation" (Avritzer, 2008, p. 45). Most scholars use Smith’s definition of DIs as "institutions designed specifically to increase and deepen the participation of citizens in the political decisions that affect their lives" (Smith, 2009, 2019, p. 91). Recently, in a scoping review, Elstub and Escobar proposed a definition to avoid broadening the concept:

> “Democratic innovations are processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence” (2019, p. 11).

The authors criticise Smith's scope as limited to institutions and incorporated processes and experimentalism. Fominaya (2022) notes that the scope review centres on procedural issues, neglecting the crucial aspect of institutionalisation for sustainable practices (Ackerman, 2004; Allegretti *et al.*, 2021; Landwehr, 2023).

Here, a broader perspective is needed. The concept of DIs encompasses both processes and institutions designed to strengthen citizens' participation in the political decisions that impact their lives. Although this study does not aim to discuss definitions, we understand that a DI ceases to be an innovation and becomes a participatory institution once consolidated in the socio-political culture. Avritzer (2008) defines “participatory institutions” by linking participation and representation, viewing civil society as an ongoing political force interacting with various actors. He emphasises institutional design in strengthening civil-political society relationships and argues that political parties connected to social movements are the best means to translate participatory demands into state practice. This corroborates with recent experiences in Madrid and Barcelona, where elected representatives from social movements freed up spaces for participation, permeating bureaucratic structures (Felicetti and Della Porta, 2017, p. 128) and fostering new practices capable of combining institutional and social innovation (Avritzer and Sousa Santos, 2002) to manifest new forms of participatory governance. Bua and Bussu (2021) classify these forms as either “governance-driven democracy” or “democracy-driven governance”. The former involves government-driven institutional innovations aiming to restore trust in institutions through the participation of stakeholders from an emancipatory perspective. On the other hand, “democracy-driven governance” arises from social movements’ demands to radically transform existing institutions from an autonomist perspective.

It is argued that participation through DIs has as objectives: (1) transferring decision-making power to those affected (Arnstein, 1969; Bua and Bussu, 2021; Fung and Wright, 2001; Harvey, 2008, 2014; Thompson, 2021); (2) distributing socio-spatial justice (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Fainstein, 2014; Fung, 2015); (3) strengthening trust and community ties (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Cornwall, 2004; Falanga, 2020; Fung, 2006, 2015; Sanoff, 2000) and; (4) promoting inclusion (Allegretti, 2021; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Smith, 2009). On the other hand, there are limitations to citizen participation, including challenges in ensuring inclusion and equality (Allegretti, 2021; Rode *et al.*, 2022), risks of disempowering the state (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Falanga, 2019), trivialising involvement (Fung, 2015), needing substantial resources for implementation (Fung and Wright, 2001; Wolf *et al.*, 2020), and limited impacts on public policies (Wolf *et al.*, 2020). After the initial idealism and subsequent

frustration, current DIs research re-evaluates theoretical and methodological frameworks based on past empirical experiences (ver Jacquet *et al*., 2023; Sá e Silva, 2011).
Thus, in line with the vision of "strengthening demodiversity" and arguments supporting the hybrid coexistence and dynamic relationship between government-led and citizen-led practices, combining representation and participation (Avritzer and Sousa Santos, 2002; Bua and Bussu, 2021; Cornwall, 2004; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007), this study adopts a perspective that values this interplay as essential for democratic innovation.

3. A Methodological Framework for Participation in Urban Planning and Governance

The literature indicates that participation outcomes depend on two factors. One is the institutional design, which refers to norms and procedures determining *What* to participate in*? How? Who* participates*?* (Avritzer, 2008; Fung and Wright, 2001; Smith, 2009). The second is the context elements, including social capital, political will, implementation capacity of public management, and cultural and governance issues (Avritzer, 2008; Fung, 2003; Nogueira, 2010; Putnam, 1996; Smith, 2009).
This study is based on the notion that when well designed, DIs can blur the boundaries between civil society and government (Ackerman, 2004) and connect social and political movements (Felicetti and Della Porta, 2017), fostering a new governance paradigm (Brezzi, 2022; Russell, 2020; Thompson, 2021). This paradigm aims to democratise local economies (Harvey, 2014; Wright, 2010), promote urban transformations to improve socio-spatial justice and sustainability (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Fainstein, 2014; Fung, 2015) and incorporate new forms of direct democracy into urban planning for collective decision-making (Fung, 2004; Purcell, 2013). This study recognises that design choices are not neutral (Fung, 2004). It highlights the importance of analysing existing practices to better inform institutional design and stimulate new approaches to building democracy (Felicetti, 2021).
This work addresses the methodological gap identified by Jacquet *et al.* (2023) by proposing a theoretical-methodological framework – the DRF. It integrates four participation objectives: (1) transferring decision-making power to those affected, (2) distributing socio-spatial justice, (3) strengthening trust and community ties, and (4) promoting inclusion. Each objective is directly associated with one of three institutional design dimensions: *What* to participate in*? How? Who* participates*?* These dimensions were operationalised into twelve analytical criteria, three allocated to each objective. Although each criterion may influence multiple participation objectives, they were formulated according to their primary expected impact, drawing from normative prescriptions in the literature. The criteria are measured in one of two ways. Some are measured on a gradual scale of influence, ranging from minimal to substantial democratic depth. Others combine factors of different natures yet interrelated and consequential for the encompassed objective. Thus, the scoring is the sum of present institutional design factors, representing by accumulation its potential to reach the participation objective.
To assess its usability, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on the regulations of three DIs in Lisbon: the Participatory Budgeting (PB), the BIP/ZIP Programme, and the Lisbon Citizens' Council (LCC). These initiatives were selected based on the diversity of their institutional designs, objectives, and maturity levels: PB and BIP/ZIP have been in operation for over a decade, while the LCC, although more recent, is already in its fourth edition. This selection allowed for a comparative analysis encompassing long-established participatory mechanisms and emerging deliberative practices. The

