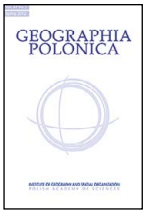

Geographia Polonica
2025, Volume 98, Issue 3, pp. 325-338
https://doi.org/10.7163/GPol.0305

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WHY DO PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES FAIL? ADVANCING SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE EUROPEAN ARCTIC

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Abstract

This article explores how participatory approaches and transnational cooperation can be advanced to advance multi-level governance in pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals, focusing on SDG 11 "Sustainable cities and communities". Based on qualitative research in Finland and Sweden we show that participatory approaches fail due to a lack of administrative capacity, path dependencies, societal conflicts and power asymmetries between the actors involved, which limit the transformative scope and legitimacy of policies. We argue that central governments in particular need to take more responsibility, provide more guidance and invest in capacity building and community empowerment at the local level.

Keywords

participation • multi-level governance • transnational cooperation • sustainable urban development • European Arctic • Nordic model • Finland • Sweden • cities • urban planning

Introduction

Continuous multiple crises affect international cooperation and the pursuit of the global goals. Progress in global climate policy is slow and in view of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the "international community has seen a reversal in progress" (Kranholdt, 2022). One important lever to limit the intensification of the climate crisis is to develop urban spaces more "sustainably"[1], as acknowledged in global agreements like the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities). Particularly regions that already experience a strong urbanization trend and are of unique importance in the global climate system are encouraged to build up city environments that match with the global goals adopted in 2015 (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2017). At the national level, however, pursuing the global goals seems more complicated. Diminishing trust in expert knowledge and growing populism in democratic systems but also annulments of contested policies in courts challenge the envisioned transformations (Keskitalo et al., 2023). Moreover, at the local level, the SDGs often seem distant from the everyday challenges of municipalities.

While in the context of city development, there is consensus among researchers and practitioners that citizens need to be actively engaged in planning processes to improve urban livelihoods (Fung, 2015), empirical evidence suggests that the participation of citizens – even if envisioned – is often symbolic. Instead, urban planning is often shaped by technocratic visions (Grossi & Pianezzi, 2017; Kitchin et al., 2019; Dybtsyna & Aleksandrov, 2020; Hollands, 2020). To advance the integration of the global targets at the local level, it is thus crucial to trace why participatory approaches fail and how urban planning can improve towards a more citizen-focused approach.

In this article, we address this knowledge gap by focusing particularly on urban spaces that are located in the European Arctic. The Arctic regions are unique in their exposure to climate change.[2] Our analysis thus excludes a lack of awareness as a reason for the difficulties to advance the implementation of SDG 11. Moreover, we focus on urban areas in stable democratic countries, as in fragile states and in regions suffering from high poverty rates and war intervening factors complicate the implementation of profound changes. In our analysis of how the global goals agreed upon in 2015 guide local development, we concentrate specifically on Sweden and Finland. Both countries rely on similar governance structures and the municipalities under investigation experience analogous development challenges. Both witnessed significant demographic change over the last two decades and large economic activities and related infrastructure measures are planned in the near future.

In the section that follows, we first introduce the concepts that determine how local perspectives feed into governance processes. Then, we focus on the municipalities under analysis, Kolari and Kiruna, and scrutinize challenges and potential avenues for advancing participation in urban planning. Lastly, we discuss our findings in the context of the ongoing debate of democratising sustainability transformations in global governance research.

Pursuing sustainable urban development: The interplay of the Nordic model, participation and urban planning

The Nordic countries Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden are known to have strong democratic systems. They apply a similar model to organize central and local

[1] While priorities ascribed to sustainable development differ, sustainable development is envisioned as advancing the quality of life in one place by avoiding harm for future generations (WCED, 1987) and for people elsewhere.

[2] The Arctic is warming four times faster than the rest of the world (Rantanen, 2022).

administrations and decision-making, which is known as the Nordic Model[3]. At the central level, all countries are parliamentary states, with multi-party systems and coalition governments that follow a consensual style in policy-making (Painter & Peters, 2010; Greve et al., 2016a). The central administrative apparatus is professional and non-politicized. At the local level, most governments have a dual structure (except for Finland[4] and Iceland) that consists of regions and municipalities (Tab. 1). Both levels are responsible for a wide range of services including health, education, child and elderly care, spatial planning, and environmental protection (Haveri, 2015). In this context, local governments are often labelled as service providers or facilitators of social welfare provision (Stoker, 2011).

