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OPT-T8: GEOGRAPHY AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Short description

This course emphasises the role of geography in addressing complex human-environmental interactions through public participation, focusing on integrating social, economic, and environmental values. Students will gain practical, both geographical and sociological knowledge of participation tools and learn to analyse their application across diverse spatiotemporal contexts. Emphasis is placed on aligning public participation with sustainable development goals and adapting approaches to fit differentiated development paradigms. By the end of the course, students will be able to critically evaluate and design public participation strategies, promoting sustainable and inclusive development in dynamic spaces and places.

2. Keywords

Geography; Public Participation; Sustainable Development; Spatiotemporal Contexts; Social Sciences; Environmental Sciences

3. Content

3.1. Introduction to the geographical perspective on public participation within sustainable development

Meadows (2021) says that “human-environment relationship is at the core of the discipline of geography, as thus geography is ‘the science of sustainability’.” When investigating and teaching sustainability, the role of geography must be emphasised. The integration of Earth system sciences with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is essential to drive transformative change. Consequently, the unity of geography should be highlighted, as it bridges natural and human sciences.

Geography cannot afford to wait for governmental responses; instead, it must actively investigate and promote bottom-up and grassroots initiatives for sustainability. Recently, the following changes within the scientific field of geography are observed (Fu et al., 2022):

- The focus of geography is shifting from acquiring basic knowledge to understanding the interconnections between patterns and processes, as well as simulating and predicting complex human-Earth systems.
- New perspectives in Geography, such as landscape sustainability science are emerging, with the “Pattern-Process-Service-Sustainability” framework offering a solid foundation for positioning geography at the heart of sustainability.
- Geography plays a key role in supporting sustainable development, contributing to achieving the SDGs.

Public participation is a cornerstone of the SDGs, recognising that everyone has the right to influence decisions that shape their lives and that their voices must be heard. A key objective in this context is SDG 16, which aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, ensure access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. One of its specific targets is to guarantee public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms in line with national laws and international agreements. Meaningful public participation in decision-making processes is therefore crucial (Ruppel & Houston, 2023). Furthermore, participatory and cooperative development is a crucial geographical approach for tackling global development challenges at the local and regional levels (Deng et al., 2023).

Transitions towards sustainable development require a substantive rationale for public participation. Unlike instrumental or normative approaches, a substantive rationale focuses on achieving genuinely improved outcomes without predetermining what those outcomes should be. Public participation involves both knowledge creation and action, with participatory and co-creative methods bridging the gap between understanding the world and fostering wisdom on how to engage with it. This approach calls for methods beyond conventional science, including transdisciplinary research; community-based, local, and traditional knowledge; and post-normal science. Adopting these alternative perspectives for sustainable transitions shifts the focus away from merely informing, educating, or persuading citizens about predetermined options. Instead, it prioritises collaborative thinking from the very inception of the decision-making process (European Environment Agency, 2023). As a result, the role of geography - interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary science itself - in enriching and improving public participation within the framework of sustainable development should be emphasised.

When practising public participation on large geographical scales, several challenges must be emphasised. Larger areas are more likely to exhibit information gaps across the geography, and they tend to be formatted and quality-controlled differently across various jurisdictions. Traditional face-to-face meetings are difficult to implement consistently across such expansive areas, and local perspectives - encompassing not only the needs of local communities but also the ontologies used to understand and describe local realities - are geographically differentiated (Griffin & Jiao, 2019; Napierała & Leśniewska-Napierała, 2024). These challenges may be partially

addressed through the application of digital tools in co-creation processes characterised by digital inclusion, which, however, potentially exacerbates disparities driven by geographically differentiated factors such as disabilities, education, gender, income, race, etc. Co-productive planning processes can provide additional avenues for people to influence the future of their communities, but the integration of technologies must carefully consider the role of distributional biases (Griffin & Jiao, 2019). Networked localities within larger areas are another challenge. While individuals belong to varied constellations of local communities rather than a single local community, there are no clear conceptual or geographical limits to the local (Asen, 2017).