documents analysed were the official regulations of each initiative as they explicitly describe their design choices and intended goals (Câmara Municipal de Lisboa [CML], 2021, 2024a, 2024b).
Data were coded using MAXQDA Qualitative Data Analysis software to classify key elements according to the DRF's criteria. The coding process identified how each criterion was addressed in the texts, assigning categories based on explicit regulatory intentions.
Incrementally measured criteria (e.g., *Goals*, which range from low to high) were coded according to their level of presence. For example, if the regulation states "inviting the co-construction of proposals to improve the city" (CML, 2024a, p. 1), it was coded as "Goals - co-creation solutions." Aggregated criteria (e.g., Sustainability, which combines multiple factors) were coded by identifying the presence or absence of specific components. For instance, clauses providing for training or capacity-building strategies for participation were coded as "Sustainability – continuous learning structure" (CML, 2021, p.8; 2024b, p.7), while references to annual regulation reviews were categorised under "Sustainability - flexible regulations" (CML, 2021, p.8; 2024a, p.1; 2024b, p.16).
MAXQDA's tools, including code matrices and frequency analysis, facilitated the identification of patterns and gaps in institutional design. To enhance comparative insights, the DRF's graphic interface was used to visually represent coded data, drawing on principles of data visualisation (Tufte, 2006), such as enabling meaningful comparisons, integrating multiple aspects, and ensuring clarity in communication. This visual approach strengthens the framework's role as an analytical and mediation resource, aligning with its function as a boundary object (Star and Griesemer, 1989), maintaining a shared structure while adapting to diverse interpretative needs.
While this analysis systematically examines institutional design choices, it is limited to stated intentions in regulations without assessing their practical implementation. The comparative approach allows for identifying shared and divergent aspects, although contextual nuances and power dynamics may be overlooked. To address these limitations, ongoing research investigates how different actors in various contexts engage with DRF and how relationships between its analytical criteria and participation objectives unfold. This empirical investigation combines participatory workshops, focus groups, and interviews to assess the framework further.

3.1 Democracy Radar Framework (DRF)

The DRF aims to demonstrate how institutional design choices for participation influence decision-making and implementation, particularly when addressing urban, socio-spatial, and democratic challenges. The framework construction is detailed below, explaining how each participation objective is theoretically grounded, linked to institutional design dimensions and operationalised through specific criteria and measurement approaches.

1. Transferring decision-making power to those affected

Several authors argue that social justice can only be effectively achieved by redistributing power to the most vulnerable groups impacted by decisions (Arnstein, 1969; Bua and Bussu, 2021; Fung and Wright, 2001; Harvey, 2008; Thompson, 2021). Arnstein (1969) noted how any form of participation that does not enable the redistribution of power is, in practice, ineffective and superficial. Harvey (2008) further develops this, asserting that such redistribution is fundamental to achieving the "right to the city". The transfer of decision-making power also leads to more effective and responsive solutions (Arnstein, 1969; Fung and Wright, 2001; Bua and Bussu, 2021), such as safeguarding affordable

housing, creating public spaces, and developing community-focused infrastructures (Harvey, 2008). It fosters greater accountability of authorities, improving resource management and transparency (Fung & Wright, 2001; Bua & Bussu, 2021; Thompson, 2021); strengthens community empowerment by fostering bonds and encouraging engagement (Arnstein, 1969; Bua & Bussu, 2021; Sanoff, 2000) and, finally, catalyses innovation in governance practices through more horizontal and inclusive participatory structures (Fung & Wright, 2001; Bua & Bussu, 2021; Sanoff, 2000, Thompson, 2021). In designing a DI, these initial choices shape the scope of participation when defining *what* to participate in. The proposed criteria explore how involvement is expected (i. goals), how power is organised (ii. initiative organisation), and how power is distributed (iii. power sharing). While *Goals* define the intended outcomes of a DI, *Power-Sharing* assesses how much authority citizens exercise in decision-making. The *Initiative Organization* defines the roles of government and civil society in initiating and implementing DIs. This distinction highlights the potential gap between design aspirations and operational realities.

i. Goals

Reflect the intended level of citizen involvement and social control in a DI design. These intentions shape the scope and ambitions of participation, varying from minimal engagement to co-governance. They are classified along a progressive scale:

- *Ratification:* seeks to legitimise pre-made decisions, often reinforcing existing power dynamics (Arnstein, 1969; Smith, 2009);
- *Informing decisions:* includes citizen perspectives in decision-making processes without granting direct control (Fung, 2003, 2006; Smith, 2009);
- *Co-creation solutions:* fosters a collaborative approach to policy-making involving citizens and decision-makers (Fung, 2003, 2006; Smith, 2009);
- *Co-governance:* empowers citizens to autonomously manage policies, share responsibilities, challenge the status quo, and promote accountability (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2003, 2006; Smith, 2009).

ii. Initiative organisation

Focuses on the roles of government and civil society in convening and implementing initiatives, particularly how participation is structured. It is classified based on its organisational model and assessed on a scale of democratisation ranging from least to most democratic:

- *Top-down:* authorities control the process, often limiting the inclusion of social actors (Avritzer, 2008; Moulaert *et al.*, 2019);
- *Bottom-up:* initiatives are led by civil society or local groups, even when invitations to participate are issued by the government. This approach fosters autonomy and a leading role for citizens, reflecting a 'bottom-up institutionalism' (Avritzer, 2008, p. 46);
- *Shared or bottom-linked* (Moulaert et al., 2019): a collaborative model in which government and civil society share decision-making responsibilities (Avritzer, 2008; Rode *et al.*, 2022);
- *Autonomous:* initiatives are organised and managed independently by communities, encouraging self-mobilisation and innovation (Almeida and Cunha, 2011; Faria and Ribeiro, 2011).

iii. Power-sharing

Based on Arnstein's “A Ladder of Citizen Participation” (1969), *power-sharing* assesses citizens' authority within a DI, reflecting the practical distribution of power, ranging from low to high:

- *Manipulation/therapy:* minimal citizen influence, where participation is used as a form of pedagogy to shape citizens' perceptions, often serving to legitimise decisions already made;
- *Informing/consultation/placation:* citizens are informed or provide feedback, but their input often has limited impact on outcomes and may prioritise elite groups, sidelining broader representation;
- *Partnership/delegated power:* a collaborative dynamic where citizens share or assume decision-making authority;
- *Citizen control:* ensures citizens full authority, enabling them to manage decisions and outcomes directly.

