

Stepping stones as metaphor for building partnerships and co-producing knowledge in coastal transitions

Janni Sørensen, Kristen Ounanian, Rikke Becker Jacobsen, Josefin Ekstedt, Sunniva Midthaug Solnør, Katrina Rønningen, Sílvia Gómez, Maria Hadjimichael, Wesley Flannery, Kristina Svelds, Anna Antonova, Vida Maria Daae Steiro & Madeleine Gustavsson

To cite this article: Janni Sørensen, Kristen Ounanian, Rikke Becker Jacobsen, Josefin Ekstedt, Sunniva Midthaug Solnør, Katrina Rønningen, Sílvia Gómez, Maria Hadjimichael, Wesley Flannery, Kristina Svelds, Anna Antonova, Vida Maria Daae Steiro & Madeleine Gustavsson (13 Jul 2025): Stepping stones as metaphor for building partnerships and co-producing knowledge in coastal transitions, *Local Development & Society*, DOI: [10.1080/26883597.2025.2528014](https://doi.org/10.1080/26883597.2025.2528014)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/26883597.2025.2528014>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 13 Jul 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 430



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Stepping stones as metaphor for building partnerships and co-producing knowledge in coastal transitions

Janni Sørensen ^a, Kristen Ounanian^a, Rikke Becker Jacobsen^a, Josefin Ekstedt^a, Sunniva Midthaug Solnør^b, Katrina Rønningen^b, Sílvia Gómez^c, Maria Hadjimichael^d, Wesley Flannery^e, Kristina Svells^f, Anna Antonova^g, Vida Maria Daae Steiro^h and Madeleine Gustavsson^b

^aDepartment of Sustainability and Planning, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark; ^bRuralis, Trondheim, Norway; ^cDepartment of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain; ^dCyprus Marine and Maritime Institute, Larnaca, Cyprus; ^eSchool of Natural and Built Environment, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK; ^fNatural Resources Institute Finland (LUKE), Turku, Finland; ^gRachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU Munich, Munich, Germany; ^hNordlandsforskning, Bodø, Norge

ABSTRACT

This paper centers local processes for co-creating transitions toward more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient coastal community development. We have conceptualized a path for change processes with phases of transition including 1. Reasons to convene; 2. Governance and participation “rules”; 3. Building knowledge together; 4. Implementing and experimenting; 5. Post-hoc reflections and assessment; 6. Transfer/reproduction of practices. Here, we focus on the first three stepping stones, which form the foundation of the collaborative process, focusing on the challenges and opportunities encountered as a pilot intervention is planned. We use a framework informed by partnership-, co-creation-, transition-, and justice literatures, to analyze data focused on establishing partnerships for ongoing co-creation of knowledge, empowering actors in the local communities, and selecting options for an intervention pilot. Conclusions relate to (a) trust and preexisting relationships, (b) what inclusion means, (c) internal power differentials, (d) preexisting tensions in the community, (e) challenges to co-creation.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 September 2024
Accepted 27 June 2025

KEYWORDS

Coastal transition;
community development;
participation; conflict; power

Introduction

When a community is faced with significant challenges and changes, transition must occur. The ways local people and communities intentionally engage with adjustment and adaptation can be critical for the transition process and outcomes. Communities can be forced to transition due to challenges associated with climate change, centralization processes, urban development, gentrification, tourism, and other related pressures. Such transitions often impact traditional and cultural practices, moving toward a “new normal” to sustain the communities. The drivers of coastal transition are complex and

CONTACT Janni Sørensen  jannis@plan.aau.dk  Department of Sustainability and Planning, Aalborg University, Rendsburggade 14, Aalborg 9000, Denmark

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

interconnected, and they require careful consideration and planning to ensure that communities can adapt and thrive in the face of change. The complexity in the coastal community context can be summed up as the struggle to re-balance the (over) use of marine areas and resources, while maintaining community identity and viability where reliance on an almost exclusively “blue” economy has deep roots. This involves an urgent need to re-connect people to the sea in new ways with new knowledge and a changed access to the coast and the sea. If we broadly think of local stakeholders in a coastal community as “the users of the sea,” we begin to see transitions ripe with potential for conflicting interests, including environmental justice considerations and process-related questions about power, capacity, and access. To plan for coastal transitions, the dynamic and complex interactions between human activities and natural systems should be considered in order to create sustainable and resilient coastal environments (Van Assche et al., 2020). The challenges involved in working toward interrelated but also often conflicting goals, calls for deep reflection, informed by solid research.

To explore this topic, we draw upon ongoing research and practice in the EmpowerUs project. EmpowerUs is a Horizon Europe-funded project established to develop such research-based knowledge on how to support coastal communities undergoing transitions (Project overview, 2023). A core objective of EmpowerUs is “to understand the nature of power in marine environments and to better position local communities to exercise greater control over their natural, social and economic development” (Flannery et al., 2024). Underpinning this work are questions of what it will take to empower coastal communities for the necessary social, cultural, economic, and political transition to ensure that social-ecological systems contribute to equity and sustainability locally, regionally, and globally, and how such empowerment can develop in practice.

EmpowerUs learns from collaboration with six transition coastal labs (TCLs) located on the coasts of Spain, Cyprus, Norway, Åland (Finland), Bulgaria, and Ireland, representing all the EU sea basins (Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and southern and northern European Atlantic coast) in an effort to learn from the experiences of different contexts. This paper reflects on geographical differences as part of its analysis of processes.

The TCLs consist of local organizations (hosts) partnering with academic researchers (academic leads) to generate knowledge together, seeking to understand the possibilities and challenges in processes that actively involve broad community constituents during ongoing transition (EmpowerUs, 2023). Based on information collected during the first year of the project (governance audit, interviews, document analysis, participant observation), all of which build toward a co-created plan for these communities’ futures, the six TCLs aspire to an overarching vision of a re-directed Blue Economy that supports a thriving coastal community. Within this broad vision, each lab has overlapping and varying priorities as illustrated in Table 1.

The project aims to deduct generalizable lessons to inform other partnerships based on principles of co-creation, justice, and inclusion. Lindberg states the importance of understanding transition through the lens of justice: “. . . transition scholars need to develop greater sensitivity in terms of who stands to gain or lose from different initiatives to avoid locking societies and cities into inequality-exacerbating and inefficient transition paths” (Lindberg, 2022, pp. 227–228).

In this paper, we set out to share lessons about the barriers we have encountered while acting in accordance with principles of justice and empowerment, even with the explicit

Table 1. Brief overview of the six transition coastal labs contexts and priorities (governance audit, 2023).

| Bulgaria | Cyprus | Åland | Ireland | Norway | Spain |
|---|--|---|---|--|---|
| Core context to consider when analyzing observations in the different TCL's: | | | | | |
| Significant Natura 2000 site, wetland along the Black Sea coast. Economy was traditionally based on salt extraction. Today, tourism is the primary industry. Governance structure is highly centralized at national level and even at local levels, top-down approaches dominate. Transformation from a post socialist toward marked driven development | EU Habitat directive/ Natura 2000 protecting biodiversity in place Local government have some decision-making authority but heavily regulated from top level. The TCL area was a bicomunal village, where both Greek and Turkish Cypriots lived prior to the 1974 violent division and displacement of Turkish Cypriots. Conflict between industrial marine aquaculture and a residential/ tourist use. | Åland Islands is an autonomous, Swedish-speaking region of Finland, with the competence to legislate internal affairs. Fishing quotas are determined within the EU system in cooperation with the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. EU directives also affect fisheries governance Strong tourism economy and diversified fisheries sector Unique ownership structure where all archipelago waters are in private ownership while deeper waters are public. | Rich cultural, linguistic (Gaeltacht), and maritime heritage. Has historically had few employment opportunities aside from small scale farming and fishing – youth outmigration results. level of Irish fluency varies. Government and community groups both play key roles in the local economies providing avenues for political representation within the broader governance network. Increasing pressures from aquaculture, energy developments and tourism intensification | Several small islands, 33 nautical miles from the shoreline off northern Norway, Total of app. 450 inhabitants and accessed by ferry only. Significant 9000+ year cultural history. Half of the workforce employed by the municipal government others in fishing, construction and tourism, Today, one woman and 31 men are registered main occupation fishers. Being a “project-run municipality” means less local freedom to focus on the most pressing issues when they must fulfil objectives of a projects established at county level, | Been a Natural Park since 1998 to preserve exceptional natural and cultural heritage. Retired European citizens, often aging, move to enjoy the natural environment and establish second homes. Economic immigrants (Many from African countries) work in low-wage jobs, have language barriers, and experience exclusion in governance processes that have stated aims to be participatory, involving various actors such as park governance and local citizen initiatives. |
| Identifying shared priorities across the varying contexts | | | | | |
| <i>Identify (infra)structures that promote local vitality</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bulgaria ● Cyprus ● Ireland ● Norway | | <i>(Re)claim Blue Economy benefits & wealth locally</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bulgaria ● Cyprus ● Åland ● Ireland ● Spain | | <i>Widen the users of the sea constituency</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bulgaria ● Cyprus ● Åland ● Ireland ● Spain | |

Principles of partnership-, co-creation-, transition- and justice informs all steppingstones and the bridges in between.