One approach to addressing the challenges of implementing public participation in achieving sustainable development goals is the concept of ‘community geography’ (Robinson et al., 2017). This emerging field within academic geography fosters partnerships between universities and communities to improve access to spatial technology, data, and analytical tools. By collaborating with community members, it applies geographic methods to tackle local challenges. Community geography can be seen as a geographical version of citizen science (or participatory action research, community-based participatory research, participatory planning, etc.), focusing on empowering under-resourced communities. A key aspect of this approach is confronting power imbalances, enabling these communities to better address issues related to community development, including equitable access to technology.

3.2. Socio-economic inequalities and public participation

The mainstream literature on public participation analysis tends to overlook the spatial dimensions of social networks and remains largely detached from the extensive research on spatial networks within geography. Consequently, understanding the connections between space, place, and the social contexts of public participation becomes critically important (Viry et al., 2022).

The issue of access, representativeness and legitimacy are paramount when discussing participation, as not all the individuals and groups who may have an interest at stake may have equal resources and possibilities to attempt participation. The different presence in participatory process is usually not neutral or equally distributed within different socio-economic groups, rather those in a disadvantage position (to be understood with an intersectional approach, combining variables such as class, gender, age, ethnicity, legal position, etc. with spatial ones as well) are less likely to participate and their voices may remain, once more, unheard and underrepresented (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Schroder & Neumayr, 2023). Schroder and Neumayr (2023) for example argue that higher inequality is most often negatively related to civic engagement, and that this relation is moderated by individual factors, such as, for example, income and education.

It has also been noted that participation promoted by public authorities often favours well-structured groups of interest rather than the inclusion of ordinary citizens, which involvement may remain marginal. Moreover, the involvement of groups of interests, bottom-up initiatives, associations and urban-based experiences is rather selective, as not all the existing ones come to be included (Silver et al., 2010). Working with third

sector associations and bottom-up initiatives, local authorities empower some actors, initiatives and visions of the city while others become or remain excluded. Often, those who are included are not the most progressive voices: it has been noted that most of the associations, NPOs and civic initiatives that come to be involved in the processes of urban transformation do not bring forward (any more) stances of systemic change or political struggle, challenging the neoliberal pro-growth approach of urban change or suggesting alternatives, but they are rather aligned with the existent approach and may even function as elements of stabilisation and legitimisation (Uitermark et al., 2012). Not all of the interests put forward by associations and locally-based initiatives are considered to be equally legitimate by political institutions. And, as mentioned, not all the individuals or groups who may have an interest at stake have the resources to attempt participation. Therefore, power inequalities may remain strong, and participation process may even end up confirming rather than reducing inequalities between social groups if not carefully thought (Silver et al., 2010).

Moini (2011), when discussing how ‘participation’ has become an hegemonic frame of reference in the policy-making process, alert us about the risks of what he calls “political algorithm” (“if the participation is developed in the context of local democracy, then it will automatically produce more democratic decisions”) and “technical algorithm” (“if participation is well organized and structured, then the quality of decisions will be better”). Therefore, on the one side it is crucial to address the dynamics shaping the possibility to access to participation and how they may play different across different contexts, on the other the attention to the process should not cancel the needed attention to the outcomes too.