This objective determines the nature of DI and defines *what* to participate in. It highlights the importance of rebalancing authority between citizens and institutions and emphasises the impact of power dynamics in participatory processes, influencing the level of citizen autonomy and the effectiveness of institutional collaboration.

2. Distributing socio-spatial justice

To achieve a just city, it is essential to prioritise equity and justice distribution in urban policies. Fainstein (2014) argues that participation in decision-making ensures that diverse interests are fairly represented rather than treating participation as an end, as power imbalances can undermine equitable outcomes. She highlights planners' responsibility in addressing these issues through the design of projects and policies while also emphasising the importance of social movements in pressuring local governments to shift the focus of urban policy from competitiveness to fairness, thereby leading to a more equitable allocation of resources and opportunities. Similarly, Albrechts *et al.* (2020) contend that participatory structures, grounded in an awareness of inequalities, can expand the imagining of alternative futures and drive transformative change toward greater socio-spatial justice. Fung (2015) maintains that such structures must be explicitly conceived for redistributive goals. He uses the example of the PB in Porto Alegre to demonstrate how redistributive mechanisms can be designed to direct investments to lower-income neighbourhoods, fostering greater socio-spatial justice distribution.

These design choices are defined by determining how the objective of distributing socio-spatial justice is intended to be addressed, considering three aspects: how the benefit offered is effectuated (iv. kind of benefit), how decisions are made (v. interaction mode) and how these decisions are incorporated by authorities (vi. decision-making character), as detailed below.

iv. Kind of benefit

Assesses the scope and scale of DIs outcomes, analysing their potential to address socio-spatial inequalities. From implementing located assets through incorporation into public policies, such as participatory guidelines for sectoral plans, to institutionalisation in formal decision-making processes, ensuring participation continuity in urban governance, and allocating a dedicated budget to these initiatives. It follows a logic of simple summation, where each component contributes independently to the overall score, and their combined presence enhances the potential of impact:

- *Located assets:* address specific issues in a localised context, creating visible improvements but rarely tackling structural inequalities (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020);
- *Integration into public policies:* participation influences policy formulation and implementation (Almeida and Cunha, 2011), promoting equity, transparency, and accountability (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Allegretti, 2021; Fung, 2015);
- *Integration into formal decision processes:* embeds participatory practices into democratic arenas with clear rules and legal frameworks, enabling long-term structural transformations in urban planning and governance (Akbar *et al.*, 2020; Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Smith, 2009);
- *Dedicated budget management:* citizens influence resource allocation, ensuring investments align with community needs (Almeida and Cunha, 2011; Fung, 2006, 2015; Smith, 2009).

v. Interaction mode

Reflects how participants engage with one another and with decision-makers in a DI. Inspired by the "communication and decision mode" axis of Fung's Democracy Cube (2006, pp. 68–69), it is classified on a scale from more passive to more influential forms of interaction:

- *Listening:* citizens are informed by authorities or experts but have no role in shaping decisions;
- *Expressing and developing preferences*: participants articulate their views and refine their preferences, though without assurance of impact;
- *Aggregating and bargaining:* diverse opinions are collected and negotiated, enabling a more inclusive consideration of voices in the decision-making process;
- *Deliberating and negotiating:* participants engage in informed debates and collective reasoning to reach agreements, ensuring decisions are both inclusive and reflective of shared priorities.

vi. Decision-making character

Determines the process and extent to which citizens influence decisions in a DI and the institutional commitment to implementation. It is classified on a scale of increasing impact:

- *Advisory/non-binding:* citizens express opinions without assurance that they will influence decisions (Smith, 2009);
- *Deliberative/non-binding:* fosters richer discussions and higher-quality contributions but lacks political commitment to act on the results (Smith, 2009);
- *Advisory/binding:* citizens' contributions must be officially taken into consideration, enhancing their capacity to shape decisions (Mazeaud and Gourgues, 2023);
- *Deliberative/binding:* the most empowering configuration. At this level, deliberation fosters informed debates that lead to fairer and more equitable outcomes, while the binding nature ensures political commitment to implementing decisions (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017; Smith, 2009).

This objective underscores DIs' potential to address structural inequalities and align policies with collective needs, emphasising how design choices influence resource distribution and promote equity. Aligned with the dimension of *how* participation takes place, it highlights the importance of designing processes that generate cumulative benefits, encourage deliberative interaction, and establish strong

political commitments to reinforce cycles that promote socio-spatial justice. Linking processes to public policies enables more inclusive and fair urban governance structures.

3. Strengthening trust and community ties

Many authors argue that the main purpose of participation in DIs is to restore trust in democratic institutions (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Cornwall, 2004; Falanga, 2020; Fung, 2006, 2015). Although critics highlight that participation has shifted from focusing on social justice to prioritising the reinforcement of trust in government (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2017), this rapprochement between citizens and decision-makers plays a decisive role in transforming bureaucratic institutions to develop more inclusive ways of city-making. Fung (2015) argues that participatory governance can enhance policy legitimacy and effectiveness, making decision-makers more responsive and accountable. Moreover, when citizens see their opinions valued and involvement yielding results, their trust in the governance is reinforced (Fung, 2006, 2015). The interaction between communities, technicians and managers in addressing common problems not only strengthens social ties and social capital (Albrechts *et al*., 2020), but, when mediated by well-structured participatory methods, promotes institutional trust and collective agency (Sanoff, 2000).

