

Article

A Qualitative Study on the Meaning of Participation in Public Administration: A Case Study of the Emilia-Romagna Region in Italy

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how local project managers interpret the concept of participation when implementing participatory processes under the Emilia-Romagna (Italy) regional framework. Drawing on 41 in-depth interviews with project managers and key personnel from participatory initiatives funded between 2020 and 2024, the research examines how these actors interpret the concept of participation and how their views align with regional objectives. Thematic analysis reveals that participation is widely viewed as a process of shared responsibility, co-decision, empowerment, and active citizenship. Participants described participation as both a political and relational act, involving co-responsibility, information exchange, and commitment to the common good. While many embraced a transformative vision of participation, others highlighted institutional constraints and the risk of participation being reduced to rhetoric. Additionally, gendered differences emerged in the way participants framed participation, with women emphasizing relational and care-based dimensions, and men focusing more on agency and power. The findings suggest that participation, when meaningfully enacted, is seen as a driver of democratic engagement and institutional trust, but it requires a sustained effort to go beyond procedures and enable genuine collaboration between institutions and citizens.

Keywords: public participation; public administration; citizenship participation; public engagement; democratic engagement; Italy



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1. Introduction

Participation is an important requirement for the proper functioning of democracy [1], as it allows individuals to express their voices, contribute to decision-making processes, and hold elected representatives accountable [2] while improving democratic legitimacy and policy outcomes [3].

However, the interpretation of the concept and meaning of participation is multifaceted and varies between approaches and practices. Specifically, even though it could be well-defined on a theoretical or even on a policy level, the understanding of this concept can vary between the actors in charge of making participation happen. These visions are central to the creation of participatory processes, as they inevitably shape the practices that these actors put in place.

Participatory processes reflect a shift from traditional top-down governance, where decisions are made solely by public officials, toward more inclusive and collaborative

forms of decision-making. As public expectations for transparency and accountability have grown, so has the interest in involving citizens more directly in administrative processes [4]. In fact, citizens bring unique knowledge, lived experience, and diverse perspectives that can help make policies more responsive to their own needs [5]. Involving citizens not only has the potential to transform the quality of policies, but also the relationships between citizens and institutions, as when people feel that their voice matters, they are more likely to trust institutions, contribute ideas, and accept difficult decisions [6].

Participation can be indirect, such as voting or supporting advocacy groups that act on behalf of citizens, as well as direct, when individuals are personally and actively involved in decision-making processes [7,8]. Different forms of participation reflect different dimensions of democratic life. In the existing literature on public governance, participation is defined as the formal opportunities created by institutions for citizens to contribute to decision-making processes. While public governance provides essential institutional and procedural frameworks for citizen engagement, it can benefit from integration with different perspectives of participation, such as attention to the experiential, emotional, and relational dimensions. In this regard, community psychology, which focuses on empowerment, sense of community, and context-sensitive practices, can offer a valuable complementary approach.

In this sense, community psychology contributes conceptual models, methods, and tools that help align participatory processes with citizens' perceived needs and lived realities [9]. Specifically, participation is conceptualized as the process of having a meaningful influence on the issues that affect one's life and community [10], it involves both individual agency and structural opportunities, and is deeply shaped by power dynamics [11,12]. A pillar of community psychology is the concept of sense of community, which is defined as a feeling of belonging, mutual influence, fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection [13]. It is a strong predictor of civic and community engagement, as when individuals feel that they are part of a supportive and meaningful community, they are more likely to participate actively in collective actions and decision-making processes [14].

Community psychology describes participation as the processes by which public concerns, needs, and values are incorporated into decision-making [15]. It refers to the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process [16] in the form of voluntary actions aimed at influencing public decision-making and the management of collective affairs [2].

In public administration, participation can take many practical forms. For example, in consultative processes, public offices may gather input through surveys, public hearings, or stakeholder meetings. In deliberative formats, such as citizens' panels or co-design workshops, administrators may involve citizens more actively in shaping the content of policies or services. These formats are often used to deal with complex or controversial issues, where listening to different perspectives helps improve both the legitimacy and the outcomes of the processes [5,17].