Public participation is an important pillar of the Nordic Model. According to the principle of network governance[5] (Andreasson, 2017), local governments have to incorporate actors and stakeholders, coming from public, private, and societal sectors into decision-making process (Torfing et al., 2012; Sorensen, 2022). However, despite the participative and deliberative turn in many European democracies, in the Nordic states representative democracy is still at the heart of decision-making. Empirical evidence also indicates that in all Nordic countries professional expertise is prioritized over common knowledge of "ordinary citizens" (Radzik-Maruszak, 2019). The latter are more portrayed as service users than genuine stakeholders in policy-making processes, which also limits the social inclusiveness in processes of local level strategic planning for urban development (ibidem).

While participation is mandatory for spatial planning in the Nordic countries, there are multiple approaches and tools to ensure engagement. Participatory processes are used at different times, at different stages of the policy cycle and for different purposes and the participatory engagement of citizens thus highly depends on how participatory processes are organised and designed. In this way, Nordic scholars also highlighted that it is important to assess "the democratic values that are honoured in these experiments and those that are not" (Nyseth et al., 2019: 15), as there is a risk that some tools are channels for "those who scream the loudest" (Bjørnå et al. 2022: 6). Moreover, it is not always transparent who qualifies as a stakeholder in participatory processes and who does not (Blühdorn & Deflorian, 2019). Therefore, even in Nordic countries there are tensions between the idea of participation and its practice.

Other inconsistencies within the Nordic Model are visible in regard to how sustainable development (SD) is approached (Wehrmann et al., 2022). The latter applies to many areas of Nordic local authorities' activity such as planning, development, tourism or education (Kristjánsdóttir, 2017; Øian et. al., 2018). National support initiatives developed by the central governments shall support the integration of the SDGs and related national priorities at the local level. When it comes to urban development, which relates specifically to spatial planning and land-use, however, "many responsibilities lie with the municipalities" (Huynh, et. al. 2022: 5) as these units are responsible for organizing participatory processes. The extent to which urban development projects are socially inclusive is thus decided upon at the local level and ideally, local planning processes are designed

[3] The Nordic model is widely regarded as a benchmark as Northern countries succeed e.g., in education, social policy as well as in economy and labour market. The states have also own administrative solutions based on such values as rule of law, equality, inclusion and transparency (Greve et al., 2016b).

[4] In Finland there are 19 Regional Councils (18 in the mainland) whose members are however appointed by municipalities located in the region. The councils have two main functions laid down by law, regional development and regional land use planning (see more Regional Councils, 2023).

[5] In contrast to the traditional representative democracy chain of command, network governance emphasizes the existence of formal and informal linkages in the shape of institutionalised networks between 'the State' and other actors. These new institutionalised linkages are the result of increasing interdependences between various actors, as well as an increasing complexity both in the problems of society and in the understanding of them (Löfgren and Ringholm 2009, 507).

Table 1. Administrative structure of Finland and Sweden (on 1 May 2025)

State: territorial model	National level (main institutions)	Regions (original name and number of entities)	Municipalities (original name and number of entities)
Finland: centralised unitary state	President, parliament, government, ministries and central agencies	maakunta, 18 + the autonomous region of Åland Islands	kunta, 308
Sweden: centralised unitary state	Monarch, parliament, government, ministeries and central agencies	region, 21	kommune, 290

Sources: Purkarthofer & Mattila (2023), Schmitt (2023), Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner (2024), Suomen Kuntaliitto (2025).

to facilitate knowledge exchanges and learning. Respective knowledge platforms that recognize unequal power relations (Shawoo & Thornton, 2019) and facilitate knowledge exchanges in a trustful atmosphere are seen as supporting the sharing of information and the co-creation of development plans that match the interests of those affected (Newig, 2019). Institutionalizing participation in knowledge platforms, however, requires a careful set-up to avoid the perpetuation of established authorities, as "[d]esign choices affect whose and which knowledge claims are represented as true and relevant" (Esguerra & van der Hel, 2021).