Strengthening trust and community ties depends on design choices that determine *how* interactions are shaped, focusing on three key aspects: ensuring the quality of participatory processes (vii. process quality), promoting effective communication between citizens and institutions (viii. communication quality) and implementing measures to sustain these practices over time (ix. sustainability).

vii. Process quality

Evaluates the combination of factors that enhance participatory experiences and strengthen trust between citizens and institutions. It is based on a summative approach, where key elements are aggregated, increasing the overall quality of the process:

- *Diversity of methodologies:* tailored and adaptable approaches address the varied needs of participants and contextual challenges, promoting inclusion and responsiveness (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Broadley and Dixon, 2022; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Fung, 2015; Sanoff, 2000);
- *Qualified facilitation:* trained professionals ensure efficient, impartial processes that provide equal opportunities for participants to express their voices (Bua and Bussu, 2021; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Curato *et al.*, 2021; Font *et al.*, 2018; Smith, 2009, 2019);
- *New technologies:* digital platforms expand access, transparency, and monitoring capabilities, transforming participation into a more inclusive and accessible experience (Bua and Bussu, 2021; Elstub and Escobar, 2019; Fung, 2015; Rode *et al.*, 2022; Smith, 2009; Thompson, 2021);
- *Impact evaluation:* procedures to assess outcomes and processes (Akbar *et al.*, 2020; Falanga, 2019), ensuring accountability through scheduled reviews and performance indicators (AlWaer *et al.*, 2021) while providing insights into achieving participation goals and establishing a foundation for continuous improvement (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020).

viii. Communication quality

Assesses the mechanisms through which information flows within a DI, emphasising their role in fostering relationships of trust. The elements that, when combined by summation, increase the effectiveness of communication include:

- *Direct and specific communication channels:* a dedicated channel ensures clear, objective, and less bureaucratic interactions (Smith, 2009, 2019);
- *Diversity of communication channels:* integrating traditional media, digital platforms, social networks, and face-to-face or virtual meetings, thereby expanding access to information and enabling broader, more inclusive participation (Broadley and Dixon, 2022; Smith, 2009, 2019);
- *Transparency:* encompasses access to information and its accessibility, ensuring that communication is understandable and straightforward, thereby strengthening trust and accountability in governance processes (Brezzi, 2022; Font *et al.*, 2018; Fung, 2015; Pogrebinschi, 2023; Smith, 2009);
- *Accountability and feedback:* hold decision-makers responsible for their actions while recognising citizens' contributions, motivating sustained engagement (Font *et al.*, 2018; Fung, 2015; Pogrebinschi, 2023; Smith, 2009).

ix. Sustainability

Observes the capacity of a DI to endure over time, generate long-term impact, and foster a culture of participation. It is structured based on the sum of the following factors:

- *Organisational structure:* a stable infrastructure with dedicated human, physical, and financial resources ensures the continuous operation of the DI (Cornwall, 2004; Curato *et al.*, 2021; Faria and Ribeiro, 2011; Font *et al.*, 2018);
- *Continuous learning structure:* involving formal and informal opportunities such as training sessions and workshops that empower participants, foster collaboration, and build a shared culture of engagement (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Faria and Ribeiro, 2011; Fung, 2003);
- *Flexible regulations:* designed to adapt to changing contexts and accommodate new data, ensuring durability and responsiveness (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Faria and Ribeiro, 2011);
- *Monitoring indicators:* are tools that assess progress towards objectives, promote transparency and accountability, enable strategic adjustments, and foster legitimacy (Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Almeida and Cunha, 2011; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Fung, 2003).

This set of criteria guides *how* to structure participation for long-term engagement between citizens and institutions. By promoting diverse user-based practices, supported by robust dedicated resources and comprehensive communication strategies, design choices for this goal encourage sustained collaboration and accountability among stakeholders, reinforcing trust between citizens and government.

4. Promoting inclusion

Inclusion is the main challenge to address when designing a DI. Efforts to combat social exclusion and bring the voices of minorities, the poor, and other typically underrepresented groups into political arenas should be a central commitment for those designing and advocating for them (Allegretti, 2021; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Smith, 2009). Inclusion ensures that the voices of affected citizens are

considered in decision-making processes, leading to fairer and more equitable urban policies. However, simply bringing underrepresented citizens into DIs does not guarantee meaningful participation. Strategies and mechanisms must be established to ensure marginalised groups' representativeness and create conditions for equitable participation (Allegretti, 2021; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Smith, 2009).

The proposed criteria associated with this objective, focusing on those *who* participate, aim to address the challenges identified by Cornwall and Coelho (2007, p.3) of inclusion (x. selection criteria), representation (xi. affirmative actions) and voice (xii. plurality), as presented below.

x. Selection criteria

Evaluates the methods used to determine participant composition in DIs, emphasising their impact on inclusion and representativeness. Arranged from least to most inclusive, the criteria include:

- *Open doors:* participation is voluntary, attracting highly engaged individuals but risking representational bias as it often excludes underrepresented groups (Allegretti, 2021; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Smith, 2009).
- *Selective recruitment:* targets stakeholders or experts, enriching discussions with specialised knowledge but limiting diversity by excluding broader public participation (Fung, 2006; Kamlage and Nanz, 2018; Smith, 2009).
- *Stratified sampling or sortition:* seeks sociodemographic representativeness through random or stratified samples, reducing bias (Fung, 2006; Kamlage and Nanz, 2018; Smith, 2019) but presenting challenges in including smaller or marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities or people with disabilities (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Smith, 2009, 2019).
- *Mixed selection criteria:* combines self-selection, targeted invitations, and sortition to balance inclusion and representativeness, fostering enriched discussions and exchanges of knowledge (Allegretti, 2021; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Smith, 2009).