3.3. Public participation in geographically differentiated paradigms of economic development (neoliberalism, post-capitalism, ultra-capitalism)

Today, the public sphere is under pressure from both the market and private interests. As a result, political participation and democracy are gradually eroding. Furthermore, the fragmentation and privatisation of public space occur alongside the exploitation of the commons. The appearance of public participation creates an illusion of equality, conceals existing inequalities and anomalies, and hinders the recognition of underlying crises (Erkan et al., 2022). Contemporary discourse on public participation extends beyond its recognition as a fundamental right, highlighting its practical advantages and contributions to governance. Meaningful and dynamic participation has been shown to enhance governance outcomes and effectiveness. However, participation risks becoming a tool for perpetuating existing power imbalances or degenerating into superficial exercises with little real impact (European Environment Agency, 2023). Furthermore, pursuing the SDGs within the dominant neoliberal paradigm appears untenable, as neoliberal institutions are often seen as responsible for perpetuating poverty, economic inequality, exploitative working conditions, and environmental degradation (Azmanova, 2021). Efficient public participation requires a better understanding of geographically differentiated paradigms of economic development and the anticipated evolutionary shifts from neoliberalism to ultra-capitalism, as well as from neoliberalism, through its critique, towards post-capitalist alternatives.

Within a neoliberal framework, already empowered groups may gain further advantages through participation mechanisms, amplifying the influence of wealthier voices. This is because neoliberal capitalism is a non-democratic ideology where power depends on the ownership of resources, primarily capital. In modern ultra-capitalism, the significance of other resources, such as information, has increased. Nevertheless, the more resources one possesses, the more powerful they become. The dominance of empowered elites and ruling classes who gain the social and economic surplus within this system - ostensibly democratic but heavily shaped by capitalist influences - has already been confirmed (Erkan et al., 2022). In neoliberal systems, doubts persist about the conditions necessary for participatory arrangements to effectively enhance both democracy and governance. A related challenge lies in the potential power imbalances between elite local governance structures - such as the influence of unelected local figures within institutions like local partnerships - and participatory processes, which can undermine their intended democratic outcomes. Also, the problem of limited capacity and resources of participatory institutions should be emphasised (Guarneros-Meza & Geddes, 2010; Sancino et al., 2024).

Without a shift in discourse from neoliberal ideology towards alternative developmental and political post-capitalist ontologies, genuine public participation remains an unrealistic concept (Erkan et al., 2022). What is important is that these ontologies should be geographically differentiated (Napierała & Leśniewska-Napierała, 2024). Differentiated ontologies are also linked to the varied capacities of individuals. This is because the development of participatory models depends on the geographically diverse skills, resources, and competencies of citizens, who contribute in different roles throughout the participation process (Sancino et al., 2024). The spatial and temporal dynamics of neoliberalism can show a contradictory movement, where opposition to neoliberalism itself has two aspects: resistance to neoliberalism, and contestation against its imposition by forces and practices that existed before it and continue alongside it (Guarneros-Meza & Geddes, 2010).

Unless there is a shift from the dominant neoliberal paradigm towards post-capitalism, participatory processes will be viewed as part of a 'social neoliberalism.' In this framework, despite focusing on the interests of the dominant class, there is a need to address social inequality - creating a paradox where processes meant to reduce inequality are used to manage it instead (Guarneros-Meza & Geddes, 2010). One way to understand how neoliberalism fosters citizenship through participation spaces and practices is by examining the 'governing technologies' within different geographies, which aim to shape citizens from a young age into specific types of people. Viewing participation as governance reveals significant ways of shaping and controlling knowledge and identity in the neoliberal era. It is crucial to understand the conflicting ways in which people are moulded into citizens through participation. These contradictions in how people are expected to think and act reflect a deeper conflict between neoliberal and democratic values (Komporezos-Athanasiou et al., 2019).

Geography, supported by modern and digital participatory tools such as Geographical Information Systems (GIS), plays a crucial role in facilitating the exchange of spatial and geo-referenced perspectives. This exchange serves as a vital precondition for dialogue, fostering cultural evolution. Such progress is evident not only at the technological level but also conceptually, as it enhances understanding of differing

viewpoints and - broadly - geographically differentiated ontologies (Ahamer, 2012). Furthermore, progress must extend to the political level. Geographical participatory tools should not merely enhance spatial technology in public participation, but also become a political force capable of challenging the powerful interests that currently dominate land use decision-making processes at various levels of government (Brown et al., 2020).