In the Nordic countries, however, it is often not specified how participatory processes inform development plans (Nyseth et. al., 2019). Moreover, development plans can be created by public authorities but also by private developers and entrepreneurs. The interpretation of participation may differ among these actors as illustrated by the different participatory concepts applied (Forbes & Colella, 2019). Additionally, development plans cover different content. They may address spatial planning but do not necessarily relate to industrial development. The scope of these plans thus already impacts the potential say of citizens in planning processes. Returning to the inconsistencies within the Nordic Model, the different planning approaches thus enforce differences between urban and rural communities and "throw the Nordic egalitarian ideals into question" (Johansson et al., 2022).

Case description and methodology

In our research, we investigated two municipalities that experience significant societal and infrastructural changes predominantly driven by environmental change and contested economic activities: Kiruna in Sweden and Kolari in Finland. Kiruna is a multi-cultural municipality with Sámi, Finnish and Swedish-speaking citizens located in Sweden's northernmost and largest municipality of the same name. The municipality is home to the world's largest iron ore mine, which was opened in 1890 by the state-owned industrial corporation LKAB. To this day, LKAB is the biggest employer in the municipality (Tepecik Dis & Karimnia, 2021). The transformation of the city is intertwined with LKAB's development: While the mine is perceived as ensuring prosperity and providing services for Kiruna's residents, LKAB's expansion requires the relocation of Kiruna. This urban transformation leads to a quite paradoxical situation: "the city cannot be where the mine is but without the mine, the city cannot exist" (Mattsson & Götze, 2022). By 2035, approximately 6,000 residents will have moved to new houses and town buildings. The so-called built heritage of Kiruna, such as the town hall, were already demolished and newly built (Nikiel, 2021). At the beginning of Sweden's EU Presidency in January 2023, LKAB announced the discovery of Europe's so far largest known rare earths

deposit in this area (LKAB, 2023). The discovery was framed as an important contribution to the implementation of the European Green Deal, which will affect the land use in the region. In addition to the mine, Kiruna is also known as "number one tourist destination in northern Sweden" (Kiruna Kommun, 2022).

Similar to Kiruna, Kolari is a large but sparsely populated municipality with 3,800 inhabitants living in 16 villages. The municipality is located in Finnish Lapland and was originally inhabited only by Sámi people. The Ylläs area in Kolari's North has developed towards a tourist area, hosting one of Finland's most popular ski resorts and the Pallas-Yllästunturi National Park. Closer to Kolari's center, in Hannukainen village there is an iron-gold-copper mine. Mining was operated in the Hannukainen Mine from 1969 until 1989. Currently, the mine is closed but there are plans to reopen it by the Tapojärvi Company and to start ore production again in 2026 (Björkman, 2022). The reopening of the mine rises various emotions. On the one hand, the mine is considered crucial for local development and for service provision. Particularly the reconstruction of the railway would improve the municipalities' accessibility. On the other hand, the mine is expected to intensify societal challenges: it will provide employment opportunities, but most employees will be seasonal workers from distant places who likely move to Kolari only temporarily for work purposes and without their families. Thus, they will not help the municipality to diversify and to reverse the demographic trend. There are also concerns that the mine will attract a certain type of people with macho attitudes (see the concept of male periphery, Segerstedt, 2020) that do not match the current picture of this Lappish area (Ekenberg, 2008). Mostly, however, it is feared that the mine may have negative effects on the environment and on tourism in Kolari's North.

Our analysis is based on desk research and on 18 semi-structured interviews, that were conducted in English (virtually and in-person) between August 2021 and November 2022. We used purposive sampling and snowballing to reach key informants (citizens, politicians, researchers, representatives from town administrations, businesses and NGOs) who hold special knowledge on Kiruna and Kolari. Interviews, in general, lasted 45 to 60 minutes and consisted of questions about the meaning and practices of sustainable development. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analyzed by using the software MAXQDA. Additionally, the research team conducted research visits and place observations in both municipalities.

Why does participation across governance levels fail? Challenges and potential avenues for policy-alignment in Kiruna and Kolari

In our analysis of why the global goals agreed upon in 2015 do not seem to guide local development and why participation across governance levels fails, we first explore how the concept of "sustainable development" is addressed by local governments and citizens in Kiruna and Kolari in the context of spatial planning. Second, we investigate to what extent Kiruna's and Kolari's local governments apply participatory approaches in urban development planning to identify how local challenges hinder the implementation of the global goals. Lastly, we discuss how knowledge platforms may facilitate local governments to follow a more citizen-focused approach in their planning, to include communities in policy- and decision-making and to make decisions on urban development more durable.