However, participation also presents significant challenges. As many public institutions are still structured around hierarchical, expert-driven models of decision-making, participation is not always a straightforward process. Involving citizens requires time, resources, and new skills, such as facilitation, negotiation, and the ability to listen to non-expert voices [18]. It can be time-consuming, costly, and difficult to manage, especially when trying to ensure that all voices are heard, including those of marginalized groups [6]. There is also the risk that participatory processes are used symbolically, without actually influencing decisions, resulting in tokenism. To be meaningful, participation must be well-designed, transparent, and genuinely linked to decision-making.

Moreover, there is a risk that participation remains superficial or disconnected from actual decision-making power, especially when outcomes are pre-defined or participation

is treated as a formality [19], as bureaucratic discretion has a more significant influence over administrative decision-making [20].

In fact, participation in public administration is not only about improving efficiency or service delivery, but also about redistributing power. Empowerment in community psychology is understood as a process through which individuals, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives and influence the conditions that affect them [10]. In this sense, participation is defined as the meaningful involvement of people in decision-making, planning, and implementation, moving beyond mere consultation toward shared control and genuine influence [21]. In fact, when done well, participation can challenge bureaucratic hierarchies and open up space for more democratic forms of governance [22].

While participation is widely promoted in public administration, its meaning varies significantly, especially among those tasked with implementing it. Participation is not a fixed concept, but a fluid practice shaped by institutional framing and individual interpretation.

Only a few studies explore the meanings of participation according to the public officials who are responsible for creating participatory initiatives. Among these studies, there is a tendency to focus on the drivers and the effects of participation rather than on the meanings per se.

A recent review highlights how public managers' attitudes toward citizen participation are shaped by individual traits, process design, organizational norms, and broader contextual factors, suggesting that strengthening participatory governance requires attention not only to institutional structures but also to the personal beliefs and experiences of those implementing participation [23]. Public officials' perceptions are also influenced by their administrative roles and institutional contexts, with regulatory, executive, or oversight responsibilities shaping the ways they define participation and the extent of citizen involvement considered appropriate [24]. Empirical studies drawing on first-hand data from officials show that participation is conceptualized in diverse ways, from simply being informed to co-creating policies or solutions, and that these meanings are shaped by intended purposes such as building networks or fostering shared visions, as well as by dimensions like influence, interaction, and empowerment [25,26]. Officials' support for participatory practices is further affected by institutional constraints, particularly when processes are perceived as inefficient, burdensome, or obstructed by bureaucratic procedures [27].

Despite these contributions, the literature shows important gaps, as few studies examine how officials themselves experience and interpret participation, its meaning and its practice. The way they define participation is key in shaping the ways citizens are engaged, and how participatory processes are designed and put in place. Therefore, there is a need for more in-depth, qualitative research that captures officials' perspectives on what participation truly means to them, as they are the ones in charge of implementing it.

1.1. The Context: The Emilia-Romagna Region

An example of how public participation is embedded in administrative practice comes from the Emilia-Romagna Region in Italy, which has developed a structured participatory framework. With the approval of Regional Law 15/2018 on participation [28], Emilia-Romagna has institutionalized citizen involvement as a regular part of policymaking at regional and local levels. This law not only provides a legal basis for participation but also allocates resources and technical support to promote participatory processes across municipalities and policy areas. Participation in Emilia-Romagna is treated as a foundational practice of democracy, as the Region's approach to it is marked by legislative commitment, financial support, and institutional training. This vision affirms that partici-

pation, when well-structured and inclusive, can be a driver of social, ecological, and even institutional transformation.

Through Regional Law 15/2018 [29], the Region formally recognized participation not only as a legal right, but also as a shared responsibility between institutions and citizens, framing participation as a process that enhances active citizenship and supports the co-design of public policies. Emilia-Romagna adopts a perspective grounded in horizontal subsidiarity, aiming to foster shared decision-making and co-responsibility in matters of public interest [29].

Specifically, participation is intended to open up governance processes, strengthen trust between institutions and communities, and improve the quality and inclusiveness of public decision-making. The Region aims to ensure that participation contributes to social cohesion, institutional innovation, and the ecological and digital transitions. These processes are seen as central in citizen involvement processes, with a particular focus on including younger generations and amplifying underrepresented voices [30].

When it comes to budget, between 2018 and 2019, the Emilia-Romagna Region allocated over one million Euros to support participatory processes [31], and with the 2025–2027 programme, it has committed a further EUR 670,000 annually, demonstrating a consistent and growing institutional investment in democratic innovation and citizen engagement [32].