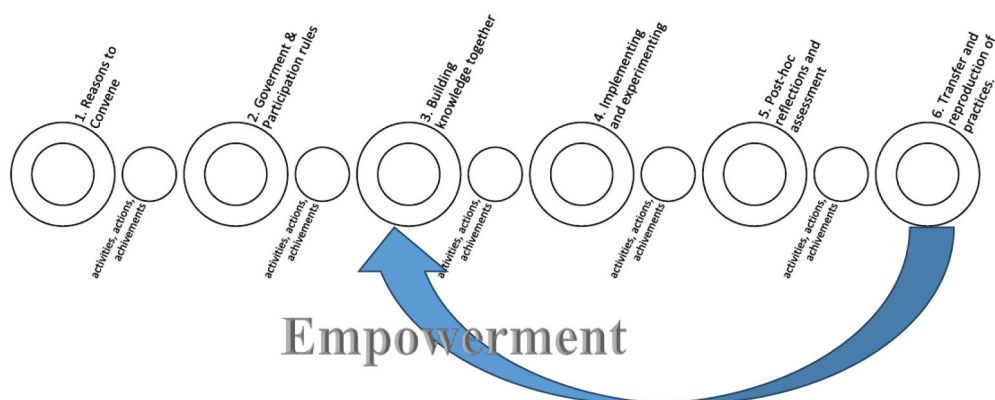


Figure 1. The stepping stones model of building a partnership for community-led coastal transition.

intention of doing so. To illustrate these intentions, we imagine a “cycle of partnership” inspired by work in the Participatory Action Research and community development literature (De Oliveira, 2023; Greenwood et al., 1993; Morrell et al., 2015; Sorensen & Lawson, 2012). Skipper and Pepler (2021), p. 589) link a core EmpowerUs principle of co-creation to action research by describing co-creation as *a type of action research at the interface of science and practice in which the interests of both practitioners and academics have equal weight and benefits*. In the following figure, we illustrate a pathway consisting of six stepping stones established to describe an idealized model process to follow, with the aim of community-led transitions. The six steps are illustrated in Figure 1b. The arrow indicates that when one cycle is complete the community can continue working together building on the experiences and social capital now established and therefore start a new project at stepping-stone 3. In the remainder of this paper, we will focus on stepping stones 1–3 as the foundation for work that can continue past the scope of the funded research in the EmpowerUs consortium.

Methods

This paper is set up as an accumulative case study, defined as “studying multiple cases simultaneously or sequentially in an attempt to generate a broader appreciation of a particular issue” (Crowe et al. 2011, 2). Rather than comparative work that seeks to extract knowledge that relates to differences in contexts, we wish to accumulate and share the types of challenges partnerships must prepare for encountering.

Baseline data was collected in the form of a “governance audit.” This consisted of mapping the challenges that each case area faces; how the policy network is structured; how power in various forms is enacted; what discourses dominate; and how place is organized. Data gathering was completed by TCL hosts and academic researchers and involved the development of a policy document library; critical analysis of key programs impacting each Lab; and 134 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders across the public, private, and community sectors in the six TCLs. The final report of this work includes rich

details about each TCL, including local challenges, especially for nature and nature-based solutions (NBS); how the community has been impacted by economic change; the role and potential of policy to address these complex challenges, and gives an insight into the potential for local action. In this paper, we use the published report that resulted from this work as secondary data and did not use original interviews and other materials that require human research approval.

Based on the knowledge and relationships developed to create the governance audit, two workshops were planned and implemented. The data collected during and after the workshops is the core data used in this paper.

Some of the authors of this paper are facilitators of the workshops (and thereby participant observers) and their knowledge has also been collected through reflection interviews where peer researchers (remaining authors of this paper) facilitated looking back at the work in the TCLs to secure that deep reflections were preserved. The fact that both respondents and interviewers are part of the same research team is a methodologically important element to acknowledge as it created data in the form of peer debriefing (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) that has depth but not the neutrality an independent scientist may offer. Workshop 1's focus revolved around the geographical context of each TCL and envisioned the challenges and potential solutions related to promoting environmentally friendly transformations. The core principle for inviting participants was an ideal of "leaving no-one behind" and this meant using different strategies from traditional e-mail distribution lists to personal visits in parts of the communities where "hard to reach" people live or work. The goal was to secure diversity in terms of age, gender, and occupation but also effort to reach migrants, indigenous people, youth, and the elderly. As part of the workshops, findings from the governance audit were shared with participants and a variety of breakout sessions were facilitated to provide opportunities for meaningful discussion. Researchers participated as facilitators and observers. The workshop allowed participants to share their individual perceptions of both challenges and opportunities facing the community and effort was made to allow different voices to emerge by starting with written individual notes added to posters followed by small group discussions and finally plenum discussion to collectively understand the breath of local priorities and concerns. Workshop 2 centered on narrowing the focus to an intervention to be implemented and followed over the remainder of the EmpowerUs grant period in response to the priorities illustrated in [Figure 1](#). Here, participants from workshop 1 were invited back and a repeated effort to diversify was made. The core of this workshop was to arrive at a choice for an appropriate (within time frame and budget) action that participants agreed would be a positive change that could be managed by local partners. In [Table 2](#), we summarize information about participation in the two workshops.

The work developed in the governance audit and workshop 1 was merged by researchers and presented to workshop 2 participants to facilitate a process of choosing and developing an idea for implementation. Workshop 1 and 2 fit in stage 3 of the stepping stone model presented in [Figure 1](#), while the implementation of the selected intervention fits in stepping stone 4 and is beyond this paper's scope. Following workshops 1 and 2 in each TCL, interviews with the main planners and facilitators of the total 12 events were conducted. The interview guides were semi-structured and included a range of questions from basic facts

Table 2. Overview of participants in workshops.