xi. Affirmative actions

Considers approaches to ensure the inclusion of underrepresented groups in participatory processes, addressing historical inequities. It is measured through an aggregation of enabling actions, which create necessary conditions for participation:

- *Itinerant sessions:* increase accessibility by holding sessions in different locations and at varied times, accommodating participants with mobility restrictions or conflicting responsibilities (Allegretti, 2021; Broadley and Dixon, 2022; Col·lectiu Punt 6, 2019);
- *Participation quotas:* guarantee representation of diverse social groups, such as by gender, race, or geographical location, ensuring deliberations reflect those most affected by policies (Allegretti, 2021; Fung, 2003; Smith, 2009);
- *Basic support services:* provide transportation, childcare, meals, and language translation, which remove logistical barriers and enable the participation of vulnerable groups (Col·lectiu Punt 6, 2019; Curato *et al.*, 2021; Rongerude, 2020);
- *Financial compensation:* recognises participants' time and effort, allowing individuals who might otherwise face economic constraints to engage in decision-making (Curato *et al.*, 2021; Fung, 2003; Smith, 2009, 2019).

xii. Plurality

Assesses the diversity and inclusiveness of participatory processes, reflecting alignment with principles of equality and openness. It is measured through an aggregation of elements that foster broader participation:

- *Openness to new actors:* encourages strategies to rotate participants, preventing dominance by the same groups and creating opportunities for the inclusion of traditionally marginalised voices (Almeida and Cunha, 2011; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Faria and Ribeiro, 2011; Gaventa, 2006; Smith, 2009, 2019);
- *Diversity of voices:* values the coexistence of different perspectives through the creation of mechanisms that foster dialogue and creative solutions to complex problems (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Faria and Ribeiro, 2011; Gaventa, 2006; Rongerude, 2020; Smith, 2009, 2019);
- *Deliberative equality:* ensures all participants have equal opportunities to present arguments and engage, regardless of their socioeconomic status, supported by skilled facilitators and methodologies that address power asymmetries (Allegretti, 2021; Almeida and Cunha, 2011; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Curato *et al.*, 2021; Fainstein, 2014; Smith, 2009);
- *Structural incentives:* motivate participation by offering tangible benefits to communities, such as visible neighbourhood improvements or recognition of contributions, encouraging sustained engagement (Allegretti, 2021; Fung, 2003, 2015; Smith, 2009).

The inclusion objective, related to the *who* participates dimension, highlights the importance of designing processes that reflect the diversity of the populations they serve. The criteria work to ensure diversity of voices, promote deliberative equity, empower marginalised groups, and foster representation. Design efforts should be made to integrate these elements, as inclusion is perhaps the greatest challenge to participation. Progress toward more inclusive approaches increases diversity, strengthens legitimacy, and ensures that decision-making processes are fair, representative, and aligned with equity and social justice principles.

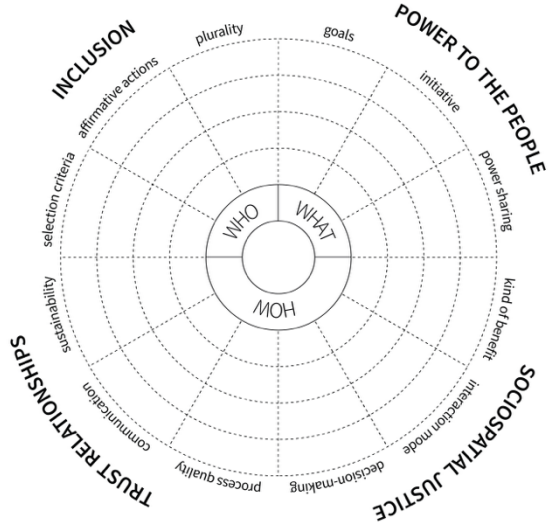
This section adopted a structured approach to present the DRF. It comprehensively analyses design choices, linking participation objectives to their corresponding criteria and arranging them according to aspects of institutional design. Table I summarises the framework to facilitate understanding, providing an overview of how objectives and criteria interrelate to assess participatory practices.

