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COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT DECISION MAKING: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF MODELS AND IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract: *This study presents a systematic review of community empowerment in local government decision-making, with a focus on prevailing models and patterns of implementation. A structured search of Scopus and Google Scholar identified more than 800 initial records. Following PRISMA procedures, 62 studies met the inclusion criteria and were analysed in depth. Data were extracted and coded by geographical context, type of participatory model, degree of citizen influence, process quality, level of institutionalization, political commitment, and reported policy outcomes. The synthesis identifies several main configurations of community empowerment and shows that the expansion of participatory mechanisms at the local level has not been accompanied by a consistent deepening of citizen power; most initiatives remain at low to moderate levels of influence. Higher empowerment ratings are often linked to better-designed participatory processes and stronger policy outcomes, but these links are not always clear-cut. Institutionalization and political commitment are identified as facilitating circumstances; nonetheless, they are inadequate alone to guarantee meaningful power sharing. The results show that community empowerment in local government depends a lot on how the institutions are set up, the political situation, and planned initiatives for inclusion, accountability, and redistribution. It does not just depend on using participatory tools.*
Keywords: *community empowerment; local government; participatory governance; systematic literature review; citizen participation.*

Abstrak: Studi ini menyajikan systematic review mengenai pemberdayaan masyarakat dalam pengambilan keputusan di pemerintah daerah, dengan fokus pada model dan pola implementasi. Pedoman PRISMA digunakan untuk memilih penelitian, yang menghasilkan lebih dari 800 rekam awal. 62 penelitian yang memenuhi kriteria inklusi memenuhi syarat untuk analisis mendalam. Pencarian literatur dilakukan melalui basis data Google Scholar dan Scopus. Data diekstraksi dan dikodekan berdasarkan konteks geografis, tipe model partisipasi, derajat pengaruh warga, kualitas proses, tingkat institusionalisasi, komitmen politik, serta outcome kebijakan yang dilaporkan. Hasil sintesis mengidentifikasi beberapa konfigurasi utama model pemberdayaan masyarakat dan menunjukkan bahwa ekspansi mekanisme partisipasi di tingkat lokal belum diikuti oleh pendalaman kuasa warga yang konsisten; sebagian besar praktik tetap berada pada tingkat pengaruh rendah hingga menengah. Skor pemberdayaan yang lebih tinggi cenderung berasosiasi dengan kualitas proses partisipasi yang lebih baik dan outcome kebijakan yang lebih kuat, meskipun hubungan ini bersifat kondisional dan tidak deterministik. Institusionalisasi dan komitmen politik berperan sebagai kondisi pemungkin, namun tidak cukup untuk menjamin pembagian kekuasaan yang substantif. Temuan ini menegaskan

bahwa pemberdayaan masyarakat bagi pemerintah daerah sangat bergantung pada desain institusional, konteks politik, serta strategi yang disengaja untuk inklusi, akuntabilitas, dan redistribusi.

Kata Kunci: pemberdayaan masyarakat; pemerintah lokal; tata kelola partisipatif; systematic literature review; partisipasi warga.

I. Introduction

Discussions concerning democracy, involvement, and accountability in local government have put more and more stress on the need for community empowerment. That is, giving people and communities the power to make decisions that affect their lives instead of just being asked for their opinion or told what to do. Pateman's (1970) (Pateman, 2014) argument for citizen involvement in decision-making and Arnstein's (1969) (Arnstein, 1969) influential ladder of citizen participation are two examples of classic work on participatory democracy that have long drawn a line between tokenistic forms of engagement and real power arrangements for citizens. Recent literature on democratic innovations and participatory governance has expanded upon this insight, recording the emergence of various new mechanisms, including participatory budgeting, citizens assemblies, neighborhood councils, co-production initiatives, and digital engagement platforms at the local level (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Fung, 2006; Smith, 2009).

In policy discussions, these changes are generally seen as proof that local governments are going from government to governance, which means they are building more horizontal, inclusive, and collaborative partnerships with communities (Healey, 2003; Rhodes, 2007). Empowerment is anticipated to augment the validity of public decisions, elevate the quality and relevance of policies, and reinforce social inclusion by amplifying the voices of underrepresented groups (Gaventa, 2004; Thompson et al., 2014). Nonetheless, a continual apprehension in empirical research is that numerous participatory and "empowerment" initiatives are predominantly symbolic, providing platforms for expression without meaningfully transforming the power dynamics or the essence of policy results (Cleaver, 2001; Rogers, 2003; Slater, 2002).

This conflict between the idea of empowerment and the way it is actually done is especially strong at the local government level. Municipalities and other local authorities are often seen as the best places for citizens to get involved because they are close to everyday life, the issues are clear, and there is a chance for direct interaction between officials and residents (Bramer et al., 2016; Elcock, 2006; Lowndes et al., 2001; Reynaert, 2008). On the other hand, local governments have limited money, legal, and political power, and they may not have the ability or the motivation to share power in ways that matter (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2005). This prompts fundamental inquiries regarding the extent to which community empowerment programs at the local level transcend procedural inclusiveness to impact actual decision-making, resource distribution, and institutional frameworks. Although there is now a substantial body of

empirical work on participatory and empowerment practices in local government, the evidence is fragmented across countries, sectors, and institutional forms. Existing reviews often focus on single instruments such as participatory budgeting (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014; Gilman & Wampler, 2019) or citizen juries (Smith & Wales, 2000) or on normative debates about participation and empowerment (Cornwall, 2008; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Hickey & Mohan, 2008), rather than systematically comparing different models and their implementation. As a result, our cumulative knowledge about the conditions under which community empowerment leads to influence and substantive policy outcomes remains limited and scattered (Clark, 2021; Newman et al., 2004).

