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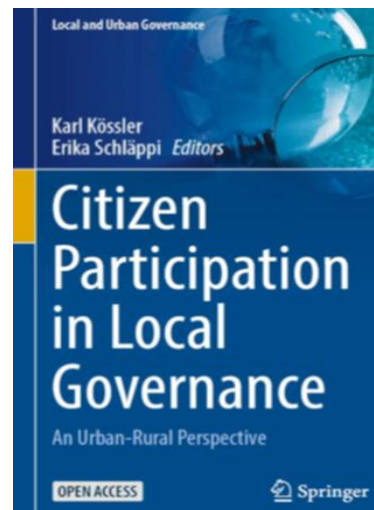
Kössler, K. & Schläppi, E. (Eds.) (2026). *Citizen participation in local governance: An urban-rural perspective*. Springer.¹

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As democratic legitimacy faces mounting pressure from declining voter turnout and growing political cynicism, local governance has increasingly been seen as the most natural arena for meaningful participatory democracy. Edited by **Karl Kössler** (Institute for Comparative Federalism, Eurac Research, Bolzano) and **Erika Schläppi** (Ximpulse GmbH, Bern), this volume assembles empirical case studies from the Horizon 2020 LoGov project, bringing together the expertise of 18 partner institutions across six continents. It addresses four thematic domains: participation in local development and planning, participation in large-scale projects, participatory budgeting, and the promises and pitfalls of digital participation. The collection is a significant and globally oriented contribution that enriches both scholarly debate and practitioner knowledge on democratic governance at the local level.



The volume opens with a theoretically rich introduction by Kössler, situating citizen participation within the longstanding tension between representative and participatory democracy. Drawing on scholarship from Arnstein (1969), and Fung (2006), Kössler argues that the local level is the most feasible scale for meaningful participatory innovation, while acknowledging empirical limitations including participation bias and the documented phenomenon of "participatory frustration" (Fernandez-Martinez et al., 2020).

Part I covers participation in local planning through cases from Argentina, Germany, Italy, and Spain. The Italian chapter on the Shared Administration of the Commons model, originating in Bologna and now adopted across numerous

¹ This book is available by open access at <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-99824-9>

municipalities, stands out as an illustration of bottom-up collaborative governance. The German chapter traces how planning participation evolves from open consultation towards legally binding formality as plans are finalised.

Part II examines large-scale projects in Argentina (lithium mining), Germany (Stuttgart 21), Italy (nuclear waste siting), and Switzerland. These chapters demonstrate how high-stakes projects generate intense mobilisation and sharp tensions between local and national interests. The Stuttgart 21 case is particularly instructive: sustained civic protest triggered mediation, two parliamentary committees of inquiry, and the ouster of the state government, leading to a state-level referendum in November 2011. Although the majority voted to continue the project, the episode contributed to procedural reform of participation requirements under administrative law— a sobering illustration of how democratic mobilisation can reshape institutional frameworks even in defeat.

Part III explores participatory budgeting across Italy, North Macedonia, Poland, and South Africa, revealing substantial contextual variation: in South Africa, participatory budgeting is intertwined with post-apartheid redress; in Poland, it has sometimes served as an electoral tool; in North Macedonia, it emerged alongside fiscal decentralisation to build civic capacity.

Part IV addresses digital participation through cases from Italy, South Africa, and Spain, with contributors collectively advancing a complementarity thesis: digital tools function most effectively as supplements to face-to-face deliberation rather than as replacements for it. The comparative conclusions chapter synthesises findings across all seven guiding research questions.

The volume's most important contribution is its genuinely global comparative scope. The inclusion of South Africa, Argentina, and North Macedonia alongside European cases produces insights that challenge assumptions derived solely from Western democratic contexts. The finding that participatory institutions cannot be understood in abstraction from their socio-historical conditions is powerfully illustrated: participatory budgeting in South Africa is shaped by the legacy of apartheid; in North Macedonia, by the civic vacuum left by communism. The structural coherence of the volume—with each case study addressing the same seven guiding research questions—enables systematic cross-case comparison while preserving contextual specificity.

Several substantive findings merit particular attention. First, the urban-rural dimension emerges as a persistently underexplored axis of democratic inequality. Rural communities face compounding disadvantages in participatory processes: limited organisational capacity, restricted digital infrastructure, and relative invisibility in policy frameworks designed with urban governance in mind. Second, the volume demonstrates convincingly that the legal nature of participatory processes is a necessary but insufficient condition for their effectiveness. Multiple chapters document statutory participation reduced to procedural formality, while the Swiss case shows that a culture of direct democracy can give even non-binding processes political weight. Third, the treatment of Madrid's Decide Madrid digital platform is exemplary. Its strengths, including more than 1,000 participatory decisions taken through the platform

and cross-issue versatility, sit alongside serious vulnerabilities, among them declining engagement and political discontinuity across administrations, a sobering reminder that digital infrastructure requires sustained commitment beyond any single electoral cycle.

The volume has notable limitations. Its regional coverage remains weighted towards Europe, with Asia entirely absent; future comparative work might profitably extend this framework to Asian contexts and integrate gender-disaggregated participation data. Gender dimensions of participation receive only passing attention across most chapters, despite being consequential for who speaks and whose voices carry weight in deliberative settings. Impact assessment also remains underdeveloped, with several chapters stopping short of tracking outcomes once participatory decisions are adopted. These are meaningful gaps in an otherwise exemplary comparative study.

Citizen Participation in Local Governance is a rigorous, theoretically grounded, and empirically wide-ranging contribution that will be widely cited across public administration, political science, and urban governance literatures. Its open-access availability ensures that its insights reach scholars and practitioners in settings where participatory governance questions are most pressing. For researchers working on local governance and public policy, the volume offers a productive comparative framework for examining the gap between formal participatory structures and their substantive democratic outcomes. It is strongly recommended for graduate seminars in comparative public administration and as a reference for those designing or reforming participatory governance frameworks.

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Santosh Juvvaka was an Assistant Professor at Assam Don Bosco University. He also taught at Zakir Husain Delhi College, University of Delhi. He holds a PhD in Social Exclusion from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Dr Juvvaka has published extensively on the issues related to caste, exclusion and participatory governance. His academic interests include social justice, governance, policy and caste-based exclusion.





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Karl Kössler is Senior Researcher and Group Leader at the Institute for Comparative Federalism of Eurac Research Bolzano/Bozen (Italy). He received a Ph.D. from the University of Innsbruck in 2011. Due to his background in both comparative public law and political science, Karl Kössler's research adopts a multidisciplinary perspective. His teaching includes a wide range of courses at universities, master programs and summer schools in Europe, Africa and Asia. He is the author of more than 70 academic publications including 13 books, among them *Comparative Federalism: Constitutional Arrangements and Case Law* co-authored with Francesco Palermo.



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