objectives	dimension	variables			authors
(1) transferring decision-making power to those affected	WHAT	i. Goals	Ratification	-	Arnstein, 1969; Smith, 2009
			Informing decision		Fung, 2003, 2006; Smith, 2009
			Co-creation solutions		Fung, 2003, 2006; Smith, 2009
			Co-governance	+	Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2003, 2006; Smith, 2009
		ii. Initiative organization	Top-down	-	Avritzer, 2008; Moulaert et al., 2019
			Bottom-up		Avritzer, 2008
			Shared (bottom linked)		Avritzer, 2008; Moulaert *et al.*, 2019; Rode *et al.*, 2022
			Autonomous	+	Almeida & Cunha, 2011; Faria & Ribeiro, 2011
		iii. Power sharing	Manipulation / therapy	-	
			Informing / consulting / placation		Arnstein, 1969
			Partnership / delegated power		
			Citizen control	+	
(2) distributing socio-spatial justice	HOW	iv. Kind of benefit	Located assets	Σ	Albrechts, Barbanente and Monno, 2020
			Integration - public policies		Almeida & Cunha, 2011; Fung, 2015; Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Allegretti, 2021
			Integration i- formal decision processes		Smith, 2009; Akbar et al., 2020; Albrechts *et al*, 2020
			Dedicated budget management		Fung, 2006, 2015; Smith, 2009; Almeida & Cunha, 2011
		v. Interaction mode	Listening	-	
			Expressing and developing preferences		Fung, 2006
			Aggregating and bargaining		
			Deliberating and negotiating	+	
		vi. Decision-making character	Advisory / non-binding	-	Smith, 2009
			Deliberative / non-binding		Smith, 2009
			Advisory / binding		Mazeaud & Gourgues, 2023
			Deliberative / binding	+	Smith, 2009; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017
(3) strengthening trust and community ties		vii. Process quality	Diversity of methodologies	Σ	Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Fung, 2015; Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; Broadley & Dixon, 2022; Sanoff, 2000
			Qualified facilitation		Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Smith, 2009, 2019; Font *et al.*, 2018; Bua & Bussu, 2021; Curato *et al.*, 2021
			New technologies		Smith, 2009; Fung, 2015; Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Bua & Bussu, 2021; Thompson, 2021; Rode I., 2022
			Impact evaluation		Falanga, 2019; Akbar *et al.*, 2020; Albrechts *et al.*, 2020; AlWaer *et al.*, 2021
		viii. Communication quality	Direct specific communication channels	Σ	Smith, 2009, 2019
			Diversity of comunication channels		Smith, 2009, 2019; Broadley & Dixon, 2022
			Transparency		Smith, 2009; Fung, 2015; Font *et al.*, 2018; Brezzi, 2022; Pogrebinschi, 2023
			Accountability & feed back		Smith, 2009; Fung, 2015; Font *et al.*, 2018; Pogrebinschi, 2023
		ix. Sustainability	Organizational structure	Σ	Cornwall, 2004; Faria & Ribeiro, 2011; Font *et al.*, 2018; Curato *et al.*, 2021
			Continuous learning structure		Fung, 2003; Faria & Ribeiro, 2011; Albrechts et al., 2020
			Flexible regulations		Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Faria & Ribeiro, 2011, Albrechts *et al*, 2020
			Monitoring indicators		Fung, 2003; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Almeida & Cunha, 2011; Albrechts *et al.*, 2020
(4) promoting inclusion	WHO	x. Selection criteria	Open doors	-	Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Smith, 2009; Allegretti, 2021
			Selective recruitment		Fung, 2006; Smith, 2009; Kamlage & Nanz, 2018
			Stratified sampling or sortition		Fung, 2006; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007;Kamlage & Nanz, 2018; Smith, 2009, 2019
			Mixed selection criteria	+	Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Smith, 2009; Allegretti, 2021
		xi. Affirmative actions	Itinerant sessions	Σ	Col·lectiu Punt 6, 2019; Allegretti, 2021; Broadley & Dixon, 2022
			Participation quotas		Fung, 2003; Smith, 2009; Allegretti, 2021
			Basic support services		Col·lectiu Punt 6, 2019; Rongerude, 2020; Curato *et al.*, 2021
			Financial compensation		Fung, 2003; Smith, 2009, 2019; Curato *et al.*, 2021
		xii. Plurality	Openness to new actors	Σ	Gaventa, 2006; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Smith, 2009, 2019; Almeida & Cunha, 2011; Faria & Ribeiro, 2011
			Diversity of voices		Gaventa, 2006; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Smith, 2009, 2019; Faria & Ribeiro, 2011; Rongerude, 2020
			Deliberative equality		Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Smith, 2009; Fainstein, 2014; Allegretti, 2021; Curato *et al.*, 2021
			Structuring incentives		Fung, 2003, 2015; Smith, 2009; Allegretti, 2021

Source: Authors own work

Table I - Democracy Radar Framework – Summary

Additionally, the DRF incorporates a graphic visual interface tool (Figure 1) that enhances the evaluation process by offering an intuitive representation of a DI performance across the framework's analytical components. The graphic interface allows rank scoring, clearly visualising how well a specific DI meets the defined criteria and participation objectives. This tool makes the framework accessible and user-friendly.



Source: Authors own work

Figure 1 - Democracy Radar Framework

4. Democratic innovations in Lisbon

Portugal is recognised for its extensive citizen participation initiatives in public policy (Falanga, 2020), and its capital, Lisbon, represents this dynamism. It was the first European capital to hold a PB, which introduced three key innovations: a co-decisional model where participants voted on priority projects, the use of digital platforms for proposal submission and voting, and the adoption of a Letter of Principles by the Lisbon Municipality (CML) to formalise its organisational structure (Allegretti *et al.*, 2016). Initiated in 2008 under a left-wing coalition government, it was discontinued in 2021 (Alemão, 2024) after twelve editions.

The BIP/ZIP Programme, launched by the same administration in 2011 as a response to the 2008 economic crisis, was designed to strengthen social and territorial cohesion by funding small-scale urban regeneration projects in priority neighbourhoods and areas (Falanga, 2020). Unlike PB, which focuses on general urban priorities, BIP/ZIP is explicitly place-based, targeting socially or spatially vulnerable areas. The programme operates as a public-community partnership, where partnerships between local organisations must submit project proposals. A multidisciplinary technical committee evaluates these proposals, and selected projects are implemented by the proponents themselves under CML's monitoring. Now in its fourteenth edition, BIP/ZIP has demonstrated long-term success.

In 2022, the CML launched the LCC, a deliberative experiment designed to involve citizens directly in debating critical urban issues. This initiative, framed as a deliberative mini-public (Falanga, 2023), was the first of its kind promoted by a municipal government in Portugal, this time implemented by a centre-right government. Unlike PB and BIP/ZIP, which are project-driven, the LCC aims to facilitate structured deliberation among a representative sample of Lisbon residents using a stratified random sampling method to ensure demographic diversity. The LCC is in its fourth edition and has produced recommendations on topics such as "Climate Change," the "15-minute City," and "How to build a Lisbon that cares?".

4.1 Results

To demonstrate the DRF's application, a qualitative comparative analysis was conducted on the official regulations of Lisbon's PB (CML, 2021), the BIP/ZIP (CML, 2024b), and the LCC (CML, 2024a). These initiatives represent distinct participatory mechanisms: PB fosters broad citizen engagement through direct voting, BIP/ZIP promotes partnerships to address territorial inequalities, and LCC introduces deliberative mini-publics.