Three specific gaps stand out. First, relatively few studies integrate analysis of empowerment design (who participates, with what rights and resources) with process quality (inclusiveness, deliberative depth, transparency) and institutional embedding (ad-hoc projects versus formalized structures). Yet the literature suggests that these dimensions are deeply intertwined: arrangements that appear empowering on paper may in practice be constrained by poor process design or weak institutionalization (Archon Fung, 2006; Gaventa & Barrett, 2010, 2012). Second, the role of political commitment, for example, whether local leaders and senior officials are genuinely willing to share power is often discussed qualitatively but rarely operationalized and compared across a broad set of cases (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007). Third, there is surprisingly little comparative, cross-case evidence on the relationship between empowerment, influence, and policy outcomes that is, whether and how empowered communities actually shape decisions, implementation, and longer-term institutional change (Fox, 2015; Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

This paper addresses these gaps by conducting a systematic review of empirical studies on community empowerment in local government decision-making, with a focus on models of empowerment and their implementation. Building on the PRISMA framework for systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2009), we identify, screen, and analyse studies retrieved from the Scopus and Google Scholar databases that report on participatory or empowerment initiatives in subnational and local government contexts. For each included study, we code information on the level of empowerment granted to communities, the quality of participatory processes, the degree of institutionalization of empowerment mechanisms, the presence of political commitment, the reported degree of influence on decisions, and the strength of policy outcomes. After that, these dimensions are turned into normalized indices and looked at in real life using a series of scatterplots. Our primary objective is to transcend success stories and individual case narratives, aiming for a more systematic and comparative comprehension of the practical functioning of community empowerment within local government. The paper is specifically directed by five

interconnected research inquiries: (1) How are models of community empowerment in local government structured and executed, especially concerning the degree of empowerment and the caliber of participatory processes? (2) How deeply are these practices embedded in local government organizations, and how does institutionalization connect to how much they say they affect decisions? (3) What part does political commitment play in how empowerment programs affect how local governments make decisions? (4) What circumstances enable empowering and participative processes to provide significant policy achievements, rather than being limited to procedural or symbolic functions? (5) How have documented levels of influence and impact changed over time in the empirical research on community empowerment within local government?

The paper provides a comprehensive, empirically-based analysis of current practices in community empowerment within local governance by illustrating the interconnections among various dimensions, including empowerment and process quality, institutionalization and influence, political commitment and influence, and influence and policy outcomes. The analysis indicates, for instance, whether more empowerment is consistently linked to improved process design; whether institutionalized procedures yield different results compared to ad-hoc initiatives; and the degree to which impact on decisions correlates with enhanced policy outcomes. The study contributes to continuing discussions regarding whether modern modalities of community empowerment represent significant transformations in power dynamics or if they inadvertently perpetuate the so-called new tyranny of participation (Khotari, 2001; Rogers, 2003). The article continues as follows. The next part talks about the procedures used for the systematic review, such as how to search for information, what to include, and how to make empowerment and influence indices. The findings section shows the scatterplots that came from the coded experiments and explains what the patterns mean. The discussion subsequently contextualizes these findings within extensive discourses on democratic innovation, local governance, and participatory politics, emphasizing both the possibilities and constraints of contemporary community empowerment practices. The conclusion considers the ramifications for philosophy, practice, and future research regarding empowerment and local democracy.

II. Literature Review

When local government is based on participatory democracy, which stresses direct citizen participation in public decision-making instead of just depending on periodic elections, community empowerment happens. Pateman (1970) says that real democracy needs people to be involved in making decisions every day (Pateman, 2014), and Arnstein's "ladder of citizen participation" (1969) clearly shows the difference between participation that is either deceptive or symbolic and participation that gives people real power. This structure is very important for

figuring out if participatory methods really do give people power. Later studies show that a lot of local participation meetings are still mostly about consultation and providing information, with no clear promise that what citizens say will affect the final decisions (Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa, 2004, 2006). (Khotari, 2001) even call involvement a possible new tyranny when it is used mainly to support policies that are already decided. At the same time, research on democratic innovations like citizen juries, participatory budgeting, and deliberative forums shows that if these tools are designed well, they can give people more power over local policy and how resources are distributed (Archon, 2006; Gilman & Wampler, 2019; Smith, 2009).

When talking about local governance, community empowerment is often connected to moving toward more cooperative types of governance where the government, citizens, and other people work together to make choices and find solutions (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Healey, 2003). But empirical research shows that results rely on many different things, like the quality of the process, how institutionalized something is, and political commitment (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). This systematic study is based on previous research, and it looks at whether and how these mechanisms actually have an effect on local government decisions and lead to policy changes.

III. Research Methodologies

a. Systematic Review Design and Rationale

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework (Moher et al., 2016; Page et al., 2021) guides this study's systematic review design. The goal of using PRISMA is to make sure that the process of finding, screening, determining eligibility, and finally including research is clear, repeatable, and well-documented. Systematic review approaches are very good at putting together bits of real-world data from different places and types of community empowerment in local government (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008; Tranfield et al., 2003). The review is based on the research questions that were laid out in the introduction. It looks at empirical studies that look at models and practices of community empowerment in local government decision-making and report outcomes that can be measured or clearly described, such as levels of empowerment, process quality, institutionalization, political commitment, influence on decisions, and policy or implementation outcomes.

b. Data Sources and Search Strategy

We used two big databases: Scopus and Google Scholar. According to Petticrew and Roberts (2006), Scopus was the main source of peer-reviewed journal articles since it had a wide range of well-organized articles on social sciences, public administration, urban studies, and governance research. Google Scholar was used as a complementary database to capture

additional relevant material, such as conference papers, book chapters, and articles in regional or less widely indexed journals especially important for studies of local governance and community participation in diverse national settings (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). The search strategy combined keywords related to community empowerment and participation (e.g., "community empowerment", "citizen empowerment", "public participation", "co-production"), local government and local governance (e.g., "local government", "municipal", "local governance"), and decision-making and policy processes (e.g., "decision-making", "policy process", "policy outcomes"). Searches were limited to publications from 2000 onward to capture contemporary practices of empowerment and participatory governance while allowing sufficient temporal breadth.

c. PRISMA Flow: Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion

In the identification stage, a total of 842 records were retrieved across the two databases. Of these, 312 records were identified through Scopus and 530 through Google Scholar. All records were exported and merged into a single database for further processing. In the next step, duplicates across the two sources were identified and removed. A total of 174 duplicate records were found, resulting in 668 unique records that proceeded to the screening stage. During the screening stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed against broad relevance criteria: the study had to concern community or citizen participation/empowerment in a local government setting and involve some link to decision-making, resource allocation, or policy processes. At this stage, 510 records were excluded because they did not focus on local government, did not address empowerment or participation, were purely theoretical without any empirical component, or addressed unrelated topics (such as internal organizational management or private-sector participation). This left 158 records for full-text assessment.