Through its Participation Office and dedicated funding, the region supports projects that involve citizens in participatory projects. The call for proposals is published on a yearly basis and it defines the framework of the region's vision of participation, the requirements for the proposals, and the perimeter within which local authorities are required to design and implement activities. The local administrations develop projects within this framework, in order to be able to access funding, which can focus on a range of themes (e.g., urban regeneration, environmental planning, social services) and must have the explicit goal of fostering participation through a participatory process. Secondary goals can vary year by year and can range from targeting a specific demographic group (e.g., women, youth) or specific topics (e.g., sustainability).

Funded projects can vary in theme and in scope, encompassing a variety of activities, practices, and target groups. For instance, a project may be aimed at renovating an unused space (e.g., cinema, warehouse) in a small remote municipality together with the local youth and creating a panel of activities that respond to the needs and the preference of the young participants; another may target the elderly and teach them how to use digital tools; while another one may aim to renovate the local library to be more suitable to the needs of the citizens. Additional examples include community gardens, urban green space revitalization, participatory art and cultural events, neighbourhood planning meetings, and collaborative environmental initiatives. The participatory tools and practices also vary, from participatory budgeting, citizen panels, and consultation workshops to co-design sessions, online platforms, and interactive surveys. These variations reflect both the objectives of the projects and the characteristics of the target population, illustrating the many ways participation can be enacted in practice across the region and highlighting the practical, contextual, and social dimensions of participatory governance.

Additionally, Emilia-Romagna also promotes skills related to participation through structured initiatives for public servants in the region, as well as close training and supervision regarding the phases related to the yearly call for proposals: in preparation for it, during the drafting, and during the execution and final evaluation. The Region has also planned a Participation Training Plan (2025–2027), which is integrated into the regional training system and offers open badge certifications to public employees, practitioners, and civil society members. It covers the following objectives: opening governance, inter-sectoral

dialogue, territorial empowerment, democratic innovation, and integrated communication, and it covers specific thematic areas, such as democratic innovation, territorial policy, participatory methods, and communication strategies [32].

The Region also ensures continuous monitoring and transparency through the Observatory on Participation, which collects and disseminates data, tracks participatory experiences, and supports the evaluation of the law's implementation. The Law 15/2018 also introduced a so-called "evaluative clause" that mandates a review of the law's outcomes every three years [31].

1.2. *The Present Study*

This study focuses on the meanings of participation perceived by the people in charge of participatory projects developed within the regional policy framework promoted by the Emilia-Romagna Region. Given that in order to access funding opportunities, local administrations were required to design initiatives aligned with the regional guidelines on participation, investigating how project leaders interpret and implement these guidelines offers valuable insights into the coherence between policy intentions, the visions of those in charge of implementing the projects, and actual practices.

Through qualitative interviews with professionals who had a central role in the making of the projects (e.g., project managers, coordinators, project designers), the study aims to explore to what extent their visions and representations of the concept of participation reflect the regional objectives and guidelines. This perspective is particularly important because the way project managers understand and interpret the concept of participation can be a meaningful piece of information on how they design and carry out participatory processes. In fact, their perceptions influence not only the methods they choose and the degree of citizen involvement they enable, but also how closely their actions align with the broader goals set by regional policies. In this sense, examining their views offers a key to understanding how participation is translated from policy into the visions of the project managers, who are the ones who are responsible for taking participation from theory to practice.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted between 7 November 2024 and 6 December 2024 via MS Teams and each lasted approximately 1 h.

A total of 131 individuals were invited to participate in the interviews. Emilia-Romagna Region expected that around a third of the participants would accept. This expectation was based on their previous work with project managers of participatory projects, who have very busy working lives, and many commitments related to their roles which would make it difficult for them to spare one hour for an interview on a workday. Their contact details were provided by the Emilia-Romagna Region, as they had all served as project managers in participation projects within the region over the past five years (2020–2024). The participants were interviewed by a researcher not directly affiliated with Emilia-Romagna, and they were assured that the content of the individual interviews would only be shared among the researchers, while the anonymized and aggregated data would be shared with Emilia-Romagna as well.

In some cases, the initially identified project managers indicated one or more different individuals who were more closely involved with the project or had more direct experience. As a result, in certain instances, the interview was conducted with a different project team member or jointly with both the project manager and the more directly involved colleagues.