How do local governments and citizens in Kiruna and Kolari relate to "sustainable development"?

In the most recent development plans that apply to the municipalities of Kiruna and Kolari, the concept of "sustainable development" is mentioned only occasionally. Similarly, to the global goals agreed upon in the 2030 Agenda, which relate to different policy

fields (economy, energy, environment, social policy, etc.), also spatial planning affects citizens in many regards (their housing, employment opportunities, access to services, etc.). It thus comes as no surprise that in development plans the concept of sustainable development covers priorities in different fields. Further, as in democratic countries administrations change, development plans do not necessarily build on or relate to one another. Also the development plans in the cases under analysis do not refer to previous documents and cover usually a period of five years.

We asked citizens in Kiruna and Kolari about the priorities and challenges that come to their mind when thinking about the sustainable urban development in both places. The understanding of what SD means for them differed, but all interviewees related to the mines. In Kiruna, citizens were divided about the mine and the relocation of the town. Those benefitting from the mine framed its operation as necessary for the city to further exist and also considered "sustainable mining" possible. Others who are more dependent on a sound environment, like citizens engaged in tourism or in reindeer herding, did not see mining and sustainable development as compatible goals. In Kolari, interviewees highlighted that the municipality is in transition and divided because of the mine. They worried about the effects of the mine on families, on the local employment situation, on the environment and infrastructure. While informants stressed that they think positively about Kolari's future because of its unique and precious nature and because many families lived there for centuries, they also worried about Kolari's environment being at risk – mostly due to the mine but also because of climate change. They were also concerned about the income needed to maintain Kolari's infrastructure and services.[6] The conflict about the re-opening of the mine affects Kolari's future planning because those in favour of the mine worry that other economic perspectives (e.g. the settlement of tech industries, continuous growth of the tourist industry) would endanger Kolari's mining plans. As one informant explained, those in favour of the mine are mostly elderly people who used to work in Kolari's mine, and believe that Kolari will be prosperous again if the mine opens. They form the majority in Kolari's city council. In the eyes of the interviewee, they seem to follow an imaginary of Kolari's past that is guiding their policy- and decision-making. In contrast, those against the mine consider tourism as a more "sustainable economic perspective" because it can be maintained for a longer time and does not necessarily cause significant harm to the environment. Those in favour of the mine, however, perceive tourism as an economic branch that is offering only cheap labour and does not provide the "big money" that is needed to cover Kolari's public expenses.

The development plans for Kiruna and Kolari do not indicate that in both places the communities are divided in regard to the mine, which underlines the perception of the informants that communicating concerns on mining is difficult. In Kiruna, this difficulty relates to the influence of the mining company, which informants perceived as hindering innovations in urban development and limiting participation. In addition, constrained capacities of the administration impacts planning processes in Kiruna:

> "*The small administration cannot follow any plans because it has too many tasks to fulfil.*" (Kiruna, city administration, January 2022)

The administration sees itself rather as a crisis manager than a developer or implementer of plans.

In Kolari, citizens stressed the polarized positions towards the mine that are rooted in social conflicts:

[6] Similar to other smaller communities in the North, Kolari is a shrinking and peripheral town that seeks to attract private investments to advance the living standard in the area and to offer more employment opportunities for younger residents.

> *"[...] they hate each other. You can't imagine what is the situation. It is like civil war."* (Kolari, citizen and politician, November 2022)

This conflict is hidden in official documents and not brought to courts but addressed personally, at the micro-level, among residents, in newspaper reporting and in and among families:

> *"They were writing in the newspapers 'go to hell, don't you ...' it was horrible. And you know they really don't want other people to mess them around."* (Kolari, citizen and politician November 2022)

Pro-mining elected representatives are usually elderly people but also young people vote for them:

> *"Because it is like a brain wash here. [...] For decades their families have been telling negative things about tourism. It is not a good work. It is not a lot of salary. You have to start studying mining. And it is a generational thing also. And when I talk to people at my age, 40, who are here, it is like they are living in a totally different world and they are waiting for the mine."* (Kolari, politician, November 2022)

Overall, for both cases it can be stated that the global goals agreed upon in 2015 do not guide local development. Furthermore, the low level of consideration of the 2030 Agenda in local development plans and the vague nature of these plans means that what is agreed at and beyond the national level is very different from what is implemented at the local level. In the next section, we investigate in how far this is caused by a lack of participation and knowledge exchanges across governance levels.