| Workshop 1 - TCL | Bulgaria | | Cyprus | | Åland | | Ireland | | Norway | | Spain | |
|-------------------------------|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Gender | 61 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Female | 11 | 39 | 5 | 35.7 | 2 | 22.2 | 9 | 64.3 | 15 | 68.2 | 9 | 45 |
| Male | 7 | | 9 | 64.3 | 7 | 77.8 | 5 | 35.7 | 7 | 31.8 | 11 | 55 |
| Age | 5.6 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Under 25 | 1 | 27.8 | 3 | 21.5 | 0 | 0 | | | 3 | 13.6 | 1 | 5 |
| 25–40 | 5 | 61 | 1 | 7.1 | 2 | 22.2 | | | 9 | 40.9 | 4 | 20 |
| 40–55 | 11 | 5.6 | 5 | 35.7 | 4 | 44.5 | | | 6 | 27.3 | 11 | 55 |
| 55 and over | 1 | | 5 | 35.7 | 3 | 33.3 | | | 4 | 18.2 | 4 | 20 |
| Sector | 11.1 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Regional Government | 2 | 39 | 1 | 7.1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 21.5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Local Government | 7 | 5.6 | 4 | 28.6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 36.4 | 2 | 10 |
| Local Business | 1 | 11.1 | 3 | 21.4 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 7.1 | 6 | 27.3 | 7 | 35 |
| Research | 2 | 16.6 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 15 |
| CSO/NGO | 3 | 16.6 | 4 | 28.6 | 4 | 44.5 | 1 | 7.1 | 5 | 22.7 | 8 | 40 |
| Other | 3 | | 2 | 14.3 | 4 | 44.5 | 9 | 64.3 | 3 | 13.6 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>N</i> = Total Participants | 18 | | 14 | | 9 | | 14 | | 22 | | 20 | |
| Workshop 2 - TCL | Bulgaria | | Cyprus | | Åland | | Ireland | | Norway | | Spain | |
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Gender | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Female | 11 | 64.7 | 10 | 52.6 | 2 | 25 | 6 | 66.7 | 11 | 55 | 6 | 35.3 |
| Male | 6 | 35.3 | 9 | 47.4 | 6 | 75 | 3 | 33.3 | 9 | 45 | 11 | 64.7 |
| Age | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Under 25 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | | | 3 | 15 | 0 | 0 |
| 25–40 | 5 | 29.4 | 3 | 15.8 | 3 | 37.5 | | | 6 | 30 | 2 | 11.8 |
| 40–55 | 11 | 64.7 | 10 | 52.6 | 4 | 50 | | | 6 | 30 | 10 | 58.8 |
| 55 and over | 1 | 5.9 | 6 | 31.6 | 1 | 12.5 | | | 5 | 25 | 5 | 29.4 |
| Sector | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Regional Government | 3 | 17.6 | 6 | 31.6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Local Government | 5 | 29.4 | 5 | 26.3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 20 | 6 | 35.3 |
| Local Business | 2 | 11.8 | 4 | 21 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 20 | 5 | 29.4 |
| Research | 0 | 0 | 2 | 10.5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| CSO/NGO | 7 | 41.2 | 1 | 5.3 | 6 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 25 | 6 | 35.3 |
| Other | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5.3 | 2 | 25 | 9 | 100 | 7 | 35 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>N</i> = Total Participants | 17 | | 19 | | 8 | | 9 | | 20 | | 17 | |

about the number and demographics of participants to complex reflections about power dynamics and challenges associated with the planning, implementing, and following-up tasks. The summaries of these interviews were also analyzed according to the codebook in Table 3. When using quotes from interviews in the analysis we identify source by TCL and role rather than name of respondent as some statements may be sensitive and we choose to do this even though interview participants have not specifically requested anonymity.

Framework for analysis

The idea that research objectives should connect with pressing needs to solve problems or further opportunities in a community is firmly established in the Participatory Action Research literature (see Gómez & Maynou, 2021) and transdisciplinary approaches (Gómez & Köpsel, 2022). In praxis, defining and initiating such work depends on pre-existing local capacity. When such capacity is low, outside researchers become critical partners for uncovering reasons to convene (stepping stone 1). To stay true to intentions,

Table 3. Codebook.

| Theme: | Trust | Meaning of inclusion | Power differentials | Conflict | Pilot planning |
|--------|--|---|---|---|---|
| Codes | Lack of trust Preexisting relationships Building on already established community priorities | Barriers to coproduction Limited capacity Language/migrant barriers Age, gender, ethnicity barriers Types of stakeholders | Within the communities Between researcher and community stakeholders Between members of the communities and external institutions | Historical and systemic conflicts Mismatching priorities Ability to work together | Who is engaged Type of problem/opportunity addressed |

the process of “uncovering” must build on the broadest possible spectra of local voices – a principle that can be challenging to achieve and one we will investigate in this paper. Once convened, transparency and agreement on the collaboration, including reflection on who benefits and how, are critical and points that may need recalibration as projects progress. This is the focus of stepping stone 2. Stepping stone 3 entails developing a deeper understanding of the issues that brought people to the table in the first place. This includes co-creation principles of developing new knowledge together by merging the outsider expert knowledge with deep local knowledge about culture, history, and competing agendas for the transition. To investigate these elements, the data has been analyzed in the qualitative analysis software NVivo using an inductive approach of adding themes to the codebook as they emerged through the coding process. The final codebook looks as follows.

Summarizing lessons learned

In the initial work of setting up partnerships, academic leads and TCL partners collaborated to establish comprehensive profiles of the history, governance, demographic, economic, and geographic profiles of the communities. This work demonstrates a respect for and intentionality about establishing meaningful partnerships. All six TCLs have worked to incorporate practical considerations such as attention to time and locations of events for the two workshops that are core to this analysis and as a result have all implemented “successful” events. In the following, we will not dwell on these “good practice” elements but rather share what was challenging – and to some extent, what got in the way of the pure intents of inclusion and co-creation. We share new insights, or challenging issues that were not on our minds prior to engagement. The intention is to make a difference by sharing challenges rather than success. The following is an accumulation of “lessons learned” across the six TCLs organized by the analytical themes described above.

Trust. Pre-existing relationships

Across social theory, trust has been variously defined as a psychological state (Kramer, 1999), as an inherent societal mortar functioning in both conscious and unconscious ways (Hosking, 2014), and as a complex interaction between individual attitudes and social systems (Luhmann, 1979). The social functioning of trust has gained particular attention in scholarship focusing on societies in transition, especially emerging from, but not limited to, post-socialist Europe (Giordano & Kostova, 2002; Luleva, 2021; Sztompka, 2000). These studies regard trust as social capital subject to transformation in a changing society; and they also debate the preconditions for changing trust and the emergence of distrust, pointing to historic dependencies, the breakdown in the reliability of institutions, or the resulting gulf between legal and actual status as important factors (Giordano & Kostova, 2002, p. 75; Hosking, 2014). This scholarship helps contextualize the significance that trust and distrust both play as enabling or constraining conditions for socio-ecological transitions. Put simply, trust – or the lack of – shapes community members' preexisting relationships with each other, with governance institutions, and with researchers. As such, trust and distrust both impact the first three “stepping stones” discussed in this paper.

As theorized by this line of scholarship, trust has a strong influence on actors' reasons to convene – or stepping stone 1. For instance, Luhmann conceptualizes trust as having a temporal aspect because it involves anticipating the future (1979). This theory of temporality helps explain some distrust observed between different community groups during the workshops conducted in the TCLs. For example, this resonates with comments from Norway, where skepticism about involving various immigrant groups in the community seemed based on the preexisting local community's perceptions of limited temporality: “it was thought that they [the immigrants] were only going to be there for a little while and travel [elsewhere]. Then it might not make sense to build that relationship.” Viewed through Luhmann's theory, this comment can be seen to express not a doubt about the immigrant community's trustworthiness as such, but instead a concern about the durability of temporally limited relations. Indeed, this pattern applied in reverse, with migrant workers feeling reluctant to get involved in the local community because of this temporality aspect. Thus, limited time, rather than any inherent quality perceived within the community, acts as an argument for or against convening in this case.

Scholarship on the social functioning of (dis)trust in political transitions also helps explain how trust and distrust alternately underpin or undermine the governance and participation “rules” community actors can rely on – or stepping stone 2. Although much of this kind of scholarship has focused on the post-socialist context (Giordano & Kostova, 2002; Hosking, 2014; Müller, 2020; Sztompka, 2000), the theme of trust in governance institutions emerged strongly from various communities representing very different types of experiences. In all of them, the tension between the legal order and communities' real experiences identified as a key feature of societal distrust by Giordano and Kostova (2002) played an important role. In the Norwegian, Bulgarian, and Cypriot TCLs, this showed as community distrust in local and national governance institutions based on previous negative experiences: for example, workshop participants stating that the institutions were “very unreliable” or

sharing previous experiences in which similar workshop initiatives had not produced any results. In the Ålandic TCL, similarly, distrust came up as resistance toward the EU influence due to perceived “broken promises” by EU governance and imposed legislation. Conversely, in cases where preexisting relationships had functioned well and could be taken up as part of the processes in the TCL, trust played an important role in providing positive reinforcement for the governance “rules.” In Cyprus, Ireland, Spain, and Bulgaria, for example, established cooperations with municipalities, local institutions or actors embedded well in the local community helped deliver engagement even against prevailing doubt in the governance process or outcomes. As such, historic dependencies observed in each community’s recent past played an important role in shaping the presence or absence of trust (Hosking, 2014).