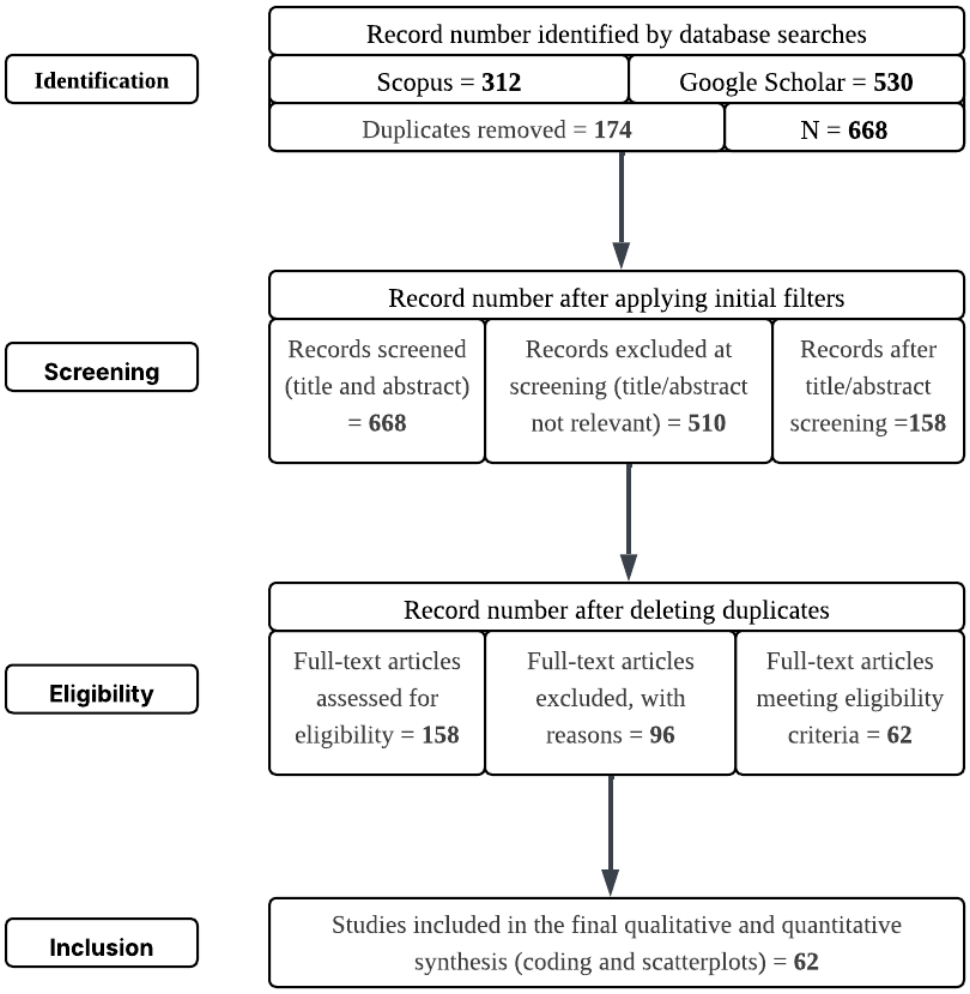
In the eligibility stage, full texts of the 158 remaining articles were retrieved and assessed against more specific inclusion and exclusion criteria derived from the aims of the review. To be eligible, a study had to:

1) focus on a mechanism, model, or practice of community or citizen empowerment/participation in local government decision-making;
2) provide empirical evidence (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods) rather than purely normative or conceptual discussion; and
3) contain sufficient information to code at least some of the core dimensions used in this review (empowerment level, process quality, institutionalization, political commitment, influence on decisions, and/or policy or implementation outcomes).

At this eligibility stage, 96 articles were excluded. The most common reasons for exclusion were: a lack of clear empirical data on how the participatory mechanism influenced decisions; a

focus on civic engagement without a clear link to local government structures; or insufficient detail to allow the construction of the relevant indices. This left 62 articles that met all inclusion criteria and were retained in the inclusion stage as the final corpus for analysis. Thus, in the eligibility stage, 158 full-text articles were considered in total, of which 62 were included and 96 were excluded. Across the entire PRISMA flow, 842 records were initially identified, 174 were removed as duplicates, 510 were excluded at the title/abstract screening stage, 96 were excluded after full-text assessment, and 62 studies were included in the final review and subsequent quantitative coding.

Table 1. PRISMA Flow



d. Data Extraction and Link to the Scatterplot Results

For each of the 62 included studies, a structured data extraction form was used to record bibliographic details (including year of publication), contextual information (such as country and type of local government), and substantive information regarding the design and implementation of empowerment mechanisms. Based on this information, each study was coded on a series of indices reflecting:

1) empowerment level;
2) quality of the participatory process;
3) degree of institutionalization within local government structures;
4) strength of political commitment;
5) degree of influence on decisions; and
6) policy or implementation outcomes.

The scatterplot analyses in the findings section use these indices to show how empowerment, process quality, institutionalization, political commitment, influence, and outcomes are all related. The PRISMA-guided method, along with Scopus and Google Scholar, gives a clear and systematically derived empirical basis for the patterns seen in the scatterplots and for answering the study's research questions (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Moher et al., 2016; Page et al., 2021; Yepes-Nuñez et al., 2021).