In total, 41 individuals were interviewed, which represented the 31.2% of the total population ($n = 131$), the majority of which ($n = 29$) were managers, while the rest ($n = 12$) held other significant roles within the project team or were colleagues who had been closely involved but not as the primary manager. The participants represent a total of 35 participating projects. Most of the participants were project managers of only one project in the chosen time frame, while 5 of them managed between 2 and 4 projects between 2020 and 2024. In 6 cases two people from the same projects were interviewed. Among the 6 projects for which two colleagues participated in interviews, in two cases the official project manager was not present in the interview and other team members represented the project, in two cases the colleagues were from the same institution, while in the other two cases, they represented different organizations collaborating on the same project. Even in the case of colleagues, Individual interviews were preferred, but when unavoidable due to personal preference of the subjects two-people interviews were organized. The demographic of the participants involved is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Participant ID ¹	Gender	Age	Organization	Municipality Size ²
ID01_M_TS	Man	34	foundation	large
ID02_W_PA	Woman	45	public administration	large
ID03_M_PA	Man	30	public administration	large
ID04_M_TS	Man	72	voluntary organization	large
ID05_W_PA	Woman	61	public administration	large
ID06_W_PA	Woman	57	public administration	large
ID07_W_PC	Woman	61	private limited company	large
ID08_W_PA	Woman	54	public administration	medium large
ID09_M_TS	Man	46	cooperative	medium large
ID10_W_PA	Woman	57	public administration	medium large
ID11_W_PA	Woman	48	public administration	medium large
ID12_W_TS	Woman	29	cooperative	medium large
ID13_M_TS	Man	45	foundation	medium large
ID14_M_PA	Man	59	public administration	medium large
ID15_W_PA	Woman	56	public administration	medium large
ID16_W_PA	Woman	30	public administration	medium large
ID17_W_PA	Woman	49	public administration	medium large
ID18_W_PA	Woman	48	public administration	medium large
ID19_M_PA	Man	51	public administration	medium large
ID20_M_PA	Man	49	public administration	medium large
ID21_M_TS	Man	45	association	medium large
ID22_W_TS	Woman	65	association	medium large
ID23_W_TS	Woman	66	cooperative	medium small
ID24_W_PA	Woman	48	public administration	medium small
ID25_W_PA	Woman	54	public administration	medium small
ID26_W_PC	Woman	46	private limited company	medium small
ID27_M_TS	Man	64	foundation	medium small
ID28_W_PA	Woman	31	public administration	medium small
ID29_W_PA	Woman	34	public administration	medium small
ID30_W_PA	Woman	46	public administration	medium small
ID31_M_PA	Man	56	public administration	medium small
ID32_M_PA	Man	29	public administration	medium small
ID33_M_PA	Man	43	public administration	medium small
ID34_W_TS	Woman	46	association	small
ID35_M_TS	Man	56	association	small
ID36_M_PA	Man	63	public administration	small
ID37_W_TS	Woman	42	cooperative	small
ID38_M_PA	Man	44	public administration	medium small
ID39_M_SC	Man	57	high school	N/A

Table 1. Cont.

Participant ID ¹	Gender	Age	Organization	Municipality Size ²
ID40_W_SC	Woman	59	high school	N/A
ID41_W_TS	Woman	34	association	N/A

¹ Participants ID is made up of a sequential number (e.g., ID03), followed by a letter that signals the gender of such participant (“M” for men and “W” for women), and a code linked to the type of organization they work for (PA = Public Administration; TS = Third Sector Organization; PC = Private Limited Company; SC = School).

² Municipality size was categorized according to population size, following a classification inspired by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, which classifies municipalities into twelve demographic classes based on population size [33], but merging each three categories into one, getting a total of four. Municipalities are categorized as small (fewer than 2000 inhabitants), medium small (2000–9999), medium large (10,000–99,999), and large (more than 100,000 inhabitants).