Finally, trust and distrust proved an important factor in the extent to which communities could build knowledge not only with each other, but also together with researchers (stepping stone 3). In Spain, where communitarian relations play a central role in capacity building to develop initiatives, past experiences of weak public administration support mean that the need for trusting relationships building on acknowledging community strengths is paramount and requires time and effort. The entrepreneurial community character at this TCL was key to the experiences of hosting the workshops in Spain.

Different “sensitivities” of inclusion

Uncertainties regarding the practical implementation of inclusion and the various nuances of its definition underscore the need to explore different sensitivities of inclusion. While inclusion can be conflated with participation, Quick and Feldman (2011) argue inclusion extends beyond participation. From their perspective, it involves access to, and equitable, participation, while also building capacity to tackle and voice issues, building “communities of practice” (Leino & Puumala, 2021; Quick & Feldman, 2011). Inclusion entails not only the inclusion of “someone” but also the inclusion of their perspectives, knowledge, values, as well as power-sharing in shaping the process and defining the content/focus of an initiative. Thus, the structure and approach of the inclusion process is a key concern.

Echoing the latter point, studies such as Edwards and Imrie (2003), Morrison et al. (2020) and Richard et al. (2020), show how the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are deeply intertwined with societal structures, encompassing everything from physical spaces to attitudes and policies. For example, individuals with disabilities often find themselves navigating a world where their inclusion is contingent upon how accommodating or restrictive societal and physical structures are (Layton & Steel, 2015). Societal structures and, by extension, the built environment, policies, or approaches are thus crucial. Drawing on these literatures and focusing on inclusion as a process to build communities and improved socio-natural relations, we structure our analysis around three aspects of inclusions: (i) inclusion of *someone* (diverse people), (ii) inclusion of *something* (diverse knowledge, perspectives and values), and (iii) *structures that enable* inclusion.

Inclusion of someone (diverse people)

Reflecting on involvement and beneficiaries from the TCLs speaks to the inclusion of *someone*, across dimensions such as age, gender, ethnicity, and language. EmpowerUs defines stakeholders broadly by viewing “users of the sea” as more than just workers present at sea, such as (often male) fishers and other offshore workers, but also less “obvious” users of the sea, for example, women and young people that are active agents of continuation and change in coastal communities (Gustavsson, 2022; Gustavsson & Solnør, 2022). An underlying issue is that the inclusion of someone necessitates taking seriously the power relations present in the community (see 3.3. and 3.4). To enable such diverse inclusion, we identify four key considerations emerging from our data analysis: networks, subjective awareness of having a stake, gatekeepers, and stakeholder fatigue.

In the TCLs, stakeholder involvement relies upon the local partner organizations that were included from the project’s outset, researchers, and their networks, as well as their preexisting knowledge of the community and its members. The Norwegian TCL and Cyprus TCL were both led by organizations and researchers that lacked a large network in the community. This necessitated more efforts to get hold of knowledge about the community. Community mapping, interviews, and researchers’ ethnographic work leveled out some of these issues. However, this requires sufficient resources and accessible means. A problem that became obvious was the limited knowledge about the situations of migrant workers in some TCLs. Along with language barriers, this made sufficient inclusion of this group difficult in several TCLs. Community mapping is crucial, as well as showing a willingness to build knowledge and to expand networks to improve the inclusion of hard-to-reach groups from the outset. There is a need to go beyond existing relations and networks to avoid mainly involving already (relatively) powerful actors and exclude less powerful or marginalized groups.

Dramatic, political, and historical events have also shaped the situation of many communities (see also 3.3 and 3.4). Some of these dimensions are not realistic to address sufficiently within the scope of processes, such as EmpowerUs, but rather belong to international and national realm. Thus, the Cypriot TCL, for example, was not involving the Turkish dimension.

Inclusion of *someone* further relates to participants’ subjectivities and their subjective awareness of having a stake. When interviewing the Åland TCL lead, they reflected upon how participation may seem daunting if someone feels like they do not have the knowledge to contribute, quoting a fisher who said “I only know about fishing cod.” Such findings highlight the importance of breaking down (knowledge) power hierarchies and to emphasize the value of multiple forms of knowing to encourage inclusion. This is especially important for hard-to-reach groups, which may include youth, elderly, migrants, women, or people with disabilities – and in the Åland case, male fishers who may feel powerless in particular contexts such as within marine governance settings or in relation to external “experts.” Working for inclusion can therefore be time-consuming and difficult when capacity and resources are limited. One aspect to consider is the use of “gatekeepers.” These can be people who recruit participants on behalf of researchers and can work as important bridges to the community (Pafi et al., 2021). While gatekeepers can enable the inclusion of someone, they also hold the power to hinder inclusion. This presents potential challenges and obstacles, where, e.g., business owners can act as

gatekeepers to exclude workers, or men act as gatekeepers to exclude women. In the Cypriot TCL, there were difficulties in involving members from one of the three communities, partly linked to one potential gatekeeper deciding not to be involved in the project.

“Stakeholder fatigue” may be an issue within long-term, complex projects, dependent on stakeholder involvement. This tendency is prevalent in several TCLs, where the stakeholders involved either had a loose interest or were already key local community organizers. One cannot assume that everyone wishes – or has the time – to be included. Tsarenko et al. (2021) discuss the often invisible but crucially important labor of migrant women in sustaining an informal community organization already struggling to deliver on a modest agenda. This reminds of researchers need to consider our ask for participation in research that may not have short-term benefits.

Inclusion of something (knowledge, perspectives, and values)

Another challenge is to go from inclusion of someone to inclusion of their knowledge, perspectives, and values in the process (*something*). Inviting a large range of stakeholders to a workshop does not automatically mean that inclusion has been achieved. For instance, the importance of including youth’s voices and perspectives was explicitly promoted in the Norwegian TCL. Still, as one of the facilitators recalled; “every time [one of the youths] started to speak, it was as if no one was listening to what she said. She did not get a voice.” In the case of the Cypriot TCL, those who spoke in the meetings were mainly community leaders and director of companies. Existing invisible structures of power can be reproduced in research and innovation settings, even when attempting to avoid it, which hinders certain subjective “somethings” (i.e. knowledge perspectives, or values) to be included even if a group – or someone – is included or represented.

Structures of inclusion

The structures of the TCLs were essential for (dis)enabling inclusion. Selecting local partnering organizations, with the capacity to act as project participants, leaders of the TCLs, and representatives of the local community, posed a challenging decision, significantly impacting the project’s future inclusivity. In some TCLs, interest organizations or formal democratic structures, such as councils, could appoint representatives for stakeholder groups. The presence of such formal structures varies greatly. In Cyprus TCL, the lack of local associations within the community created difficulties in identifying suitable representatives of the various societal actors.

For several of the TCLs, constraints in capacity and resources necessitated the designation of a representative instead of recruiting members of the actual group. Consequently, it made it challenging to define whether and when a certain group is adequately represented. This has led to reflections such as “Who possesses the authority to represent a particular identity?”

Participants reported in several TCLs that they experienced some questions or assignments difficult and complex, for example, in terms of academic language or the breadth of work to which they were asked to contribute. Complexity can also function as a barrier toward inclusion, making it less accessible to contribute and voice issues. This highlights the need to understand how potential complexity can be experienced by the local community and influence inclusion.

How do we deal with the internal power differentials within each TCL?

Power is a central element in the field of political sociology as the meaning, nature, and distribution of power and how that can affect the scope and content of governmental (but not solely) activities (Giddens, 2006). Weber's work distinguished between different types of authority, traditional, charismatic, rational-legal (Weber, 1958), while Stephen Lukes offered a three-dimensional view of power, direct and indirect power, as well as the manipulation of desires. Lukes suggests that if a person exercises power over another against that person's interests, it takes away the possibility of uncovering the true interests of this other person. There can often be dominant societal aspirations of desired ambitions for the future of coastal communities, which are linked to the dominant narratives. Hadjimichael and Delaney (2017), in their analysis of a citizens' jury-inspired deliberative workshop, highlighted the difficulties in decoupling these and thus acknowledge the difficulties in imagining a transition toward a future when the economic value of nature is not the main factor in one's choice. Even though efforts are made for a process to be pluralistic and deliberative, in some instances governance arrangements may isolate the more "radical voices" and give power to dominating discourses of economic rationality, such as the structural domination of a growth and jobs discourse (Griffin, 2007). During the second workshop in Cyprus, there was an intense conflict between representatives from the competent authorities and some local representatives which curtailed discussing elements and ideas which aimed toward more environmental protection instead of development. In other cases, for example in Bulgaria, local authorities asked to use the workshop as a platform to promote their own projects or goals, without this explicitly causing conflict; nevertheless, the internal power relation was still evident in both the request and in the perceived need to grant it.