3.4. What can be decided by humans, and to what extent? - Environmental limits to public participation

Unlike in economic or social contexts, public participation in environmental decisions must acknowledge that nature's priorities are non-negotiable. All stakeholders must confront global challenges, such as climate change, and engage in collective efforts to address them. Decision-making begins at this critical juncture. Public participation is especially crucial when the public perceives environmental harm in activities that the state does not view as problematic. It is argued that involving the public in environmental policy design and implementation enhances transparency, accountability, and legitimacy, particularly when conflicts arise between environmental policies and public priorities. This ensures that the resulting policies are fair and equitable (Ruppel & Houston, 2023). On the one hand, true empowerment entails not only the ability to shape top-down initiatives and proposals but also the freedom to express dissent and suggest alternatives (European Environment Agency, 2023). On the other hand, nature itself is a stakeholder in any decision-making process and is often significantly, and negatively, affected by human decisions. This raises a broader question about the environmental limits of human actions and, more specifically, the environmental constraints on public participation.

Poor communication between citizens and state actors often leads to a lack of public support for climate policy development and implementation. To build support for climate-related policies and initiatives while protecting the public's right to participation, the state must actively involve citizens at every stage - policy development, introduction, application, and monitoring. This approach ensures state actors are aware of public concerns and gives citizens opportunities to participate in decision-making on climate issues. It also fosters transparency, accountability, and a more inclusive and engaged society (Ruppel & Houston, 2023).

The environmental dimension of public participation can be understood through the lens of emotional knowledge, an emerging focus in human geography. The 'emotional turn' highlights the role of emotions as a fundamental aspect of geography. This perspective offers a valuable framework for addressing environmental research, crisis mitigation, and resilience. By fostering emotions like hope, responsibility, care, and solidarity, creative public participation methods can inspire adaptive actions and drive transformative change. To foster engagement, communication should take a relational approach that combines storytelling and social interaction to link individuals with environmental issues, each other, and their environment. This approach not only demonstrates how geography can help tackle environmental challenges but also paves the way for exploring post-capitalist ontologies such as feminism and poststructuralism (Ryan, 2016).

4. Assignments

Students are required to write an essay on a geographical place with which they are familiar. The place may be preselected or approved by the academic instructor. The aim of the essay is to analyse the social, economic, and environmental factors that influence the use of public participation tools within the specific geographical context. The following questions may guide students in writing their essay:

- What are the key characteristics and capacities of the social groups living in the selected place? What are the relationships between these groups, and between them and the institutions, organisations, and businesses present in the area?
- What are the core values represented by the social groups in the place? How do they perceive development? What are their primary motivations for taking action?
- What environmental issues are evident in the place? What are the opinions of the local communities regarding these environmental challenges?

5. Summary of Learning

Q1: What role does geography play in promoting public participation within the framework of Sustainable Development Goals?

A: Geography plays a pivotal role in promoting public participation within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By integrating natural and social sciences, geography examines the human-environment relationship, providing critical insights into local and regional contexts, as well as a global perspective. Specifically, in the context of SDG 16 - which aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, ensure access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions - geography's emphasis on spatial analysis and place-based understanding enhances public access to information and supports the protection of both environment and fundamental freedoms. Through participatory methods, geographers contribute to social and spatial justice.

Q2: What challenges are associated with the involvement of various groups of interest in participatory processes?

A: The involvement of various groups of interest in participatory processes often faces challenges, as public authorities tend to favour well-structured groups while marginalising ordinary citizens. Inclusion is selective, empowering some actors and visions while excluding others, often reinforcing existing neoliberal frameworks rather than fostering systemic change. Moreover, not all interests are treated as equally legitimate by political institutions, and individuals or groups lacking resources may struggle to participate, risking the perpetuation of social inequalities rather than their reduction.