The analysis involved coding the regulatory documents in MAXQDA and aligning content with the DRF's criteria. Only explicitly stated intentions and factual design choices were considered. The results, organised by the four participation objectives, are presented below:

1. Transferring Decision-Making Power to Those Affected

All three DIs share *i. Goals* centred on *co-creation solutions.* However, in *ii. Initiative organisation,* while all DIs are government-initiated (top-down), PB and BIP/ZIP suggest a *bottom-up* institutionalisation (Avritzer, 2008), as citizens autonomously develop proposals before submission. The LCC, in contrast, follows a strictly *top-down* approach, where participants engage with government-defined topics. On *iii. Power-sharing*, PB and BIP/ZIP operate at *partnership/delegated power* levels. PB enables direct influence through participatory project co-creation and voting, while

BIP/ZIP grants citizens substantive authority in both designing and delivering solutions through local partnerships. The LCC's deliberative model, classified as *informing* decisions, allows citizen input in shaping recommendations while maintaining government control over outcomes.

2. Distributing Socio-Spatial Justice

Regarding *iv. Kind of benefit*, PB and BIP/ZIP address socio-spatial inequalities by integrating *located assets* into *formal decision processes* and ensuring that prioritised projects receive *dedicated budgets*. BIP/ZIP has an additional level of anchoring integrated into public policies (housing) and the municipal master plan. The LCC, operating without a dedicated budget or policy integration, remains limited to *located assets*. In *v. Interaction mode,* all DIs involve *deliberating and negotiating*. Concerning *vi. Decision-making character*, PB combines an *advisory/binding* approach, ensuring citizens' input formally informs decisions, though final approval rests with Lisbon Municipality. BIP/ZIP adopts a *deliberative/binding* model, delegating implementation authority to local organisations. The LCC's *deliberative/non-binding* process lacks mechanisms to convert recommendations into actionable policies or funded interventions.

3. Strengthening Trust and Community Ties

While all DIs prioritise interaction between citizens and authorities, they differ in their approaches. Regarding *vii. Process quality*: all regulations refer to *qualified facilitation* support and *impact evaluation* procedures. PB incorporates *new technologies* for proposal submission and voting*,* and LCC emphasises the *diversity of methodologies* to enhance deliberation. *On viii. Communication quality* all DIs ensure *direct communication channels* and concern for *transparency* and *accountability*, establishing how both will be carried out. However, only LCC and PB formally define multiple *communication channels* in their regulations. In *ix. Sustainability*, all DIs offer an internal *organisational structure* and ensure *flexible regulations*. PB and BIP/ZIP define a set of objectives, goals and *monitoring indicators*, while only BIP/ZIP provides a *continuous learning structure* through training and capacity-building strategies.

4. Promoting Inclusion

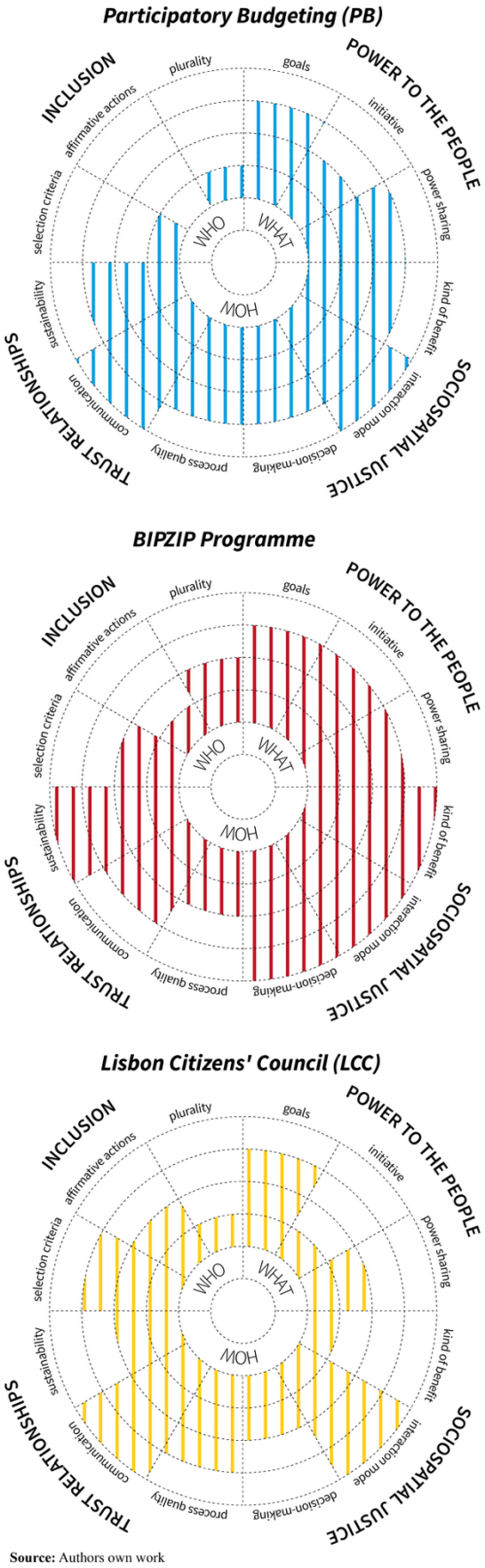
Regarding *x. Selection Criteria*, all initiatives incorporate elements of *open doors/self-selection*. BIP/ZIP specifically requires local stakeholder partnerships through *selective recruitment*. LCC combines stratified sampling to increase representativeness with pre-registration requirements that may paradoxically limit participation. In contrast, PB relies on open participation without additional mechanisms to ensure representativeness. For *xi. Affirmative actions,* referring to *participation quotas*, BIP/ZIP, provide geographic prioritisation and explicit support for projects benefiting marginalised groups, while LCC ensures the participation of people with visual or hearing impairments. LCC provides essential *basic support services* (transportation and meals) to reduce participation barriers. PB, in contrast, lacks systematic affirmative action measures. None of the DIs currently implement *financial compensation* or *itinerant sessions* as part of their inclusion strategies.