> *To what extent do local governments apply a citizen-focused approach in their urban planning?*

Participation – meaning stakeholder specific dialogues, open hearings, and consultations – is mandatory in urban planning process in Sweden and Finland (see Land Use and Building Act Finland, 1999; Tepecik Dis & Karimnia, 2021). However, our analysis reveals significant gaps in participatory practices. Firstly, our interviewees indicate that the official rules on how participation is implemented in practice are vague. There is no guidance at what stage participation is needed and useful. Further, administrations in Kiruna and Kolari seem to lack the capacity to organize meaningful dialogues. According to several interviewees in both communities, participatory tools seem to be more about fulfilling legal requirements and ticking boxes, rather than encouraging participation and a deeper exchange of content.

One politician from Kolari (March 2022) stated for example *"And I can say from my village when they [representatives from the administration/DW] are in my community when they make this zoning for the mine everything what we said was perhaps read, but immediately forgotten*." Respondents also criticised the limited information provided to citizens in hearings and consultations and the administrative language used in official documents, which is difficult to understand. Consequently, interviewees stressed that citizens are not aware of the estimated size of the mine, the scope and effects of the mining activities. Still, they reported that some citizens in Kolari have been active in dialogues and tried to influence Kolari's development by engaging with the administration, political parties and in other networks. Particularly those who moved to Kolari from Southern Finland became active in policy-making and often supported the anti-mining position of other citizens in Kolari's North.

In Kiruna, weak participation and a lack of knowledge exchange seem to be caused more by limited administrative capacity than by a lack of political will at the local level. The urban planning department, for example, does not have resources for communication and informing citizens even though they

consider it important to avoid conflicts and to increase transparency. However, they lack support from the national level:

> *"The government is saying that we are not going to do anything up here in Kiruna. It's between the municipality of Kiruna and LKAB to solve it. That is like the real statement they made some years ago."* (Kiruna, municipality, January 2022)

> *"Sustainability and climate goals are defined by the nation-state. But then the way the municipalities are going to reach these two goals are like in a way up to them."* (Kiruna, researcher, December 2022)

Moreover, institutions seem to be rather static and have difficulties to attract competences while having to manage large territories. Traditionally, regional spatial planning in Sweden has had a small budget (compared to the regional responsibility and budget for health care). It is not surprising, therefore, that the transformation of the centre is being managed separately from other aspects and by municipal employees paid by the state-owned mining company LKAB, which has no competence in urban planning. In contrast to Kolari, citizens in Kiruna expressed that they do not feel that they can influence the city's development processes. Although they emphasised that Kiruna lacks an overall coherent concept, they feel that industry is shaping how citizens should think about sustainable urban development. For example, in the hearings organised by LKAB, very general and superficial questions were asked, including whether people were positive or negative about the planned changes. In addition, problems and solutions were often simplified and planned developments were presented as necessary steps without negative side effects. At the same time, LKAB seemed to be pushing for solutions that would cost them little (e.g. for traditional rather than energy-efficient housing):

> *"Social and cultural dimensions of transformations are less discussed, it is rather business as usual: build more, exploit more, expand more."* (Kiruna, researcher and politician, January 2022)

> *"Sustainability too often is seen as a technical problem by governments (for which there are technical solutions)."* (Kiruna, researcher and politician, January 2022)

Participation in policy-making processes and knowledge exchanges are also determined by societal factors, which help explain polarized visions and expectations and ideally should be considered in the set-up of participatory approaches (Kitchin et al., 2019; Wolfram & Kienesberger, 2023). We consider particularly five societal factors that interviewees mentioned repeatedly as impacting and shaping their participation: the level of education, culture, gender, age, employment.

While in Kiruna, citizens seem mostly divided along the line of "benefitting from the mine" or "not benefitting from the mine", in Kolari our analysis indicates that the **level of education** impacts how urban development is envisioned. Different to Kiruna, Kolari does not host a university and the level of education differs particularly between those who have been living in Kolari for decades and the "newcomers from the South", who are more often well-educated professionals.