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore the perspectives of public officials on the meaning of participation in participatory processes within the Emilia-Romagna region. This instrument was organized into thematic sections, each with targeted open-ended questions and prompts to elicit both conceptual reflections and concrete examples, while ensuring coverage of key research themes. Beginning with questions about the participant’s professional background (e.g., “Can you introduce yourself and describe your current role?”), it then addressed the meaning and forms of participation. Participants were first asked to reflect on the concept of participation (e.g., “In your view, what does ‘participation’ mean?”) and to describe the main forms in which participation takes place in their professional context (“What are the main forms through which participation is expressed?”). The interview then focused on the regional context, with questions such as, “Based on your definition, how do you see the participatory projects supported by the Emilia-Romagna Region?” and “What is your perception of the effectiveness of these projects?” Participants were encouraged to provide concrete examples and to discuss both strengths and limitations of regional participatory initiatives. The semi-structured approach allowed for flexibility, enabling the interviewer to explore topics in greater depth according to the participants’ experience and insights.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, employing an iterative coding process to identify recurring themes and patterns [34]. The analysis followed combined deductive and inductive strategies. First of all, we familiarized ourselves with the interview data and developed initial codes based on the structure of the interview guide, letting the codes emerge from the data we had collected. Most of the initial codes were somewhat in line with the existing literature on the topic (e.g., being part of a community, horizontal subsidiarity), while some others were either too narrow (e.g., the difficulties of participation) or not completely relevant to the topic (e.g., youth engagement). Then the codes found were compared to the key themes from the literature on participation in community psychology and they were restructured according to the closest theme (e.g., being part of a community, co-responsibility, horizontal governance, empowerment). This provided a theoretical starting point and allowed us to identify instances in the data aligning with existing research. Next, we conducted a reflexive, inductive coding process to capture themes emerging directly from participants’ accounts that did not fit any of the existing concepts (e.g., the hollow meaning of participation) and created others that were descriptive of the concepts that emerged (e.g., the two-way exchange of information, participation as non-delegation) Throughout coding, we paid close attention to how participants described participation and the meanings they attached to it, ensuring that the analysis reflected their perspectives. Codes were then organized, reviewed, and refined into coherent themes. This approach allowed the analysis to stay connected to existing research while also reflecting the perspectives and experiences shared in the interviews. NVivo(14, Release 14.24.3) software was used to support the coding process and to organize the data across interviews.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Bologna, with the protocol code n. 0313577 on the date 11 October 2024, and all participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. The interviews were recorded with participant consent, anonymized, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Of the people interviewed, 24 identified as women and 17 as men, and their age ranged from 29 to 72 years (Mean = 49, Median = 48). Out of 41 participants, 23 were affiliated with public administrations, 5 worked for an association, 4 for a cooperative, 3 for a foundation, 2 for a high school, 2 for a private limited company, and 1 for a voluntary organization. Regarding municipality size, 4 subjects worked on a project taking place in a small municipality, 11 in a medium small municipality, 15 in a medium large one, and 7 in a large municipality. Participants whose project did not take place in a municipality ($n = 3$), had a project that took place in a school or with a group of students. Participants reported a range of job titles, with many holding senior or specialized positions. Nearly all roles indicated significant responsibility within their organizations, whether managerial, technical, or administrative. The vast majority were service managers ($n = 18$ department head), followed by directors ($n = 3$), council members ($n = 2$), and administrative ($n = 2$), followed by several specific titles ranging from president or coordinator to teacher or librarian.

Participants reported a wide range of professional experience in the field of participation, from 0 to 30 years (mean = 12.5). Around 34% of participants ($n = 14$) were relatively new to the sector, with less than 5 years of experience, 46% ($n = 19$) had between 5 and 10 years, and 20% ($n = 8$) had more than 10 years of experience in participation. This distribution highlights the presence of both early-career professionals and long-standing experts within the sample, contributing to a nuanced understanding of participatory practices across different career stages. Participants worked across three main organizational types: (1) Public sector, which mostly included municipalities, (2) private sector and third sector such as social cooperatives, non-governmental organizations, associations, and independent foundations, and (3) schools.

3. Results

The analysis explored how those responsible for implementing participatory projects within the Emilia-Romagna Region understand and give meaning to the concept of participation. Interviewees described a variety of interpretations, which seemed to be shaped by the institutional frameworks of Emilia-Romagna, as well as the on-field experience they had in their career as well as their beliefs. Five main thematic areas emerged from the data: (1) participation as contributing to and being responsible for the collective decisions; (2) participation as co-responsibility and horizontal governance between citizens and public administrations; (3) participation as being part of a community and working toward a shared goal; (4) participation as empowerment and activation; and (5) the complexity of the meaning of participation. These themes illustrate both alignment with the regional framework and the diversity of situated meanings held by project leaders.