Avelino and Wittmayer (2015) discuss the way in which power and empowerment have been treated in transition research and argued that theoretical frameworks and empirical analyses in transition studies lack precision when it comes to distinguishing between different types and levels of actors. Such precision is important in the case of this project as "leaving no one behind" is one of the fundamental principles called to address. Avelino & Whitmayer (2016) proposed a Multi-actor Perspective to address the tendency to use the category of "civil society" for everything that is not market nor government, as well as to distinguish between actors at different levels of aggregation.

In discussions regarding empowerment, power and participation, one could not ignore Arnstein's landmark article "The Ladder of Citizen Participation" (Arnstein, 1969), which aimed at highlighting the caveats of participatory practices and enable an in-depth understanding of power in decision-making. Nevertheless, the development of a more integrated, intersectional approach to radical, regenerative planning, design, and development requires further attention and lenses through the work of others, such as Meadows, Lorde, and Boggs (Walsh and Wilson, 2020). Importantly, analysis should consider elements such as specific legal and political frameworks, as well as characteristics of the supra-local deliberative sphere (Falanga and Fonseca Igor, 2021). In the context of the EmpowerUs project, it is particularly interesting to understand the power created through the political frameworks and the supra-local Blue Economy deliberative sphere which has been created across the EU. In the Cypriot TCL, marine aquaculture is quite

possibly a key actor and though not present in any of the discussions, the sector is one of the winners in the spectrum of the Blue Economy while in the Irish TCL offshore renewables hold an important place and in Bulgaria, the clear winner is tourism.

The interconnectedness between power and knowledge as put forward by French philosopher Michel Foucault has enabled our understanding into how power both makes use of and shapes knowledge and is possibly the most dominant link across the case studies. The academic lead of each TCL as the “expert” presenting the challenges identified and possible ways forward can come across in different ways depending on who the audience is. In the case of Cyprus, there was a mixed audience (technocrats, NGOs, and community members) it was somewhat difficult to ensure commonly understood terms were used. However, in the cases of Åland, Bulgaria, and Ireland, the selectivity of stakeholder group allowed for the conversation to take place a “higher” level but with less diversity.

Empowerment as a motivational construct is an element which seems to be present across TCLs, and which is also indicative of the importance of such projects and has to do with the threshold (which might have to do with trust, on one hand, or increasing knowledge on the other) where a participant, or group of participants begin realizing that they might have the agency to make a change and start becoming more engaged. A female non-Cypriot participant who became involved in the Cypriot TCL from the start felt empowered to join a local committee for her neighborhood after her attendance in the first workshop. Success stories, even small ones, can be very important in reaching this threshold.

Pre-existing tensions in the community

Both preexisting and new community relationship dynamics influenced strategies for establishing participatory processes, including different variables that workshop facilitators (researchers) had to weigh in planning and implementing the work. Considerations included awareness of possible biases, value judgments, and interests of specific social groups that could influence the course of discussions by reproducing power asymmetries. This also included consideration of strained community relationships that would hinder the dialog with the risk of jeopardizing the entire process. Some TCLs, such as Spain, convened stakeholders with known divergences and seated them at the same table based on previous experiences that exchange and cooperation would be possible. Others determined that due to the magnitude of the tension, it was necessary not to invite a specific subgroup because it could significantly compromise the dialog. Such a choice was made in Cyprus. As Skill (2010) argues, nationalism and/or territorial identities are important to environmental issues as they relate to legitimate control over natural resources (or commons) (Skill, 2010). Consequently, sociocultural, and ecological aspects need to be considered to attain a complete understanding of the trade-offs associated with conservation (Gómez et al., 2021). As it has been pointed out by Jentoft (2003), conflicts are often cultural in nature and not only interest driven. According to Folchi’s theory (1991), sometimes it is more a matter of “conflicts with environmental content” when indeed containing cultural values that are put in dispute in a negotiation process between different social groups that mask “power relations” with “environmental

concerns,” since “conflict with environmental content occurs precisely when the historical stability achieved between a community and its habitat is put under tension” (Folchi, 2001, p. 91). Jurisdictional overlaps and administrative boundaries, lack of agreements between government agencies and community expectations in management, as well as disappointment experienced with existing administrative and institutional barriers, along with the long historicity of interethnic relations of exclusion/inclusion and property relations involving territoriality and uses of coastal and maritime space, are all aspects that we find in the different TCLs. Aspects that have to do with the legitimate control, use, and management of natural resources that bring into play intra-community tensions and conflicts.

Along with these preexisting community relations, new dynamics of tension have been detected emerging in all TCLs at the intersection of new blue economy development, conservationist, and energy transition projects to meet political agendas on sustainability in climate change mitigation and the EU’s Green Deal implementation. The potential of marine resources entered as an almost ubiquitous discourse of the “blue economy” as part of the international agenda in the last decade (Barbesgaard, 2017; Silver et al., 2015; Winder & Le Heron 2017) producing conflicting policy discourses which are themselves linked to conflicting economic and ecological objectives and priorities. These are in essence outcomes of the inherent mismatches between the blue economy and conservation objectives. Many of these initiatives – offshore wind farms, aquaculture, recreational marine activities, and even the establishment of marine protected areas and Natura2000 Network areas – become controversial. They exacerbate uncertainties around marine spatial planning, governance, potential ecological impacts, and impacts on coastal communities and their livelihoods. This is catalyzed as the fear of losing identity and cultural heritage calling into question the coastal future.

The enclosure, industrialization and gentrification processes produce intersectoral competition and tensions between social actors in the social and economic fabric of coastal communities (Ounanian & Howells 2024). This is seen in the cases of Ireland, Norway, Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Spain where trade-offs between job creation, infrastructure, and socio-economic benefits with conservationism goals put into question conceptions of growth, blue economy, and development. Both the tensions rooted in historical interethnic relations and those latent in the newly developing economic forces are reflected in the dynamics of community relations. The lack of dialog, possible misunderstandings, and absence of understanding and agreements in Cyprus and Bulgaria showed dyadic relationship networks of trust and complicity that had to be taken into account in the representation of participatory processes.

Overall, the TCLs experiences support the “theory of agonism” (Mouffe, 2013) which argues that, despite conflicts, attention should be paid to the divergence of interests through establishing a relationship of priorities and finding common ground, which would guarantee the democratic process in decision-making. Contrary to consensus theories, also called “good governance” approaches (MacDonald et al., 2016) which state that under consensus there is trust, support, and collaboration that allows for win–win outcomes to be produced. The local stakeholders in the Åland TCL have a deep tradition of close relations with their governmental agencies where deliberative communication creates a common ground of trust. Lessons learnt from workshops point out that deliberative processes aligned with the ideals of good governance can reproduce

inequities between social groups given the impossibility of reaching total consensus, which nevertheless may produce winners and losers, excluded and included (Porter, 2011) without reaching out a completed involvement of communities in decision-making.

Findings from the experience of participatory processes in different TCLs suggest that the processes require and are reinforced by multiple and divergent narratives that need not be reconciled in line with the “agonistic pluralism.” Under this perspective, the citizen is a provider of complementary views and a legitimate adversary rather than a communicatively rational actor in search of consensus (Mouffe, 2013).

Co-creation of intervention

The strength of adopting a co-creation approach is that it enables an understanding of problems and potential solutions that would not be developed independently by either the researchers or the community (Utter et al., 2021). The co-creative approach seeks to go beyond the typical dialogical approach, where the focus is on developing a conversation between researchers and research subjects (Beebeejaun et al., 2015), toward transformative forms of research which engage “the researched at the problem definition stage and to actively alter the social conditions in which they find themselves” (Robinson & Tansey, 2006, p. 152). To facilitate transformative research, non-academic participants must be involved in most or all stages of the research, from formulating specific research questions and defining the problem to be addressed, to implementing and evaluating solutions (Simpson & Seibold, 2008).