As a result, citizens without a university education expressed the feeling of being dominated by those who have moved to Kolari and who often argue in favour of high standards to preserve nature and against the development of 'regional riches' to improve living standards. This phenomenon is illustrative for "green colonialism".

Our analysis also provides evidence that **cultural factors** determine the extent to which participatory approaches are used in local planning. In both cities there are tensions between Sámi and Swedish and Finish parts of society. In Kiruna, many residents have ancestors who lived in the area before the mine was

opened. As the city is located on land that is part of the reindeer husbandry area, many citizens still identify as indigenous and some are involved in traditional activities such as reindeer husbandry, which is heavily impacted by the mine's operation and infrastructure. Being known as opponents to the mine, Sámi people engaged in reindeer herding were only invited to separate hearings as part of stakeholder processes. Many of them were reluctant to participate in these participatory processes, because from their perspective, governments frame sustainability as a technical problem for which there are technical solutions and do not understand Indigenous livelihoods and the respective consequences for the Sámi. In Kolari, moreover, citizens tend to not express their opinions in public and share their views with friends and in closed family circles only. The division of the municipality and long-lasting societal and political conflicts that are also rooted in positions taken during World War II perpetuate this behaviour. In contrast, new citizens seem more actively engaged in policy-making and also better connected in their networks (often based in the country's South).

Our data also provide evidence of the importance of **gender and age** as factors affecting participation in the cases analysed. While younger residents seem to prefer using social media to express their views rather than engaging directly with local authorities, older residents often do not (yet) use virtual tools. Moreover, in keeping with the Finnish tradition of not encouraging open criticism, our analysis of Kolari shows that younger residents often do not participate in hearings and thus do not publicly share their views on the future of the community and the planned reopening of the mine.

Overall, our data shows that a lack of opportunities and a lack of trust limit constructive dialogues and challenge a meaningful outcome of participatory processes. Advanced participatory tools seem needed to reveal and bridge conflictive positions, to treat conflicts no longer as something negative per se but as a "potential catalyst for social change" (Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018: 94, in: Fjellheim, 2023: 46) particularly among "newcomers" and "established residents", among those in favour of mining and those in favour of tourism, among citizens with different ethnic and gender identities. In order to avoid dialogues, hearings and consultations being perceived as artificial participatory approaches, and to encourage citizens to get involved, it seems necessary to build up administrative capacity in this area, to better prepare information and to organise participatory events as open knowledge exchanges without a pre-defined outcome.

How can knowledge platforms facilitate local governments to follow a citizen-focused approach in their governance?

In both cases analysed, participation and knowledge exchange are envisaged by the local government. The municipality of Kolari stresses, for example, "to work together for the development of the municipality, across structures and sectoral boundaries. The municipality of Kolari involves the various stakeholders, from all areas and across all levels of government [...]. Regional community spirit is also reflected in active cross-border cooperation" (Kolari Kasvaa Luonnosta, 2023). In reality, these knowledge exchanges, however, seem limited as in both municipalities, interviewees worried about mining corruption and did not trust that their voices really make a difference, because decisions were often taken behind closed doors ("in the sauna", in small social circles) and promises were broken (e.g. services were not upgraded). Interviewees also highlighted power asymmetries and mentioned that people with established networks and good connections to practitioners and influential stakeholders have a greater say. They also stressed that the outcome of participatory processes depends much on the people involved and whether they have a profound knowledge of the issues at stake. Young residents and Sami residents in particular felt that their views were not taken into account, and

criticised the fact that hearings were organised for different stakeholder groups separately, rather than bringing them together to discuss a common issue. To advance participation in the municipalities under analysis, it seems important that local authorities establish inclusive platforms that facilitate knowledge exchanges among citizens in a trustful atmosphere, to provide access to information and more transparency.

The results of our analysis also show that citizens and politicians from Kolari and Kiruna are interested in knowledge exchange and are aware of the benefits of knowledge exchange between regions. Interviewees emphasised, for example, the long tradition of close international cooperation between the Nordic countries and the need to provide a variety of services due to the large territorial units to be governed, which are good reasons for cooperation and exchange. The decision of some residents from Kolari to hire legal experts from Sweden who supported the legal process on the reopening of the mine is illustrative of the potentials ascribed to knowledge exchanges across borders. Common challenges and interests between stakeholders and between regions in the Arctic were seen as beneficial for knowledge sharing across regions. However, in that regard interviewees missed support from national governments. While the pandemic has already stimulated virtual communication, national governments should also invest in capacity building and empowerment of local authorities to facilitate knowledge sharing not only with citizens, but also across regions and levels of government. In the case of Kolari, however, what seems to be most necessary as a preliminary step is to address the decades-long social conflict by stimulating and supporting dialogue between citizens who for a long time have not engaged beyond their 'bubbles'.