In fact, participants described participation as meaningful and empowering, but also as sometimes limited, ambiguous, or instrumental, in the latter case they were often talking about previous participatory processes which were often not related to Emilia-Romagna. In the following sections, these understandings through the words of those directly involved are presented.

3.1. *Contributing to and Being Responsible for the Collective Decisions*

The main meaning of participation seems to be contributing to and being responsible for the decisions of the community, which is reflected in several dimensions that emerged across the interviews. For eight participants, participation involves actively taking part in

shaping decisions that affect the community, which is then explained in more detail. The key points are the individual's civic responsibility, the limits of representative democracy, and the role of public administrations in enabling meaningful participation:

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

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

3.1.1. Responsibility Towards the Common Good

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

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

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

3.1.2. Responsibility of Political Choices

This understanding of participation as shared responsibility also includes a specific focus on political decision-making. Six participants, mostly women working in public administration, emphasized that participation entails not only contributing to shared goals but taking an active role in shaping political choices: not just being heard, but contributing actively to the collective decision-making and therefore refusing passive delegation. From this perspective, participation means co-producing public decisions, being informed, and rejecting the expectation that institutions will decide on their own. Participation is a way of taking part in shaping decisions, rather than simply reacting to them. Another interviewee builds on this idea by connecting participation more directly to the relationship between citizens and institutions, stating that *“Participating is a way not to delegate” (ID08_W_PA)*, and then expands on this link between participation and political responsibility, suggesting that to truly influence decisions, one must engage directly and take ownership of political processes, therefore going from mere delegation to active participation in politics.

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

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

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

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

However, another participant also acknowledges the role of elected officials within representative democracy. In fact, despite the various levels of participation, the ultimate responsibility for decisions rests with those who were formally elected.

In addition to individual responsibility and collective engagement, the next theme broadens this concept by emphasizing collaborative governance and shared power between institutions and citizens. Here, participants reflect on the structural and procedural dimension of participation, where decision-making is intentionally distributed and grounded in horizontal relationships.

3.2. Co-Responsibility and Horizontal Governance Between Citizens and Public Administration

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

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

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

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

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

It is also worth noting that men participants tended to highlight the concept of power more frequently than women did.

Give up a Part of Our Decision-Making Power

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

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

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

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

Building this kind of collective vision involves both critical thinking and openness to difference. For two participants, collaboration is not simply about alignment, but about shaping ideas and practices through dialogue and co-construction. They describe a vision of participation that goes beyond individual empowerment, which becomes a shared space where responsibilities, decisions, and perspectives are negotiated, mediated, and constructed collectively. Alongside collaboration and co-responsibility, some participants also described participation as a form of collective reasoning. It is not only about outcomes or decisions, but about the process of publicly thinking together, where different perspectives are brought into dialogue and confronted in a shared space. This emphasis on reasoning is closely tied to the idea of sharing time, experience, and personal perspective, within a collective project. Participation becomes a relational act, rooted in openness and reciprocity.

A noticeable difference emerged in how men and women talked about active participation. Many men participants, especially those working in medium or large municipalities,

described participation as something that involves giving up part of their power, time, or control to serve the wider community. In their vision, participation was often framed as a responsibility or a way to contribute to the common good by stepping back from individual interests. On the other hand, women tended to speak about participation as something rooted in relationships, with the emphasis being more often placed on building connections, sharing responsibility, and working together to create something meaningful. Rather than focusing on what must be given up, they highlighted the importance of care, dialogue, and collaboration.

3.3. Being Part of a Community

In addition to responsibility and co-governance, a more relational understanding of participation, focused on community belonging, connection, and shared purpose, emerged particularly among male participants working in small to medium municipalities. In this view, participation is about bringing people together, supporting collective projects, and being part of a community, emphasizing participation as a process of engaging people around ideas and shared design, with the aim of generating value for the local context. A younger participant reflects on the importance of participation as a space for connection and expression, especially for those who might otherwise remain on the margins. While acknowledging the political dimension, he prioritizes the creation of inclusive and meaningful relationships:

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

A Shared Direction: Working Toward a Common Goal

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

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

3.4. Empowerment and Activation

Across the interviews, participation is frequently described as a process that enables individuals to become active contributors to collective life. Eight participants point out that, rather than remaining passive recipients of decisions, being engaged in shaping the policies and actions that affect their communities is important. This understanding of participation is closely linked to notions of empowerment and activation, where individuals reclaim agency through collaborative involvement. In this perspective, taking part means not only being heard, but gaining the capacity to influence, build, and transform. This idea is clearly expressed by one participant, who defines participation as an opportunity for citizens to take an active role in shaping policies that serve the collective interest:

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

The possibility of becoming a co-protagonist of change is closely linked to the experience of overcoming a shared sense of powerlessness. One participant reflects on how the

fragmentation of responsibilities, both within institutions and among citizens, can lead to a perception of disempowerment, where no one feels they have the capacity to effect change. Participation, in this view, becomes the process through which individuals reclaim agency by acting together:

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

Building on this notion, several participants, most of them men working in medium-large or large municipalities, emphasized that participation means being active. That is, having the opportunity to take part in decisions and processes beyond the limited scope of formal voting, and rejecting passive or symbolic involvement. One of them specifies that being active also meant reclaiming a sense of belonging and voice in both personal and political life. Participation becomes a way of mattering, not because one’s individual preference is always realized, but because one’s voice is recognized within the process:

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

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

The Effective Exchange of Information

One of the foundational dimensions of participation identified by interviewees concerns the exchange of information between institutions and citizens. Participants emphasized that participation is not only about keeping citizens informed, but also about enabling mutual understanding and active involvement. Communication is seen as the starting point for cultivating a sense of shared responsibility and for grounding decisions in the real needs of the territory. This theme was especially prominent in the thoughts shared by women working in medium to large municipalities, who often framed participation as a communicative process grounded in transparency, mutual understanding, and responsiveness to community needs. One participant explains that participation begins with providing access to information that allows citizens to remain aware of what happens in their local context, while another one expands on this idea, emphasizing that information must flow in both directions: from institutions to citizens, and vice versa. This reciprocal exchange helps not only to build awareness of public decisions, but also to allow administrations to better understand local needs:

“Participation involves multiple aspects: first of all, the involvement of the community [...] so the municipality, which is at the service of the citizen, must try to foster and

increase participation. This involvement is essential so that citizens can better understand the complexities of governing a city and become aware of the choices that an administration has to make” (ID15_W_PA)

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

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

There is also an emphasis on the importance of collaboratively identifying and addressing community needs, balancing openness to citizens’ voices with practical feasibility. One participant highlights the value of informal engagement and faithful representation of citizens’ requests, while another participant stresses the need for grounded proposals that realistically respond to community needs.

Overall, men tend to focus more on practical, project-based solutions that are grounded in realistic assessments of community needs:

“The proposal of ideas that are both feasible and project-based. Participation should not be a container where people just communicate what they’re missing, but rather an attempt to carry out the most realistic possible analysis of reality, and then, based on that, to seek solutions and responses to [the citizens’] needs” (ID13_M_TS)

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

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

Her emphasis on trust and facilitation is then further reflected in her description of youth-oriented focus groups, where participation depends on the adult’s ability to step back and create real space for others.

It is worth mentioning that participants who worked with youth had a tendency to mention it, while the others did not mention the demographic characteristics of the group they worked with.

3.5. The Complexity and Difficulty of Participation

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

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

The Hollow Meaning of Participation

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

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

(ID32_M_PA)

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

4. Discussion

This study explored how public officials, third sector actors, and school professionals, who served as project managers in participatory projects funded by the Emilia-Romagna Region understand the concept of participation within the institutional framework set by the Region. The aim was to examine whether, and to what extent, the meanings attributed to participation align with the goals and principles promoted by regional policy.

These results shed light on how participation is understood by those responsible for designing and implementing participatory initiatives under the regional framework. The interviewees described a range of meanings and interpretations, that do not seem to solely trace back to the regional guidelines, but they also seem to be influenced by their context (e.g., the size of the municipality), their gender identity, and their experiences.

Overall, this study shows that participation is not a singular or stable concept, as the meanings shared by participants reflect both alignment with the regional vision and a rich diversity of interpretations, often pointing to deeper questions about voice, agency, and responsibility. Additionally, several key dimensions that the community psychology literature identifies as foundational to meaningful participation emerged from the data, such as a sense of community, empowerment, and shared responsibility.

Taken together, the analysis of project officials' representations of participation reveals both points of alignment with, and divergence from, the guidelines promoted by Emilia-Romagna.