Co-creating transformative research in the EmpowerUs project focused on the development of pilot interventions that would be implemented over the second half of the project. The involvement of non-academic local partner organizations was key to developing implementable and locally attuned pilot interventions. The co-creation process enables the development of interventions that meet the interests and needs of both the research team and the community (Lam et al., 2020). However, conducting research in this way comes with several challenges. In the EmpowerUs project, co-creating pilot interventions required attention to several interrelated issues including problem and solution framing, and engagement in the creation and implementation of the intervention.

To be successful, co-created research must develop a common understanding among an array of actors about the problem to be addressed and the best possible solution (Simpson & Seibold, 2008). The framing of environmental or social issues to be addressed by an intervention will be largely determined by community members’ situational interests (Buchecker et al., 2023). Developing a common understanding of the problem to be addressed across the different members of a community and the research team is essential. In our project, developing a common understanding of problems was an iterative process of engaging with non-academic partners, including before the project commenced, and with their constituent communities. Therefore, the recruitment of non-academic partners during the drafting of the EmpowerUs project proposal somewhat determined both the local communities we would engage with and the problems within these communities that we would seek to address. While some EmpowerUs non-academic organizations have very wide remits, others have narrower foci and the problems the project focused on had to align with their remit and needs. For example, building on previous research in the TCL area, academic leads recruited the local non-

academic partner and, while writing the proposal, agreed that the problem to be addressed would align with this local organization's social enterprise strategy.

The very early inclusion of specific non-academic partners in the research process created a potential tension in our approach, which wanted to be broad and engaging while also working with and through these partners. Although each local non-academic partner's remit allowed a wide range of issues to be problematized, they had to be problematized within their scope to address them. For example, coastal tourism pressure was recognized as a potential problem across the TCLs. However, the ways that this could be addressed through a social intervention differed greatly due to the different competencies of our non-academic partners, ranging from information campaigns in Bulgaria, to a strategic development plan development in Cyprus, a digital platform engaging communities and visitors with marine cultural heritage in Spain to a "State of Fisheries" report on Åland, to the development of new tourism products via social enterprises in Ireland.

It was important, therefore, for the broader community to be made aware of the fact that the scope of problems to be addressed through the interventions we were developing was partly defined by the remit of our non-academic partners. Doing this was also important in terms of preserving the non-academic partner's credibility with the local community. We dealt with the issue of alignment with the non-academic partners' remits over the course of our two community workshops. Each TCL adopted slightly different approaches, depending on their previous research in the TCL areas, the role of the non-academic partners in recruiting workshop participants, and how tightly the scope of their TCL problem had been defined in the proposal writing stage. Broadly, the first workshop acted as a scoping workshop, where community members were tasked with outlining the range of local problems – with some TCLs using the competency of the non-academic partner to put some parameters on the scope of problems to be addressed. The problems raised in workshop 1 ranged from environmental concerns, such as pressures on the coastal ecosystem from increased urbanization, development, and climate change to social and economic issues, such as employment opportunities, housing crises, poor transportation, and the potential loss of cultural heritage. The TCL teams then developed potential interventions to address the issues that were prioritized during workshop 1, paying close attention to how they would align with the competency of the local non-academic partner.

Workshop 2 focused on further narrowing down the problem to be addressed and the interventions to be implemented. Given the pilot nature of these interventions, we were also interested in mapping out initial ideas on how they might be scaled or replicated if they were successful. To achieve these criteria, the TCL teams had to consider how their pilot intervention empowered communities, either by addressing structural or agency issues in the community, how it aligned with the non-academic partner's remit, and briefly outline scaling and replication opportunities. The final pilot interventions include the following: the development of an ecotourism, citizen science, and ocean literacy initiative (Bulgaria); coastal master planning (Cyprus); a combination of enhancing the awareness of local fisheries, nature preservation and local fisheries traditions (Åland); a social enterprise support program (Ireland); enhancing transport and connectivity for remote communities (Norway); and developing cross-sectoral collaboration and solidarity among coastal communities for environmental protection (MPA) via a WebApp (Spain).

While inclusion of local non-academic partners in the project enabled the project to have a high degree of local legitimacy and to build on existing community networks,

there was a risk that the local partners could act, whether deliberately or by accident, as a negative gatekeeper. For example, they might influence the research process by presenting local conditions in a way that is favorable to their own agenda or only recruit preferred community members to participate in the project (Sixsmith et al., 2003) or continuously recruit the same participants for research projects, preventing a diverse understanding of the community (S Sanghera & Thapar-Bjorkert, 2008) or to participant fatigue. One way of countering the possibility of the non-academic partners negatively impacting the research project's engagement strategy is to go beyond relying on gatekeepers to understand the community and for the researchers to immerse themselves in the community and contribute to the community (Sixsmith et al., 2003). EmpowerUs researchers did several things to approximate the ideal conditions by undertaking a stakeholder analysis early in the project (all TCLs), building our own legitimacy through site visits (Ireland, Bulgaria, Cyprus) and our own networks as long-term researchers in the area (Spain), by having public launches of the project (Bulgaria), by living in the community and volunteering for local events (Norway), advertising and giving media focus in the local media (Åland), and through institutional ethical approval processes that mandated robust and transparent recruitment strategies.

Discussion

Each section has generated several takeaways that can be used by others who aim for collaboration informed by principles of empowerment, co-creation, transition, and justice as illustrated in Figure 2. As the analysis took shape, we could identify issues at stake across all the stepping stones. These are noted in the arrow bridging the three stepping stones in Figure 2 and include the following: Pre-existing relationship with community; Links between power, knowledge and action; Competing economic/environmental rationalities. All these themes further unfold into experiences in one or more phases of the work and have been color-coded in Figure 2 to draw attention to the patterns of challenges that must be given adequate attention and recognition to set up the conditions for the cycle of empowered community illustrated in Figure 2 to take hold. Core reflections for these are included below.

As noted earlier in the paper, trust and/or lack of trust is important for work focusing on societies in transition. While empowerment and co-production cannot be brought in "from above," collaborating in a way that aims for such principles must rely on building trusting relationships with communities and honoring existing initiatives and ideas. To do so entails many challenges including those tied to time. Preexisting local community's perceptions of the limited temporality of migrant workers for example as well as new arrivals in communities that may not stay clearly impact the motivation for inviting into a trusting relationship of co-creation. The theme of trust in governance institutions emerged strongly from various communities representing where community distrust in local and national governance institutions based on previous negative experiences influenced the work. Focusing on trust meant prioritizing preexisting relationships both to ensure that we would mitigate the risk of "extracting knowledge" from community partners without returning value to them but also to minimize brewing conflicts that might derail the core purpose of the research project. Recognizing the way our work is shaped by community members' preexisting relationships with each other, with

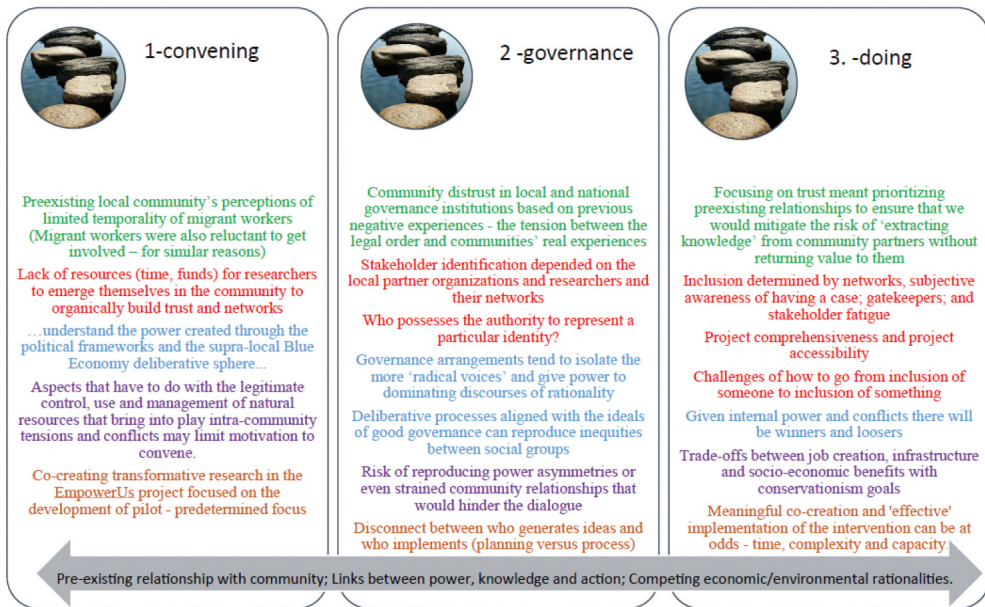


Figure 2. Lessons learned by stepping stones and color coded in themes from analysis; trust (1); inclusion (2); tensions (3); internal power (4); intervention (5).

