



Community Participation and Social Justice in Urban Sustainability Programs

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Abstract

This paper looks at how the community can play a significant role in promoting social justice in urban sustainability initiatives and how the practice of grassroots is relevant in achieving equitable and sustainable urban futures. Although sustainability initiatives have become the norm and are widely applied, these initiatives are not typically approached with managerial techniques framing them as a justice-providing mechanism but as a procedural requirement, which leads to exclusion and tokenism and marginalizes vulnerable populations. This study relies on a qualitative research design based on the in-depth interviews, focus groups discussions, and field observation within urban populations in an attempt to understand the experiences of participation, the challenge, and redefinition of participation as experienced by the bottom-up. The results show that communities implement justice in a variety of ways, among which are integration of local knowledge, solidarity networks, inclusion and engagement strategies, grassroots advocacy, and the everyday ethics of care. The practices exemplify the ways distributive, procedural, and relational aspects of justice are integrated into community everyday life and tend to fill gaps that may exist in formal institutions. This paper presents a thesis that sustainability management should remake participation not as symbolic gesture but as power-sharing process that considers communities as co-producers of justice and sustainability. This necessitates that managers should integrate equity as a guiding concept, appreciate community-based practices as a knowledge system that is legitimate and reconfigure governance institutions to enable true collaboration. This study will lead to advances in management literature by aligning sustainability, social justice and community governance, through the centrality of justice as a part of participation, and in practical terms, to the policymaker and practitioner.

Introduction

Urban sustainability has become the main topic of the twenty-first century as cities all around the world are struggling with the problem of urbanization, climate change, and increased social inequalities. Sustainability as a concept based on environmental conservation has been developed as a multidimensional framework that includes economic resilience, environmental protection, and social equity (Wang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022; Wolff et al., 2022). The role of social justice has become more prominent in this framework, especially in terms of urban environments where there is often no access to resources and power to decide on inclusive development. A key attribute that has been generally embraced to produce equitable results is acknowledging that community participation especially in sustainability programs is a pillar towards enhancing ownership and accountability as well as seeing to it that the voices of marginalized groups are heard in both policy and practice (Hariram et al., 2023; Alim & Sulley,

2024). Nonetheless, although community involvement has come to be a normative concept in the discourse of sustainable development, its actual implementation is in many ways limited by structural inequalities, tokenistic policies, and bureaucratic constraints. Sustainability programs in most instances focus on environmental goals, like minimizing carbon emissions, waste, or green infrastructure, but neglect to include the social aspect, which includes fairness, inclusion, and justice (Issa & In'airat, 2024; Zheng & Jin, 2023). This gap between rhetoric and practice has been of concern regarding the question of whether urban sustainability initiatives do lead to social transformation or by reinforcing hierarchies already in place to benefit some groups of people at the expense of others. In fact, unless social justice is engrained into the core of the sustainability endeavors, urban policies will only exacerbate exclusionary practices that marginalize low-income people, migrant group members, and other vulnerable groups.

Community participation is therefore not only an operational requirement of urban governance but it is a normative requirement and relates to wider struggles of justice and democracy. When meaningful, participation enables communities to define the design, implementation and evaluation of sustainability programs in a manner that defines their lived realities and aspirations (Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024; Martín et al., 2022). However, the extent of the participation is skewed towards tokenistic consultation to active empowerment that transfers the decision-making authority. Urban sustainability has a lot to do with the level of participation and this way, the policies can either be inclusive or exclusionary, just or unjust. Indicatively, it has been demonstrated that participatory processes in city planning may boost the legitimacy and develop trust between citizens and governments, yet when developed on a shallow level, may also contribute to disillusionment and disengagement (Mitlin, 2021; Faldina, 2023; Bouw et al., 2023).

Community participation and social justice are especially relevant to Global South cities, where socioeconomic inequality and ineffectiveness of governance is most deeply rooted. Increased urbanization in developing economies like Indonesia has further exerted pressure on housing and infrastructure and scarce natural resources, particularly on the marginalized populations who in most cases do not have access to formal means of participation (Silver, C. (2024; Esubalew & Adebisi, 2024; Padawangi, 2022). Within such contexts, sustainability programs, whether addressing climate adaptation, waste management, or urban greening, cannot be considered based on the environmental grounds only; their effectiveness should also be determined with the help of the level of equity and inclusion promotion. Participation of the community offers an avenue to promote social justice by preempting local knowledge, top-down governance, and power redistribution in decision-making.

However, socially just participation is not easily achieved. Marginalized groups are frequently not allowed to engage in urban governance meaningfully as such aspects frequently are excluded due to structural inequalities, including income disparity, limited access to education, and hierarchies and politics that are entrenched (Kiss et al., 2022; Fors et al., 2021). Additionally, participatory processes are often structured in a manner that favors technical over experiential knowledge, which further supports epistemic injustices that diminish community views. The continued existence of these obstacles implies that urban sustainability initiatives should stop being procedural participants and find more transformative approaches that would explicitly respond to the concerns of justice, power, and representation.