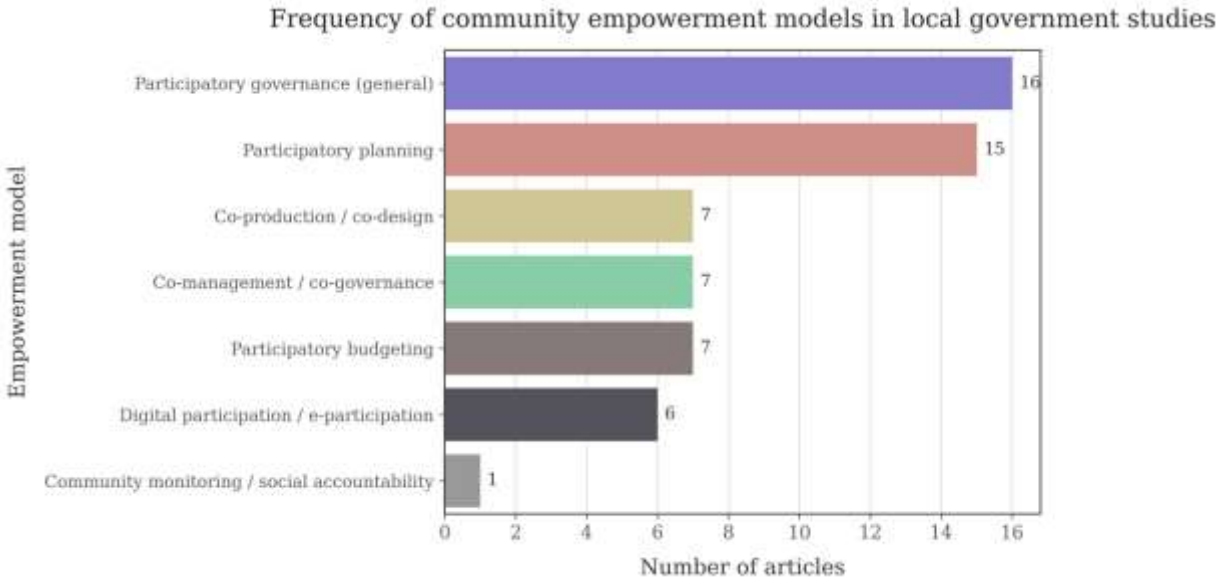
IV. Result and Discussion

a. Community Empowerment Model's

This part shows the real-world results of how community empowerment is thought about and put into action in local government decision-making based on the studies that were looked at. Using a dataset from both Scopus and Google Scholar, we methodically found, classified, and counted the number of different community empowerment models. We created these models by utilizing text mining to look at titles, abstracts, and keywords. We focused on words that show how communities and local governments share power or participate in decision-making. The study found seven different types of community empowerment models. While they all relate to citizen involvement in public decision-making, they differ substantially in terms of depth, formality, and the degree of decision-making power granted to communities. In what follows, we first present the frequency with which each model appears in the literature, and then discuss their relative position along an empowerment continuum.

The final dataset contains a set of local government studies that employed one or more community empowerment models. Because a single article can feature multiple models (for example, participatory planning combined with participatory governance, or participatory budgeting combined with digital participation), we allowed multiple codes per article. This means the counts per model reflect how often each model appears, not how many unique articles overall.

Figure 1.



In the bar chart, the horizontal axis shows the number of articles, and the vertical axis lists the different models. The tallest bars correspond to participatory governance (general) and participatory planning, visually emphasising their dominance in the dataset. A second tier of medium-length bars represents co-production/co-design, co-management/co-governance, and participatory budgeting, all with identical counts. Digital participation appears slightly less frequent, and community monitoring/social accountability is represented by a single, very short bar.

This picture makes two important points clear. First, most empirical work on community empowerment in local government has clustered around relatively broad and flexible arrangements, such as participatory governance and participatory planning, rather than highly specific institutional innovations. Second, there is a lot of study on more intensive models of power sharing, like co-management, co-production, and participatory budgeting. However, there isn't as much research on explicit social accountability mechanisms in this body of work. The significance of participatory governance and participatory planning necessitates more contemplation. In many of the articles coded as participatory governance (general), the focus is on institutional reforms, forums, or processes that seek to integrate citizen voices more directly into local decision-making routines. This may include multi-stakeholder councils, neighborhood

forums, consultation bodies, or other governance innovations designed to increase openness and deliberation. Participatory planning, by contrast, emphasises the planning cycle: the formulation of local development plans, spatial plans, or sectoral strategies. Here, empowerment is primarily located at the agenda-setting and design stages. Communities contribute their knowledge, preferences, and priorities, which may shape the final content of plans, although the ultimate authority often remains with elected officials or planning professionals. In several studies, participatory planning processes also serve as gateways to other forms of empowerment, such as co-management of the resulting projects or monitoring of plan implementation.

The three models with intermediate frequency co-production/co-design, co-management/co-governance, and participatory budgeting tend to be more demanding in terms of institutional resources and political will. Co-production and co-design require sustained collaboration between citizens and officials in designing or delivering services. Co-management and co-governance formalise joint authority, often through shared committees or agreements that specify roles and responsibilities. Participatory budgeting institutionalises recurring decision-making powers for citizens over the allocation of public funds. Digital participation, although slightly less prevalent in this dataset, is noteworthy because it often overlaps with other models. For instance, some studies use online platforms as a channel for participatory planning or as a component of participatory budgeting. In this sense, digital participation can be seen as a cross-cutting modality that shapes how empowerment processes are conducted rather than introducing an entirely separate model of empowerment.

We developed a two-dimensional conceptual map to situate the different ways in which communities can be empowered in local government decision-making. Figure 2 positions the seven models identified in our review according to both the predominant form of citizen involvement (ranging from information and consultation to joint planning, co-design, co-management, and ongoing monitoring) and the degree of community influence over public decisions (from weak to strong). This visualisation provides a synthetic overview of how the models found in the literature relate to one another, and it helps clarify that they represent distinct configurations of participation and power rather than fixed stages in a single linear hierarchy.