4.2 Comparative Insights

The findings illustrate how institutional design choices shape the capacity of DIs to empower citizens, deliver socio-spatial justice, build trust, and promote inclusion (see Figures 2 and 3). The analysis reveals three key insights:

- The redistribution of power depends on the level of binding commitment.
  PB and BIP/ZIP demonstrate stronger power-sharing through participatory decision-making and budget allocation, whereas LCC remains consultative.
- Integrating participatory outcomes into formal policies strengthens impact.
  BIP/ZIP's territorial cohesion model, anchored in policy frameworks, enhances socio-spatial justice more effectively than LCC, which lacks policy integration and dedicated funding.
- Inclusion remains the most challenging aspect across DIs.
  LCC's stratified selection enhances representativeness, while BIP/ZIP employs territorial segmentation. However, all initiatives lack comprehensive affirmative action strategies, particularly regarding affordability and outreach to marginalised groups.

Overall, design choices influence participatory processes. While PB and BIP/ZIP exhibit greater potential for power redistribution and socio-spatial equity, LCC prioritises representation. However, inclusion, encompassing diversity and deliberative equality, remains the most persistent challenge, demanding greater attention from DI designers.



Source: Authors own work

Figure 2 Visualization of the application of DRF in PB, BIP/ZIP, and LCC regulations

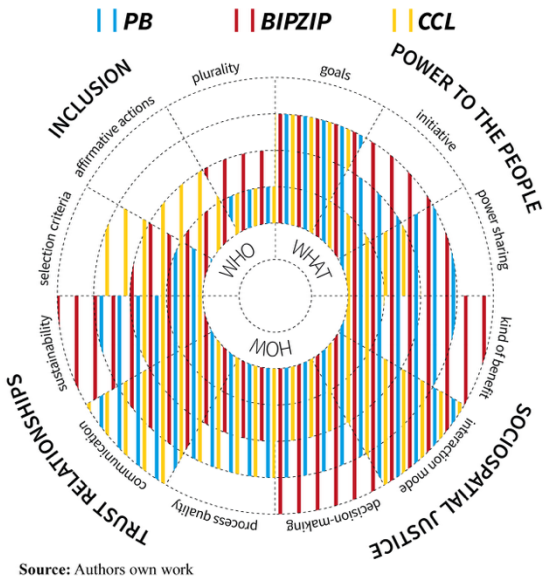


Figure 3 Comparative representation across the DIs

5. Discussion

The different analytical criteria of the DRF impact the four participation objectives to varying degrees, interacting dynamically. For example, strengthening inclusion mechanisms can promote greater trust and legitimacy, while greater power-sharing tends to increase perceptions of justice. This understanding of interdependencies is crucial to improving both participatory processes and the DRF itself, which, although not a DI itself, provides a framework for evaluation and guiding institutional design and mediation between different actors.

It is essential to highlight that the DRF criteria are not in competition with each other. Instead, they aim to reflect the effort dedicated to each of them, where higher scores indicate higher compliance with desirable normative principles and not the superiority of one criterion over others. This strategic approach identifies achievements and potential for improvement, transforming the DRF into a learning and knowledge transfer tool.

The criteria can also play different roles in institutional design; some enable and structure participation, while others assess the quality of processes. Further work on these distinctions will help navigate the complexities of institutional design and allow a more nuanced application of the DRF.

The DRF can operate as a boundary object (Star and Griesemer, 1989), maintaining sufficient robustness to ensure a common identity across different contexts while remaining flexible enough to be meaningful to diverse actors. This dual quality enables ongoing research to apply the framework to examine how contextual factors interact with institutional designs and outcomes—serving simultaneously as: (1) an analytical tool that preserves methodological coherence across cases and (2) a mediating device adaptable to the strategic needs of policymakers, the implementation challenges of practitioners, and the empowerment agendas of civil society.

In parallel, we are developing a graphical and interactive interface to enhance the DRF's accessibility and utility as an analytical and mediation resource for all user groups.

6. Conclusions

This study contributes to understanding and applying DIs to foster more inclusive and effective urban governance. The analysis highlighted how institutional design choices can enhance participation and bring citizens closer to urban planning and governance decision-making.

To this end, a new theoretical-methodological framework was developed articulating four main objectives of participation: (1) transferring decision-making power to those affected; (2) distributing socio-spatial justice; (3) strengthening relationships of trust and community ties; and (4) promoting inclusion, with three central dimensions of institutional design: *What* to participate in*? How? Who* participates*?* The framework's twelve analytical criteria guide design choices and enable the evaluation and comparison of DIs.

Findings from Lisbon DIs highlight inclusion as the greatest challenge, alongside shortcomings in diversity and deliberation warranties. The DRF proves helpful in identifying design gaps and fostering cross-learning, where strengths from one initiative can inform and improve others. Findings suggest its potential to guide design choices and facilitate knowledge transfer across DIs, contexts and cities. Moreover, the study reinforces the idea that DI design can help bring civil society and government closer. The framework also shows the potential to function as a boundary object, maintaining coherence across cases while remaining adaptable to different actors and contexts. Ongoing research further explores its role in mediating dialogue between policymakers, urban planners, researchers and activists.

Recognising the context-dependent nature of DIs, future research should explore, in particular, how contextual dimensions, such as social capital, political will, institutional capacity, and culture, impact the institutional design or the performance of each and overall institutional design dimensions. The framework remains open to contributions and transformations, supporting comparative research on DIs and responding to evolving urban challenges. Ultimately, it contributes to strengthening the creation of "structures of direct participation of civil society in urban planning and management that operates regularly and democratically" (United Nations, 2016) aligning with SDG 11.

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