Q3: Why is a shift from neoliberal ideology to alternative developmental frameworks necessary for genuine public participation?

A: A shift from neoliberal ideology towards alternative developmental and political post-capitalist ontologies is essential for genuine public participation because these ontologies are geographically differentiated. Differentiated ontologies reflect the varied capacities of individuals and their places, as the development of participatory models depends on the geographically diverse skills, resources, and competencies of citizens. These differences affect how citizens contribute in various roles throughout the participation process. Without this shift, public participation remains unrealistic and ineffective.

Q4: What is a key environmental limit to public participation in decision-making?

A: A key environmental limit to public participation in decision-making is the non-negotiable nature of nature's priorities. While public participation is essential for addressing global challenges like climate change or geo- and biodiversity loss, nature itself acts as a stakeholder, and its well-being can be significantly and negatively affected by human decisions. This constraint underscores the need for decision-making processes to consider environmental limits, ensuring that policies are not only responsive to public priorities but also respect ecological boundaries.

Quiz

Q1: If we consider access to participatory practices in democratic societies, we may state that:

- a. Access is equally distributed and involve all those having interest at stake
- b. Marginal groups are those who participate the most
- c. Higher socio-economic inequality is negatively related to participation and civic engagement
- d. Income and education have no impact on the chances to participate

A: c

Q2: The 'political algorithm' by Moini:

- a. It allows to calculate the level of a society's democracy by analyzing participatory processes
- b. It warns about the assumption that in the context of local democracy participation will automatically produce more democratic decisions
- c. It allows to predict which political positions will most likely emerge during participatory practices
- d. It warns about the intricate political balances and compromises taking place during participatory practices in the context of local democracy

A: b

Q3: When participation promoted by public authorities:

- a. It involves in particular those associations and individuals bringing forward stances of systemic change or political struggle
- b. It always involves all the individuals and groups with an interest at stake
- c. It often favours well-structured groups of interest rather than the inclusion of ordinary citizens
- d. It usually considers all the all the existing groups of interest, and all the interests put forward, as equally legitimate

A: c

Q4: Which of the following best describes the role of modern geography as a science of sustainability?

- a. It focuses solely on physical landforms and natural resources
- b. It bridges natural and social sciences, emphasizing the human-environment relationship and driving transformative change
- c. It is primarily concerned with the political aspects of global governance
- d. It disregards environmental concerns in favour of economic development

A: b

Q5: What is the main characteristic of applying public participation on large geographical scales?

- a. The ease of conducting face-to-face meetings across expansive areas
- b. The ease of quality control of information across various jurisdictions
- c. Geographically differentiated perspectives of stakeholders
- d. The lack of digital public participation tools to be applied on large geographical scales

A: c

Q6: What is the main goal of integrating knowledge creation and action within public participation?

- a. To foster collaborative thinking from the very beginning of the decision-making process
- b. To merely inform, educate, or persuade citizens about predetermined options
- c. To focus solely on conventional scientific methods for understanding the world
- d. To ensure that decisions are made by the experts

A: a

Q7: What is a key limitation of public participation within the neoliberal systems?

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- a. It ensures equal participation across all social groups
 - b. It removes the influence of elites in decision-making processes
 - c. It encourages the redistribution of resources among all community members
 - d. It amplifies the influence of wealthier voices and empowers already privileged groups

A: d

Q8: How does neoliberalism relate to civic education and participatory planning?

- a. Neoliberalism fosters democratic values by empowering citizens through participation
- b. Neoliberalism shapes citizens into specific types of people through participation spaces and practices
- c. Neoliberalism discourages the development of citizenship through governance
- d. Neoliberalism eliminates conflicts between democratic and neoliberal values in civic education

A: b

Q9: What role do GIS participatory tools play in the context of public participation?

- a. They only enhance the technical aspects of spatial data
- b. They facilitate the exchange of spatial and geo-referenced perspectives
- c. They focus solely on improving geographic data for planning perspective
- d. They limit the involvement of local communities in a decision-making processes

A: b

Q10: What is the key goal of participatory planning in environmental policy design?