On the one hand, many participants emphasized aspects such as co-responsibility, empowerment, and citizen engagement, which closely mirror the principles outlined in the regional framework and the training provided to ensure that project implementation is consistent with policy objectives. These accounts suggest that, in several cases, officials actively attempt to translate policy intentions into practice, fostering spaces where citizens can meaningfully contribute to decisions and the co-creation of community initiatives. While previous research emphasized the role of participation in promoting well-being in small contexts such as schools [35,36], the current study demonstrates its role in enhancing the well-being of the community.

On the other hand, the results also highlight instances where participation was described in ways that were more symbolic, limited, or hollow. For example, some participants reported that engagement consisted primarily of providing information or fulfilling formal obligations, with limited opportunities for citizens to influence outcomes. These divergences indicate that, despite the clarity of regional guidelines, the enactment of participation is shaped by local contexts, resource constraints, and individual interpretations of what participation entails.

These differences can be understood as insights into the lived reality of participatory governance, revealing dimensions of citizen engagement that regional policies may not

fully anticipate. Recognizing these nuances offers important opportunities for refinement. For instance, incorporating the experiences and perceptions of officials on the ground into policy development and training could help ensure that participation is not only formally implemented but also genuinely empowering for citizens, thereby strengthening the alignment between policy, practice, and community outcomes.

Additionally, differences were found in the way in which women and men described participation. Even though both emphasized the importance of being active and responsible, women more often highlighted the relational and care-based aspects of participation, whereas men more frequently talked about power, activation, and political agency. These differences suggest that gendered experiences and expectations may shape how participation is imagined and practiced. Future studies could explore this further, asking how gender intersects with professional role, institutional context, and personal history to influence understandings of democratic engagement.

These differences may reflect broader gendered social norms, where women are often socialized to prioritize relational, collaborative, and care-oriented approaches, while men are encouraged to value leadership, control, and individual agency [37–39]. This dynamic likely influences how participation is conceptualized and practiced. Future research could explore these gendered framings more explicitly, examining how social norms shape the meanings attributed to participation.

Finally, some limitations of the study need to be acknowledged to better interpret the findings. One of the primary limitations of this research is the focus on one region in Italy. Caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to other contexts. It is best to view the findings from this sample as reflective of experiences in the local context of one Region in northern Italy. In addition, we were only able to interview 31% of the invited participants; therefore, the results may not be fully representative of the total population of project managers. Moreover, the study sample was imbalanced with respect to gender.

To summarize, this study suggests that participation can be transformative, not just for institutions, but for individuals and communities. When people feel heard, when they see their contributions matter, when they act together toward something meaningful, participation becomes more than a policy; it becomes a practice of democracy in everyday life. Specifically, these results could inform the Emilia-Romagna Region about how the people working on participatory processes perceive the concept of participation. This knowledge can be used by Emilia-Romagna to inform the creation of specific training initiatives and workshops to reflect on the meaning of participation and how to best enable it. Additionally, it may encourage structured reflective training for public officials to explore their own assumptions and interpretations of participation, as well as the relational and emotional aspects related to participation, beyond the usual procedural and practical tools.

From a practical standpoint, these findings point to a number of actions. For instance, training programmes for project managers could be enhanced to address the gap between formal guidelines and lived experiences of participation, providing concrete strategies for ensuring that citizen input translates into real influence. Additionally, monitoring and evaluation tools could be adapted to capture not only procedural compliance but also the qualitative impact of participatory practices on empowerment and community engagement. Finally, creating spaces for reflection and exchange among project officials could help disseminate best practices and innovative approaches that emerge locally, ensuring that lessons learned in one context can inform projects across the region. By addressing these practical considerations, Emilia-Romagna can strengthen the implementation of participatory policies, ensuring that participation is not only formally enacted but also meaningful, inclusive, and empowering for citizens.

To conclude, this study highlights Emilia-Romagna's structured participatory framework as more than a formal policy: it emerges as a practice that resonates with the perspectives of those implementing it, enabling forms of co-responsibility and empowerment. However, developing effective participatory processes requires going beyond formal procedures. It involves creating spaces that foster genuine power-sharing, transparent information exchange, and inclusive communication, ensuring that citizens are not only invited to participate but truly enabled to do so.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

PA Public Administration

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