governance institutions, and with researchers who may have been in the area before is a critical lesson. Trust is also impacted by existing, sometimes deep and historic, tensions that we experienced and observed as a risk of reproducing power asymmetries or that our attempts at inclusion might even strain community relationships further. As noted earlier, inclusion entails not only inclusion of "someone" but the inclusion of their perspectives, knowledge and values as well as power-sharing in shaping the process and defining the content/focus of an initiative. As we moved through the different phases of the work each of these became visible in the form of barriers tied with snowballing from existing relationships, lack of time and resources to truly build new relationships, language barriers and the fact that predetermined broad scopes of work may have already pre-selected interest groups. The implications of relying heavily on (relatively) powerful actors and failing in attracting less powerful or marginalized groups includes a risk of projects with aims of empowerment and justice instead results in reinforcing longstanding injustices. It is therefore critical to acknowledge the difference between the different elements of the concept of inclusion. In our project the reflection interviews were helpful to uncover our own uncertainties about how well we were able to facilitate better inclusion by considering local power dynamics and implicit biases to work toward meaningful inclusion of diverse voices. A difficult but significant element of such reflections is that a research project cannot solve longstanding local conflicts but that we at a minimum must acknowledge them. A core example of this includes the struggles in the Cypriot TCL where Turkish perspectives were largely absent. This further exemplifies how context dependent the notion of "hard to reach" groups may be and therefore push the need for time for "getting to know" a community and that time is needed if ambitious goals such as "leaving no one behind" means more than representation by leadership. Awareness of

how history, governance, and culture may establish gates (with a variety of different kinds of gate keeper such as business owners that may exclude migrant workers or men who exclude women) that researcher with the best of intension will struggle to open requires rethinking processes of collaborative knowledge generation. This could be addressed by hosting separate events or using alternative methods of participation to allow for adding local knowledge in different ways. As mentioned earlier, complexity can function as a barrier toward true inclusion, making it less accessible for some and “easy” to control for others who may have experience, education, and connections. For these types of problems, more creative methods such as photovoice (a method that was added to our project at a later stage) may be considered.

Selecting local partnering organizations, with the capacity to act as project participant, leader of the TCLs, and representative of the local community, posed a challenging decision, significantly impacting the project’s future inclusivity as these organizations naturally became gatekeepers to varying degrees. Gatekeeping can involve both the who and the what of a process. And as mentioned earlier, power impacts in ways that tend to isolate the more “radical voices” and give power to dominating discourses of rationality, such as the structural domination of a growth and jobs discourse (Griffin, 2007), leaving less dominant voices unheard and/or uninvited. Linked to the challenge of marginalized voices is the difficult balance of a research project such as EmpowerUs to strike the balance of project comprehensiveness and project outcomes, highlighting the need to understand how potential complexity can be experienced by the local community, as excluding the local knowledge. To understand the power created through political frameworks, we acknowledge the supra-local spheres of Blue Economy and renewable energy, where power positions these sectors strongly relative to an environmental protection driven rationality. In the EmpowerUs project, co-creating pilot interventions as the critical action in stepping stone 3 required attention to several interrelated issues closely tied with the above and ultimately centering on including problem and solution framing of the intervention, which to some degree will always result in winners and losers.

Conclusion

Summing up mid-project reflections, this paper provides ample opportunity to share lessons learned about the overarching principles of partnership-, co-creation-, transition-, and justice. While our observations on trust support literature that talks about local capacity or readiness for partnership (Hyde et al., 2012), we have also been reflecting on this in terms of the risk of leaving behind those who need partnership the most if this is the only approach we use (de Hernandez et al., 2021; Morrell et al., 2015). Focusing on trust meant prioritizing preexisting relationships to ensure that we would mitigate the risk of “extracting knowledge” from community partners without returning value to them (Ferman & Hill, 2004; Sorensen & Lawson, 2012). With this in mind, we continue into the next phases of the partnership with the challenge of balancing these needs. Similarly, our work on highlighting how inclusion goes beyond participating, encompassing the meaningful incorporation of individual perspectives, knowledge, values, and experiences, we reflect on overarching, but challenging, ambition of creating arenas of inclusion, which requires more than inviting people to the table. As we move forward, we must continue to consider structures, acknowledging power dynamics, implicit biases, and institutional

practices that facilitate or stand in the way of meaningful inclusion of diverse voices. As we enter into the next phases of the collaboration, these lessons learned will continue to influence our work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Funded by the European Union under the Horizon Europe Program, Grant No. [101059957] (EmpowerUs).

ORCID

Janni Sørensen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9896-4347>

References

- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35 (4), 216–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>
- Avelino, F., & Wittmayer, J. M. (2015). Shifting power relations in sustainability transitions: A multi-actor perspective. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 18(5), 628–649. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2015.1112259>
- Barbesgaard, M. (2017). Blue growth: Savior or ocean grabbing?. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45(1), 130–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1377186>
- Beebejaun, Y., Durose, C., Rees, J., Richardson, J., & Richardson, L. (2015). Public harm or public value? Towards coproduction in research with communities. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 33(3), 552–565. <https://doi.org/10.1068/c12116>
- Buchecker, M., Fankhauser, M., & Gaus, R. (2023). Finding shared solutions in landscape or natural resource management through social learning: A quasi-experimental evaluation in an Alpine region. *Landscape Ecology*, 38(12), 4117–4137. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10980-021-01274-y>
- Crowe, S., Cresswell, K., & Robertson, A. (2011). The case study approach. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 11, 100. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-11-100>
- de Hernandez, B., Schuch, C., Sorensen, J., & Smith, H. (2021). Sustaining CBPR projects: Lessons learned developing latina community groups. *Collaborations: A Journal of community-Based Research and Practice*, 4(1(6)). <https://doi.org/10.33596/coll.69>
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- De Oliveira, B. (2023). Participatory action research as a research approach: Advantages, limitations and criticisms. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 23(3), 287–297. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-08-2022-0101>
- Edwards, C., & Imrie, R. (2003). Disability and bodies as bearers of value. *Sociology*, 37(2), 239–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038503037002002>
- EmpowerUs. (2023). <https://empowerus-project.eu/transition-coastal-labs>
- Falanga, R., & Fonseca Igor, F. (2021). The scaling-up of participatory budgeting. Insights from Brazil and Portugal. In M. Lauria & C. S. Schotterback (Eds.), *Learning from Arnstein's Ladder* (pp. 35–49). Routledge.
- Ferman, B., & Hill, T. L. (2004). The challenges of agenda conflict in higher-education-community research partnerships: Views from the community side. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 26(2), 241–257. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0735-2166.2004.00199.x>