Figure 2. Conceptual map of community empowerment models

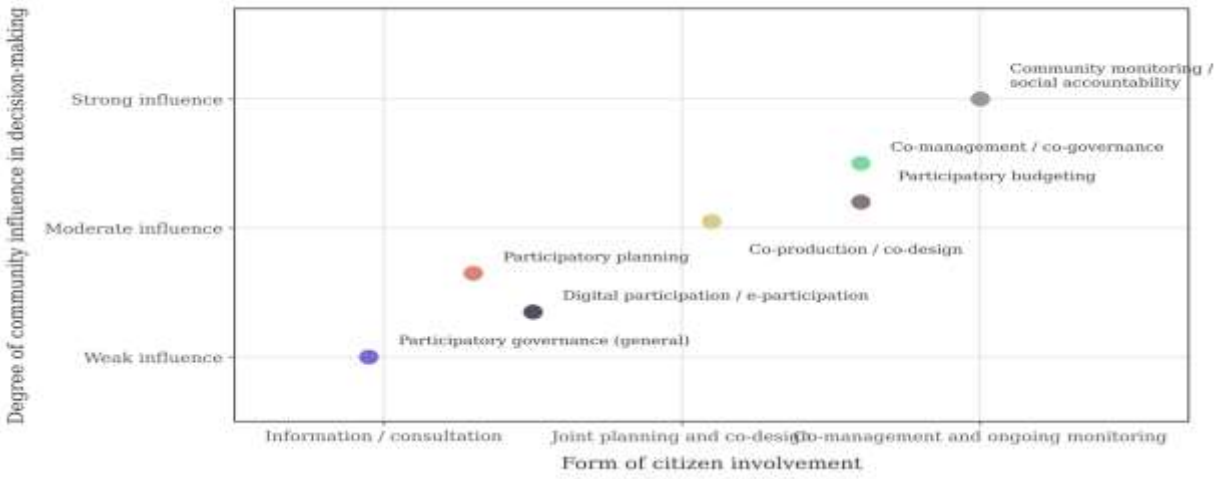


Figure 2 presents a two-dimensional conceptual map of community empowerment models identified in our systematic review of local government decision-making. The models included in the figure are those that recur in our database, namely participatory governance (general), participatory planning, co-production/co-design, co-management/co-governance, participatory budgeting, digital participation/e-participation, and community monitoring/social accountability. By positioning these models along two axes, we aim to clarify how they differ not only in terminology, but also in the form of citizen involvement and the degree of community influence over public decisions.

b. Horizontal axis: form of citizen involvement

On the horizontal axis, we map the form of citizen involvement in governmental processes. At the left side of the axis, we locate models that primarily emphasize information and consultation. In many of the cases in our database, initiatives labelled as participatory governance (general) or digital participation/e-participation focus on providing information, collecting feedback, or opening channels for comments, without necessarily creating formal mechanisms through which citizens can co-decide on specific policies or resource allocations. This corresponds to what participation literature commonly categorises as information-sharing and consultative modes (Archon, 2006; Arnstein, 1969).

Towards the centre of the axis, we place models that stress joint planning and co-design. Participatory planning involves community actors in shaping development plans, spatial strategies, or sectoral policies, often through workshops, forums, or multi-stakeholder processes. Co-production/co-design goes a step further by directly engaging citizens and community organisations in the design (and sometimes delivery) of services and programmes. The studies in our database describe, for example, co-designed social services, neighbourhood projects, and collaborative urban interventions, where citizens are treated as partners rather than mere

consultees (Bovaird, 2007; Brandsen & Honingh, 2016).

At the right side of the axis, we locate more institutionalised and continuous arrangements, such as co-management/co-governance, participatory budgeting, and community monitoring/social accountability. In these models, citizen involvement is embedded in formal procedures or institutional structures. In our dataset:

a) we see participatory budgeting processes where residents deliberate and vote on specific spending priorities;
b) we find co-governance arrangements where community representatives share management responsibilities with local government;
c) and we identify social accountability mechanisms through which communities monitor public performance on an ongoing basis.

c. Vertical axis: degree of community influence

The vertical axis represents the degree of community influence in decision-making, ranging from weak to strong. At the lower part of the axis, citizen influence is relatively weak. Here, community input tends to be advisory, symbolic, or dependent on the discretionary goodwill of authorities. Some instances of general participatory governance and low-intensity digital participation in our database fall into this category, where engagement improves communication and transparency but does not substantially shift decision power (Archon Fung, 2006; Arnstein, 1969).

In the middle of the axis, we locate models with moderate influence. In these arrangements, communities can shape agendas, plans, or implementation options, but formal authority usually remains with government. Many cases of participatory planning and some forms of co-production/co-design in our review illustrate this configuration: citizens help define priorities, propose alternatives, or collaborate in design and delivery, yet final decisions or resource control are still largely held by public officials. At the upper end of the axis, we position models that enable a stronger degree of influence. Participatory budgeting often grants residents direct decision-making power over specific portions of public budgets. Co-management/co-governance creates shared governance structures in which community actors and government jointly decide on rules, resource allocation, or management practices. Community monitoring/social accountability, although less frequent in our database, is conceptually associated with strong influence, because it equips communities with tools to scrutinise government performance, expose irregularities, and pressure authorities to respond and correct course (Fox, 2015).