- a. To calm public concerns about environmental harm when the state does not recognize them as significant
- b. To ensure that environmental policies are exclusively driven by economic interests
- c. To enhance transparency, accountability, and legitimacy, especially when conflicts arise between environmental policies and public priorities
- d. To prioritize individual preferences over collective efforts to address environmental challenges

A: c

Q11: At which stages should citizens be involved to ensure effective climate policy development and implementation?

- a. During policy development, introduction, application, and monitoring
- b. Only during the introduction and application of climate policies

- c. Only during the monitoring stage of climate policies
- d. At no stage, as climate policies should be left to experts alone

A: a

Q12: Which framework is based on emotional knowledge for addressing the environmental dimension of public participation?

- a. A framework that fosters emotions like hope, care, and solidarity to inspire adaptive actions and transformative change
- b. A framework that highlights the role of emotions as a fundamental aspect of human geography, particularly for resilience and crisis mitigation
- c. A framework that uses relational communication methods, such as storytelling and social interaction, to connect individuals with environmental issues and each other
- d. All of the above

A: d

Q13: Is it true? Public participation in environmental policy design is primarily aimed at calming public concerns about state-approved activities rather than enhancing transparency and accountability.

A: False

Q14: Is it true? Geographical Information Systems (GIS) participatory tools are not only technological advancements but also political instruments capable of challenging dominant land-use decision-making processes.

A: True

Q15: Is it true? Ultra-capitalism emphasizes the growing significance of non-capital resources, such as information, while retaining a focus on time-space compression and ultra-modernization

A: True

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7. Glossary

Citizen science (also related to community geography or participatory action research) - is a collaborative approach to research that actively involves community members in addressing local challenges through scientific methods and practices. By engaging non-professional researchers across various scientific fields, it fosters active participation in tackling issues such as community development and equitable access to technology (Gura, 2013; Robinson et al., 2017).

Geography - as the science of sustainability, bridges natural and social sciences by focusing on the human-environment relationship and driving transformative change through the integration of Earth system sciences with human development. Recent shifts in geography emphasize understanding interconnected patterns and processes while simulating complex human-Earth interactions. Consequently, geography actively advances grassroots sustainability initiatives (Fu et al., 2022; Meadows, 2021).

Neoliberalism (or Neoliberal Capitalism) - is an ideology, policy model, and economic framework centred on free-market competition and sustained economic growth as the path to human progress, even influencing the concept of sustainable development. It promotes free markets, minimal state intervention, and the unrestricted movement of trade and capital, viewing growth as the solution to societal challenges. However, this approach often exacerbates environmental degradation and social and spatial inequalities, posing persistent issues for the future (Harvey, 2020; Napierała & Leśniewska-Napierała, 2024).

Post-Capitalism (or Post-Capitalist Alternatives) - has emerged from the urgent need to address systemic challenges such as climate change, geo-, and biodiversity loss, and social and spatial inequalities. It redefines the State's role, moving beyond its neoliberal framing as a facilitator of wealth creation. Post-capitalism prioritizes re-designing economic planning, integrating environmental concerns into valuation systems, and fostering active citizenship to build a society that transcends growth-driven paradigms (Mason, 2015; Sancino et al., 2024).

Ultra-Capitalism - refers to an advanced stage of capitalism characterized by an intensified focus on maximizing profit through the rapid acceleration of urbanization, production, and consumption. It builds upon the foundations of neoliberalism, but takes it further by emphasizing speed and efficiency, often at the expense of social and environmental concerns. In ultra-capitalism, the control of resources - particularly information - becomes increasingly important, and power dynamics are shaped by the ownership of not just capital but also data, further entrenching inequalities and amplifying the influence of already empowered groups (Chen, 2024; Erkan et al., 2022).