Conclusions

Despite the widely shared ambition to provide citizens with equal opportunities to influence the decisions that affect them, our findings from the European Arctic add to the growing body of evidence on unequal representation in modern representative democracies. From the analysis of the two cases in Finland and Sweden, we found several reasons that help to explain why participatory approaches fail in strong democratic countries and why places severely affected by climate change have not (yet) succeeded in developing a transformative, coherent, long-term vision for their future in line with global goals.

First, our analysis showed that the concept of SD is not driving local development in Kolari and Kiruna. Instead, local development strategies are rather vague providing a lot of flexibility to politicians and administrators to advance different priorities. As a result, the means of monitoring and holding elected representatives to account are limited. Both further hamper policy alignment at different levels of governance and among the actors responsible for advancing the implementation of the global goals, leading to further conflicts of interest and trade-offs rather than synergies to advance the implementation of the global goals. In order to create synergies, it is necessary to develop a common understanding, which requires the exchange of knowledge and the appropriate platforms for this exchange (across levels of government and regions).

Second, while the cornerstones of the Nordic Model are network governance, collaboration, and different types of partnerships, guidance or platforms for facilitating knowledge exchanges among local governments and across governance levels seem missing. As a result, knowledge-exchanges and policy-alignment across governance levels and within and across countries are limited. Our analyses have shown that while knowledge sharing is generally envisaged, participatory approaches remain artificial and do not encourage the constructive dialogue needed to bridge conflicting perspectives and limit the growing gap between citizens and policymakers. This is mainly due to a lack of capacity to engage with citizens, but also to inequality, as well-educated citizens with

established networks and industry stakeholders often have a greater say than other residents. Local policy and decision-making on sustainable development thus runs the risk of exacerbating existing conflicts over the spatial planning of the places under study, due to the lack of participatory formats that encourage open dialogue, information sharing and respectful discussion of conflicting perspectives. A starting point for national level policy could therefore be to focus more on facilitating knowledge exchange between different levels of government, between cities and especially at the local level between different stakeholder groups. In that regard, for instance, national support initiatives, which are supposed to advance the implementation of the global goals, should empower local governments by providing concrete guidelines on participatory approaches. Establishing platforms for knowledge exchanges with virtual tools may be useful for advancing the engagement of younger residents but requires also the empowerment of elderly people to get involved.

Third, our analysis demonstrated that decisions are often perceived as being taken by those with a special say, behind closed doors, which limits the actual motivation of citizens to participate. It is therefore important to address citizens' lack of confidence in participatory approaches and to improve transparency in policy and decision-making. At the same time, however, it is also important that central governments engage more with local governments in regular exchanges to receive feedback and perspectives from the local level. Also because of their geographical distance to the countries' capitals, in our case studies, local governments were described as "on their own" in many regards. The feeling of being left alone with major tasks at the local level, often to meet national targets, must also be taken into account by national governments in order to meet the complex challenges of the global goals.

Our findings also support results from research on inequalities in representation, stressing that social ties, differences in income and education, and different levels of visibility are key factors for why also at the agenda-setting stage often democratic "governments pay more attention to what high-status citizens consider important in their legislative agenda and pay less attention to the issues of low-status citizens" (Traber, et al., 2022). In remote and sparsely populated regions like the Arctic, moreover, central governments seem to care less because the votes are not as important as from more densely populated areas in the South. Therefore, politicians misperceive (contested) priorities and citizens are not satisfied with policy- and decision-making because their problems are not addressed, limiting their trust and participation in democratic processes.

Acknowledgements

The research for this article has been funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), project no. 426674468, and by the National Science Centre (NCN) (Agreement UMO — 2018/31/G/HS5/02448).

Editors' note:
Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the authors', on the basis of their own research.

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Article first received • 27 January 2025
Article accepted • 7 June 2025