Within this two-dimensional space, we position participatory governance (general) and many cases of digital participation/e-participation in a zone characterised by lighter forms of

involvement and modest influence. They expand channels for voice and feedback, but the extent to which this translates into binding decisions depends heavily on the surrounding institutional framework. Participatory planning is placed somewhat higher and more towards the centre, reflecting a more sustained and structured involvement of community actors in shaping plans and policies at the local level. Co-production/co-design occupies a position where citizens are not only consulted about what should be done, but also participate in how it is designed and sometimes implemented, thereby deepening their role in the policy process (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Brandsen & Honingh, 2016). Participatory budgeting and co-management/co-governance are placed further to the right and higher along the vertical axis. In the studies included in our database, these models typically create formal, recurring processes that allocate real decision power to communities, whether over financial resources (in the case of participatory budgeting) or over the governance of specific territories, services, or programmes (in the case of co-governance). Finally, community monitoring/social accountability is positioned in the upper-right area of the map. Although fewer articles in our dataset focus on this model, the literature and the cases we reviewed show that social accountability instruments can significantly enhance community leverage over authorities by enabling continuous oversight and by linking citizen voice with potential sanctions or reputational costs for public officials (Fox, 2015).

d. The Implementation

In the implementation stage, we move from describing empowerment models in abstract terms to examining how they actually relate to policy processes and outcomes in the cases included in our database. To do this, we constructed a set of bivariate scatterplots that link key dimensions coded in the review empowerment levels, institutionalization, political commitment, degree of influence, process quality, policy impact, and policy outcomes—across the studies. Figure 4.x synthesises these relationships in a single visual frame. It allows us to explore, first, whether higher reported empowerment tends to be associated with better process quality and stronger policy impact, and second, whether institutional and political conditions (institutionalization and political commitment) systematically underpin higher degrees of influence and, ultimately, better policy outcomes (Archon, 2006; Arnstein, 1969).

Figure 3. Scatterrplot of Implementation (Empowerment, Institutions, Politics, and Influence empowerment

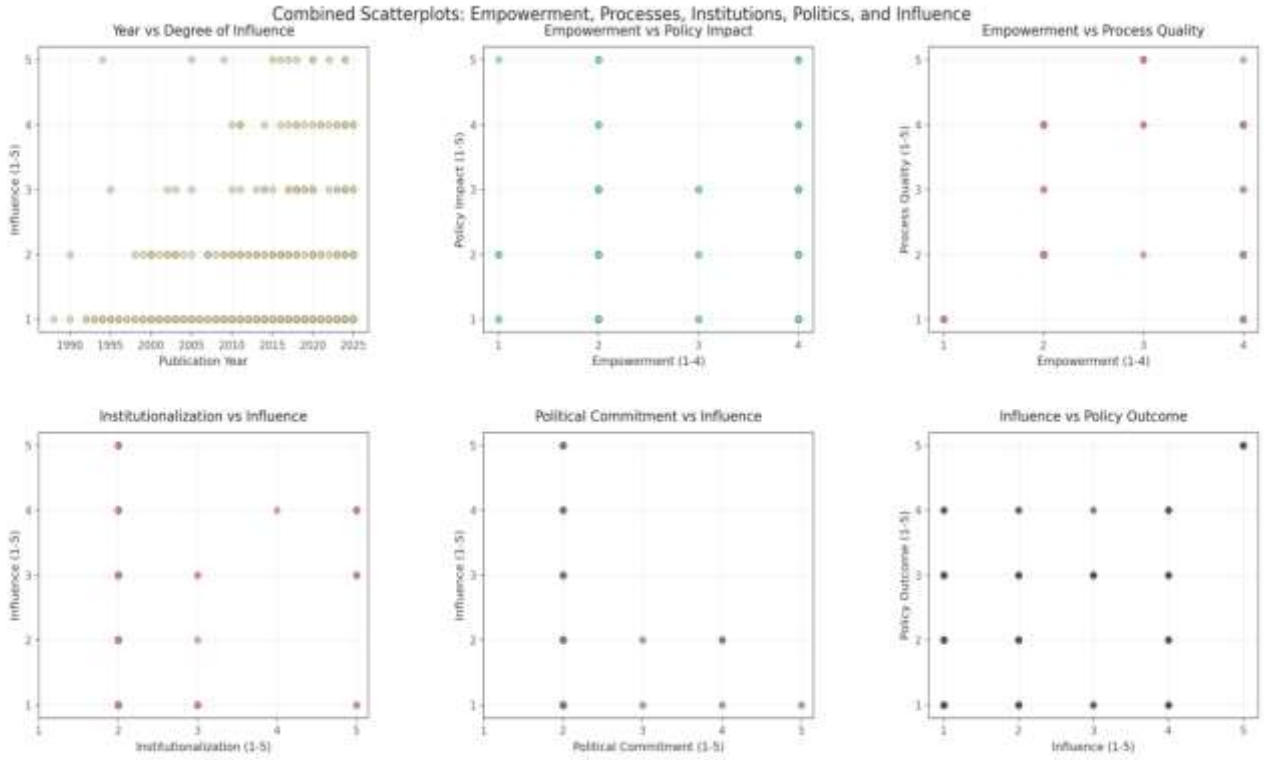


Figure 3 presents six scatterplots derived from our coded dataset of empirical studies on community empowerment in local government decision-making. The top-left panel plots publication year against the degree of influence attributed to community actors, illustrating how reported influence levels are distributed over time. The top-middle and top-right panels relate empowerment scores (1–4) to, respectively, policy impact and process quality (both 1–5), indicating that higher empowerment is more frequently associated with higher-quality participatory processes and more substantial policy effects in the cases reviewed. The bottom-left and bottom-middle panels show that higher levels of institutionalization and political commitment (1–5) tend to coincide with higher influence scores (1–5), echoing findings in the participation and accountability literature that durable rules and supportive political coalitions are critical preconditions for meaningful citizen power (Fox, 2015; Fung, 2006). Finally, the bottom-right panel links influence to policy outcomes (1–5), suggesting that cases reporting stronger community influence are more likely to report positive policy results. These charts give our implementation approach an empirical grounding by showing how empowerment, institutional design, and political considerations all affect both the quality of the process and the substantive outcomes in all the cases in our database.