The global climate crisis increases the urgency of making social justice a fundamental part of urban sustainability. Informal settlements or low-income neighborhoods are vulnerable populations, and the disproportionately exposed groups are exposed to environmental risks like flooding, air pollution, and heat stress (Hussainzad & Gou, 2024). Such communities tend to lack most say in the development of adaptation and resilience plans thus exacerbating their vulnerabilities. Researchers suggest that frameworks of resilience and sustainability that do not include justice issues are likely to deliver so-called resilient inequities when cities become resilient to environmental shocks without tackling underlying social inequalities (Tavares et al., 2024). Thus, the focus of community involvement in sustainability initiatives is not simply the issue of democratic governance but also the condition of the attainment of fair resilience during climate change (Anwana & Owojori, 2023).

These arguments are especially applicable in the Indonesian setting. Indonesia is one of the most urbanizing countries in Southeast Asia and has made major investments in urban sustainability programs including green infrastructure development and community-based waste management programs (Mardiansjah et al., 2021). However, there are questions on whether these programs address issues of social justice and how far they engage communities in decision-making. Past research emphasizes that although participatory mechanisms are frequently implemented, it is fragmented, elite-dominated, or restricted to consultation as opposed to co-decision-making (Pepinsky et al., 2024). This study aims to fill these gaps by investigating how communities are engaged in urban sustainability initiatives and evaluating the way this engagement intersects with the quest of social justice (Telaumbanua et al., 2024).

Positioning community involvement in the wider context of social justice in urban sustainability it is possible to have a more comprehensive idea of what community involvement entails when it comes to having fair and sustainable cities. It points out that sustainability cannot be separated out of justice and that involvement should not focus only on formal inclusion to meet the more fundamental structures of power that determine urban life. Through a critical approach to these points, this piece of work can add to the current discussions around issues of urban governance and sustainability research, contributing to the understanding of how participation practices can help build socially just urban futures.

Method

The research design used in this study is qualitative, which will be used to investigate the dynamic of community participation and its connection to social justice in urban sustainability programs. A qualitative method was chosen as it enables one to have a deep insight into the lives of people, their views and practices in their social and cultural settings. In comparison to quantitative methods that are more concerned with the measurement and statistical correlation, qualitative methods are much more concerned with the meaning-making, interpretation, and exploration of complex social realities. Such an approach was necessary in this paper to understand how various community actors experience participation and justice in sustainability efforts in a nuanced way. An interpretivist paradigm was used to design it as it recognizes the impossibility of separating social phenomena and the meanings attached to them by the participating actors. Therefore, the study aimed at co-construction of knowledge with participants instead of subjecting them to a set of evaluation frameworks.

Research Site and Context

The research was carried out in some of the urban areas where sustainability programs had been in force. Such programs encompassed community-based garbage management programs, urban greening and climate adaptation programs. The selected locations were situated in areas with mixed socioeconomic scenarios that comprise middle-class districts with formal infrastructures as well as informal colonies with high vulnerabilities. This difference gave a rich platform on which the extent of participation among the various social groups and the negotiation of justice in program implementation can be studied. The city environment also illustrated larger issues that confront the Indonesian cities including the rapid growth of populations, environmental deterioration as well as unequal governance capacities and thus, it provided a pertinent environment in which the intersections of participation, justice and sustainability were to be examined.

Sampling Strategy and participants.

Participants were recruited on the basis of three major groups, i.e. community, local leaders, and program facilitators or policymakers. In the community, special consideration was considered to cover representation of marginalized groups like women, low-income families and dwellers of informal settlements whose voices tend to be sidelined in sustainability governance. Local leaders consisted of neighborhood association leaders, local activists, and civil society representatives who were interested in urban sustainability. Policymakers and program facilitators included municipal officials, staff in environmental agencies and representatives of non-governmental organizations in program implementation. The sampling strategy adopted was purposive in selecting people who had first-hand experience in urban sustainability programs and had a variety of opinions on participation and justice. Snowball sampling was also adopted to access target individuals who were less visible within the formal structure yet, had a major role in the community level initiatives. The sample of the study was 32 participants, which were selected in individual interviews and focus groups so that the voices of the stakeholder groups should be equally represented.