- Flannery, W., Murtagh, B., & Miller, A. (2024). Deliverable 2.1 community governance audit. *Zenodo*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14193408>
- Folchi, M. (2001). Conflictos de contenido ambiental y ecologismo de los pobres: no siempre pobres, ni siempre ecologistas. *Ecología Política*, (22), 79–100.
- Giddens, A. (2006). Fate, risk and security. In *The sociology of risk and gambling reader* (pp. 37–67). Routledge.
- Giordano, C., & Kostova, D. (2002). The social production of mistrust. In C. M. Hann (Ed.), *Postsocialism: Ideals, ideologies and practices in Eurasia* (pp. 74–91). Routledge.
- Gómez, S., Carreño, A., & Lloret, J. (2021). Cultural heritage and environmental ethical values in governance models: Conflicts between recreational fisheries and other maritime users in Mediterranean marine protected areas. *Marine Policy*, 129, 104529. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2021.104529>
- Gómez, S., & Köpsel, V. (2022). Towards a new culture reflexive and diverse marine transdisciplinarity. In S. Gómez & V. Köpsel (Eds.), *Transdisciplinary marine research* (pp. 271–284). Bridging Science and Society. Routledge.
- Gómez, S., & Maynou, F. (2021). Balancing ecology, economy and culture in fisheries policy: Participatory research in the western Mediterranean demersal fisheries management plan. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 291, 112728. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2021.112728>
- Greenwood, D. J., Whyte, W. F., & Harkavy, I. (1993). Participatory action research as a process and as a goal. *Human Relations*, 46(2), 175–192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872679304600203>
- Griffin, L. (2007). All aboard: Power, participation and governance in the North sea regional advisory council. *International Journal of Green Economics*, 1(3–4). <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJGE.2007.013073>
- Gustavsson, M. (2022). Women's belongings in UK fisheries. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 29(12), 1694–1711. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2021.1873748>
- Gustavsson, M., & Solnør, S. (2022). *Gender, equality and diversity plan*. Deliverable 1.1. EmpowerUs.
- Hadjimichael, M., & Delaney, A. (2017). Forming perceptions and the limits to public participation on ocean commons. *International Journal of the Commons*, 11(1), 200–219. <https://doi.org/10.18352/ijc.693>
- Hosking, G. (2014). *Trust: A history*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198712381.001.0001>
- Hyde, C. A., Hopkins, K., & Meyer, M. (2012). Pre-capacity building in loosely-coupled collaborations: Setting the stage for future initiatives. *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement*, 5, 76–987. <https://doi.org/10.5130/ijcre.v5i0.2382>
- Jentoft, S. (2003). Introduction. In D. C. Wilson, J. R. Nielsen, & P. Degnbol (Eds.), *The fisheries Co-management experience*, fish and fisheries series (Vol. 26, pp. 1–14). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-3323-6_1
- Kramer, R. M. (1999). Trust and distrust in organizations: Emerging perspectives, enduring questions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 50(1), 569–598. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.50.1.569>
- Lam, D. P., Horcea-Milcu, A. I., Fischer, J., Peukert, D., & Lang, D. J. (2020). Three principles for co-designing sustainability intervention strategies: Experiences from Southern Transylvania. *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment*, 49(9), 1451–1465. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-019-01302-x>
- Layton, N. A., & Steel, E. J. (2015). “An environment built to include rather than exclude me”: Creating inclusive environments for human well-being. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 12(9), 11146–11162. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph120911146>
- Leino, H., & Puumala, E. (2021). What can co-creation do for the citizens? Applying co-creation for the promotion of participation in cities. *Environment & Planning C Politics & Space*, 39(4), 781–799. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654420957337>
- Lindberg, M. R. (2022). Transitions for people: Locating inequality in sustainable urban mobility transitions. *Aalborg Universitetsforlag*. <https://doi.org/10.54337/aau521482687>
- Luhmann, N. (1979). *Trust and Power*. John Wiley & Sons.

- Luleva, A. (2021). *Култура на (не)доверието в България: Антропологични перспективи (The Culture of (Dis)Trust in Bulgaria: Anthropological Perspectives)*, Izdatelska kúshtha. "Gutenberg" Publishing House.
- MacDonald, B. H., Soomai, S. S., De Santo, E. M., & Wells, P. G. (Eds.). (2016). *Science, information, and policy interface for effective coastal and ocean management* (1st ed.). CRC Press. <https://doi.org/10.1201/b21483>
- Morrell, E., Sørensen, J., & Howarth, T. (2015). The Charlotte action research Project: A Model for direct and mutually beneficial community engagement at universities. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 19(1), 105–132.
- Morrison, C. A., Woodbury, E., Johnston, L., & Longhurst, R. (2020). Disabled people's embodied and emotional geographies of (not)belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Health & Place*, 62, 102283. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2020.102283>
- Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. Verso.
- Müller, M. (2020, May 26). In search of the global east: Thinking between North and south. *Geopolitics*, 25(3), 734–755. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1477757>
- Ounanian, K., & Howells, M. (2024). Deconstructing and resisting coastal displacement: A research agenda. *Progress in Human Geography*, 48(5), 636–654. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325241240581>
- Pafi, M., Flannery, W., & Murtagh, B. (2021). Imagining the coast: A mixed methods approach to elicit perceptions and conflicts on the west coast of Ireland. In M. Gustavsson, C. White, J. Phillipson, & K. Ounanian (Eds.), *Researching people and the sea: Methodologies and traditions* (pp. 259–284). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59601-9_12.
- Porter, L. (2011). The point is to change it. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 12(4), 477–480. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2011.626296>
- Project overview. (2023). *EmpowerUs*. <https://empowerus-project.eu/project-overview/>
- Quick, K. S., & Feldman, M. S. (2011). Distinguishing participation and inclusion. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 31(3), 272–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X11410979>
- Richard, R., Perera, E., & Le Roux, N. (2020). The bodily experience of disabled athletes. A phenomenological study of powerchair football. *Sport in Society*, 23(7), 1186–1201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2019.1609948>
- Robinson, J., & Tansey, J. (2006). Co-production, emergent properties and strong interactive social research: The Georgia basin futures project. *Science and Public Policy*, 33(2), 151–160. <https://doi.org/10.3152/147154306781779064>
- Silver, J. J., Gray, N. J., Campbell, L. M., Fairbanks, L. W., & Gruby, R. L. (2015). Blue economy and competing discourses in international oceans governance. *Journal of Environment & Development*, 24(2), 135–160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107049651558079>
- Simpson, J. L., & Seibold, D. R. (2008). Practical engagements and co-created research. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 36(3), 266–280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880802172285>
- Sixsmith, J., Boneham, M., & Goldring, J. E. (2003). Accessing the community: Gaining insider perspectives from the outside. *Qualitative Health Research*, 13(4), 578–589. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732302250759>
- Skill, K. (2010). Investigar problemas ambientales en antropología social pertinencia social y científica: una aproximación al campo. *Ava No 18* · Diciembre 2010.
- Skipper, Y., & Pepler, D. J. (2021). Knowledge mobilization: Stepping into interdependent and relational space using co-creation. *Action Research*, 19(3), 588–605. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750320960810>
- Sorensen, J., & Lawson, L. (2012). Evolution in partnership: Lessons from the east st louis action research project. *Action Research*, 10(2), 150–169. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750311424944>
- S Sanghera, G., & Thapar-Bjorkert, S. (2008). Methodological dilemmas: Gatekeepers and positionality in Bradford. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31(3), 543–562. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701491952>
- Sztompka, P. (2000). *Trust: A sociological theory*. Cambridge University Press.

- Tsarenko, Y., Cruz, A. G. B., Snuggs, E., & Tojib, D. (2021). Institutional work by migrant women leaders in precarious spaces of volunteering in Melbourne, Australia. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 29 (5), 693–714. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2021.1951678>
- Utter, A., White, A., Méndez, V. E., & Morris, K. (2021). Co-creation of knowledge in agroecology. *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene*, 9(1), 00026. <https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.2021.00026>
- Van Assche, K., Hornidge, A.-K., Schlüter, A., & Vaidianu, N. (2020). Governance and the coastal condition: Towards new modes of observation, adaptation and integration. *Marine Policy*, 112, 103413. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2019.01.002>
- Walsh, E., & Wilson, B. B. (2020). Learning from Arnstein, Meadows, Boggs, and Lorde: Propositions on building collective power for climate justice and resilience. In M. Lauria & C. Slotterback (Eds.), *Learning from Arnstein's ladder: From citizen participation to public engagement* (pp. 168–188). Routledge.
- Weber, M. (1958). The three types of legitimate rule. *Berkeley Publications in Society and Institutions*, 4 (1), 1–11.
- Winder, G. M., & Le Heron, R. (2017). Assembling a Blue Economy moment? Geographic engagement with globalizing biological-economic relations in multi-use marine environments. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 7(1), 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820617691643>