1. Year compared to level of influence (top left)

The scatterplot of publication year against degree of citizen influence doesn't reveal a clear trend over time toward more empowering arrangements. From the late 1980s to the middle of

the 2020s, most cases cluster in the low-to-moderate range (scores 1–3), forming a relatively stable "band" of limited influence. Only a small number of studies report high levels of influence (scores 4–5), and these appear as isolated points scattered across the 2000s and 2010s rather than as a concentrated cluster in the most recent years. In other words, while participatory initiatives proliferate over time, the modal experience remains informational, consultative, or at best weak partnership, with only occasional instances where communities exercise delegated power or substantive control over decisions. This pattern suggests that the temporal growth of participatory discourse and mechanisms has not been accompanied by a systematic deepening of citizen power in local decision-making. High-influence arrangements persist as exceptions rather than the new norm, and they do not appear to be a recent historical breakthrough but rather sporadic experiments distributed across decades. The scatterplot therefore supports a more cautious reading of "participatory reforms": despite three decades of innovation, the typical local governance arrangement still offers communities voice without consistent, institutionalised, and binding influence over final decisions.

2. The Top Middle Ground: Empowerment vs. Policy Impact

There is a complex, non-linear relationship between empowerment and policy impact, as shown in the scatterplot. There is a vast variety of policy impact scores, from very little to very large, across all four levels of empowerment (1–4). Consistently high impact scores (4-5) are only seen in the higher empowerment (3-4) zone, suggesting that strong community power does indeed lead to chances for more significant policy change. Strong formal influence does not necessarily transfer into transformative consequences, since many high-empowerment cases nonetheless cluster in the low-mid effect range (1-3), indicating that this link is definitely stochastic rather than deterministic. On the flip side, depending on the circumstances, some low-empowerment arrangements (particularly those at level 2) manage to have considerable impacts. For the most part, the pattern lends credence to a cautious conclusion: empowerment is necessary but not sufficient for policy impact; the political practice, embedding, and support of power is just as important as the official level of influence.

3. Comparison of Empowerment and Process Quality (upper right)

By contrasting process quality with empowerment, a more discernible pattern becomes apparent. At the most basic level of empowerment (1), the majority of examples fall into the "poor quality" category on the process-quality scale, with few arrangements reaching very high standards. The frequency of medium to high process quality (3-5) and ratings of 4-5 increases dramatically as empowerment levels 3-4 are reached, according to the observations. In practice, participatory processes that are more inclusive, transparent, and deliberate, with better documentation, feedback systems, and regulations, are more likely to endorse structures where

citizens have a greater say. Claims of substantive empowerment based on weak, opaque, or solely symbolic techniques are difficult to sustain, while variety continues within each empowerment level. When involvement is structured with greater institutional and procedural quality, citizen power tends to rise.

4. Influence vs. Institutionalization (bottom left)

Looking at the relationship between influence and institutionalization, we see that it is not linear but rather uneven. Cases span the whole influence scale at low to mid levels of institutionalization (scoring 2-3): some arrangements claim rather strong citizen power, while others remain largely informative or advisory. Instances of extremely high influence (5) are evident but not preponderant, while observations cluster around mid-to-high influence (3-4) as we move to greater levels of institutionalization (4-5). Although this trend does not ensure robust or binding citizen influence, it does imply that incorporating participatory tools into formal regulations, processes, and organizations is typically linked with more than just symbolic engagement. Strong legal and procedural frameworks can accommodate both surface-level and deep-level forms of engagement, and effective institutional design, in conjunction with supportive political will, administrative practices, and power relations, is the only surefire way to bring about significant impact.

5. Political Engagement vs. Influence (middle section)

There is a weak and unreliable correlation between political engagement and public impact. Scores for influence range from extremely weak to extremely high (1-5) at low levels of commitment (around 2), suggesting that even authorities who appear to be neutral or ambivalent can oversee procedures that occasionally result in significant citizen power. As commitment rises into the mid-to-high range (3-5), most observed cases remain clustered at low to moderate influence levels (1-3), with only a small number of genuinely high-influence arrangements (4-5). In other words, stronger rhetorical or perceived support for participation does not systematically translate into more binding citizen influence over decisions. Political commitment often appears as a discursive or symbolic resource used to legitimise participatory reforms—rather than as a consistent driver of deep power sharing. Substantive empowerment seems to require more than leaders' expressed enthusiasm; it depends on how that commitment is operationalised in institutional design, resource allocation, and the renegotiation of power relations.

6. Influence versus Policy Outcome (bottom right)

A more clearly positive relationship emerges when policy outcomes are examined against influence. At the lower end of the influence scale (1–2), most cases concentrate in the bottom

half of the outcome range, with scores typically between 1 and 3, suggesting that weak citizen power rarely produces strong or far-reaching policy change. As influence rises to levels 4–5, observations increasingly appear at outcome scores 4–5, indicating that arrangements where communities have more binding say over decisions are more likely to generate substantive shifts in policies, priorities, or resource allocation. However, the association is far from perfect: some high-influence cases still deliver only moderate outcomes, which may reflect sectoral constraints, limited fiscal space, implementation failures, or broader political and economic conditions.

e. Discussion

An empirical evaluation of the studies' actual empowerment practices is combined with a theoretical model of community empowerment in our research. By linking the conceptual map of empowerment models (Figure 2) with the implementation chart (Figure X), we are able to discuss not only the types of participation that appear in local governance, but also the conditions under which they are more likely to generate meaningful influence, better processes, and positive policy outcomes. The conceptual map in Figure 2 departs from the idea that models of community empowerment can be ranked on a single linear scale. As an alternative, we think of each model as a configuration that mixes different types of citizen involvement with different levels of decision-making influence. More complex mappings of power dynamics in various institutional contexts have replaced simplistic typologies in the participation literature, which is consistent with this strategy (Cornwall, 2008; Dennis, 2013).

We find that digital participation/e-participation and participatory government (generic) are most concentrated in the information and consultation zone, where they exert moderate influence. There is no assurance that citizen comments will be legally binding, but these systems do increase participation in political discourse. Research on participatory platforms has shown that many digital tools are still used for consultation rather than co-decision, and this tendency is consistent with those findings (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). In terms of involvement and influence, participatory planning and co-production/co-design take center stage. Priority setting and service design are two areas where they often necessitate longer periods of engagement between the government and communities. According to various studies on co-production, which include Bovaird & Loeffler (2012), Davis et al. (2021), Lee et al. (2024), and Voorberg et al. (2015), authorities' willingness to change their routines and share control over resources determines whether these arrangements can transform or not. However, they can increase citizen engagement and service responsiveness. Models that combine institutionalized participation with higher impact are positioned at the upper right end of the map: participatory budgeting, co-management/co-governance, and community monitoring/social accountability. For instance, in participatory budgeting, citizens usually have direct control over some parts of the public budget,

and citizen supervision is embedded into decision and implementation processes through social accountability systems and co-governance structures. Research comparing participatory budgeting and co-governance (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014; Gilman & Wampler, 2019) has demonstrated that these models have the potential to change the allocation of power and redirect expenditure, particularly when backed by explicit regulations and robust political will.

The empirical relationships shown in the implementation chart can be better understood with the aid of this conceptual space. The scatterplots in Figure support the hypothesis with empirical data. Higher empowerment scores are often linked to better process quality and stronger reported policy impact across all of the examples in our database. That higher levels of empowerment are seldom linked to poor processes or negligible impacts is shown in the panels that link empowerment to process quality and policy impact. While there is some variation, the points are more concentrated in the upper-right quadrant, suggesting this. Research on participatory governance has shown that when communities have a say in policymaking, they want more transparency, more information, and stronger reasons for decisions (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). Accordingly, this pattern makes sense. Put simply, when it comes to process quality and empowerment, they usually go hand in hand. Empowerment does not just appear out of nowhere, as shown in the bottom row of Figure.

We find that political commitment and influence are positively correlated, and that the degree of institutionalization is positively correlated with the influence score. Formal rules, recurrent cycles, recognized forums, and stable avenues for public participation are characteristics of more institutionalized cases. In a similar vein, instances with a high level of political commitment typically involve coalitions or local leaders that openly support involvement and are prepared to accept its limitations. This agrees with studies on invited spaces of participation that have shown that the architecture of institutions and the support of elites are major factors in deciding whether participatory mechanisms have any real impact or are just symbolic (Cornwall, 2008; Hickey & Mohan, 2008). It appears from these results that participatory budgeting, co-governance, and social accountability, which are situated at the strong influence end of our conceptual map, have a better chance of reaching their maximum potential when supported by long-term institutional agreements and political players who recognize the importance of power sharing. Even the most theoretically lofty models run the risk of having little or unpredictable impact in the absence of such prerequisites.

f. Going from impact to results

The degree of influence is linked to the reported policy outcomes in the final panel of Figure. Once again, we see that instances with higher influence ratings tend to cluster towards

policy outcomes that are more favorable. Although correlation does not prove causality, the pattern lends credence to the claim that communities are more likely to achieve measurable changes in policy outputs and outcomes when they are systematically involved and have real decision-making authority. This is in line with the findings of meta-reviews of accountability and participation programs, which show that when combined with larger reforms in public management and governance, sustained and empowered participation is more likely to generate significant changes in service quality, resource allocation, or the inclusion of disadvantaged groups (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Our own data shows that this dynamic is at work: instead of isolated, ad hoc consultations, the best results are usually seen when citizen influence is strong and integrated in institutional frameworks. Also, the scatterplots show extreme examples where a lot of empowerment doesn't lead to very strong results, or where a little influence has surprisingly good results. The importance of context is highlighted by these outliers. No matter how well-designed a participatory model is, its effectiveness may be enhanced or diminished by varying socioeconomic factors, administrative capabilities, and larger political dynamics. Mansuri and Rao (2013) argue that involvement should not be seen in isolation from the political economies of transformation, and our findings are in line with this view. The three key findings are highlighted by combining the conceptual model with the practical results. For starters, there is no universally applicable hierarchy of empowerment models; rather, they reflect unique combinations of engagement and influence. Some techniques, like participatory budgeting, might lead to significant policy changes in particular areas, while others, like general e-participation platforms, may have a wider reach but less influence on legally binding decisions. Understanding this variability helps to clarify why.

Second, there is evidence from actual implementations that empowerment is rooted in both interpersonal and systemic factors. More clout doesn't usually materialize without corresponding shifts in institutional architecture and political determination. A combination of empowered models (top right of the conceptual map), strong rules, and clear backing from political actors characterizes the best-performing instances in our collection.Third, participation seems to have an effect on the quality of processes and their final products. According to the data, participatory procedures are more likely to be open, thoughtful, and responsible when communities have greater agency, and they also have a better chance of producing tangible policy outcomes. While this doesn't prove that participation is a panacea, it does show that it can improve governance and outcomes when local governments put their money into models that really redistribute power with the help of strong institutions and political will. Together, the evolution of institutions, political leadership, and citizen capacity constitutes a larger alteration of state-society interactions; our results lend credence to this expanding corpus of literature.

V. Conclusion

Using a two-dimensional space for forms of involvement and degrees of influence, this article presents a PRISMA based systematic review of 62 studies on community empowerment in local government decision-making. The models mapped within this space include participatory budgeting, digital participation, participatory governance, co management/co governance, participatory design, participatory planning, and community monitoring/social accountability. This is not just one rung higher or lower on a single ladder; the mapping makes it clear that these are separate arrangements of power and participation. There has been no steady increase in citizen power to correspond with the growth of participatory mechanisms, since the majority of initiatives maintain modest to low levels of influence throughout time. The correlation between higher empowerment scores and stronger policy results and better designed participatory processes is probabilistic rather than automated. Rather than being the sole motivators, institutionalization and political commitment serve as enabling factors. The operationalization of formal regulations and supportive language determines the level of participation, which can be shallow or profound. It would appear that, at its core, community empowerment in local administration is primarily an institutional and relational phenomenon. More empowering models have the best chance of making a difference when they are part of strong institutional frameworks, supported by people who are prepared to share power, and used in conjunction with open, honest, and responsible procedures. Beyond just adopting trendy participatory labels, the study adds to the existing body of knowledge by providing an integrated framework that connects empowerment models, their institutional embedding, and the effects that are seen. It also highlights the significance of specific design choices, safeguards against elite capture, and intentional strategies to include marginalized groups.

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