Data Collection Methods

The collection of data was based on various qualitative approaches to the gathering of both individual and group stories. Community members, leaders and policymakers were interviewed using semi-structured interviews to enable them to provide their opinions and to achieve a sense of consistency between the major themes of participation, inclusivity, and perceptions of justice. The interviews were 45 to 90 minutes long and the interviews were recorded and the participants gave their consent. In order to supplement the interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) were arranged with the representatives of the community to discuss the collective perception and encourage the dialogue between the members of different social groups. FGDs made it possible to identify common ground and to demonstrate tensions or contradictions that could not be observed during single interviews. Three FGDs were organized comprising of 6-8 participants, where facilitation was done carefully so that they could participate equally. Also, participant observation was completed at the community meetings, sustainability meetings, and at community consultation forums. Such an approach enabled the researcher to witness the way the process of participation happened in reality, how choices were made, and how various groups were represented in discussions. Field notes were made by way of careful observation and later became part of the analysis. Lastly, policy report and program guidelines and official

communications were analyzed as documentation and this offered contextual data on how the constructs of participation and justice were institutionalized. These records were contrasted with community experience to determine points of policy-intent mismatch and lived experiences.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data was done based on a thematic analysis method, which is commonly applicable in qualitative research to determine patterns and significance of data sets. It was initiated by interview and FGD transcription and was followed by a final reading of the transcripts and field notes. First codes were created in an inductive manner based on the repetitive words, phrases, and ideas that were expressed by the subjects. These codes were then grouped into wider themes that included; barriers to participation, marginalized voices, forms of inclusion and community-led initiatives. These categories were narrowed down to generalized themes which summarized the connection between participation and justice, such as procedural fairness, distributive equity, and recognition of marginalized groups using the tool of iterative comparison. Triangulation of document data and observational notes with interview, and FGD results were used to increase validity. NVivo software was used to assist in coding and systematic structure of data but ultimate interpretations were formulated through critical reflection and theoretical interaction with current literatures.

Result and Discussion

In addition to the fact that a lot of the management literature has treated participation as a procedural demand, this study focuses on the lived practices and localized processes that are usually overlooked in the formal systems of governance. The findings are thus not given in form of statistical generalizations but as powerful stories and analytical reports gathered by interviews, focus group discussions and field observations. They note how communities can organize around knowledge, solidarity and everyday ethics to reconfigure justice as a part of sustainability programs, and how structural obstructions may constrain equitable engagement. The findings provide an insight into the multifaceted interaction between the managerial systems and grassroots practices, with the further insight into the processes of justice production, contesting, and reproduction in the city.

Forms of Community Participation

The study revealed that community participation in urban sustainability programs manifests in multiple forms, ranging from grassroots-driven initiatives to limited involvement in formal government-led processes. These forms of participation vary not only in intensity but also in the degree of influence communities are able to exercise over decision-making and implementation. One dominant form of participation identified was active grassroots engagement, where local communities initiated and organized their own sustainability practices. Residents frequently relied on collective action to address immediate environmental challenges such as waste management, urban greening, and flood prevention. These grassroots initiatives were often rooted in local knowledge and social solidarity, rather than external directives. As one community leader emphasized,

“We started our own waste segregation system because the government program was too slow. Neighbors work together every week, and it has become part of our community culture.”

This highlights the agency of local residents in creating sustainable practices that reflect their lived realities, even in the absence of strong institutional support. At the same time, the study also found limited participation in formal decision-making processes, such as municipal planning forums and sustainability workshops. While government agencies frequently invited community representatives to attend consultations, the engagement was often superficial, with little opportunity for residents to shape actual policies. Several participants described these processes as consultative rather than collaborative. A female resident shared,

“They invite us to meetings, but most of the time decisions are already made. We are just there to listen, not to decide.”

Such narratives point to the persistence of tokenistic participation, where community voices are formally acknowledged but rarely translated into substantive influence. Another form of participation observed was collaborative engagement through partnerships with civil society organizations. In several cases, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) acted as intermediaries between communities and government, helping to amplify local concerns and provide technical expertise. This form of mediated participation often enabled residents to access resources and navigate bureaucratic systems. One local activist reflected,

“Without the NGO, our proposals would not be heard. They help us put our voices on paper and push the government to respond.”

While this approach enhanced visibility, it also risked creating dependencies, as communities became reliant on external actors for representation. In addition, the study highlighted informal participation through everyday practices that, while not formally recognized, contributed significantly to sustainability. Actions such as maintaining neighborhood cleanliness, conserving water, and planting trees were deeply embedded in community life. These practices, though less visible in official policy frameworks, demonstrated the importance of daily acts of responsibility in sustaining the urban environment. A resident explained,

“We may not attend government meetings, but every family here plants trees and keeps the drainage clear. That is our way of participating.”

This underscores the broader understanding of participation beyond formal structures, recognizing the cumulative impact of community-based practices in advancing sustainability. Finally, the findings suggest that participation was not uniform across all social groups. Marginalized residents, particularly those from informal settlements or with lower socioeconomic status, often had fewer opportunities to engage formally. Their participation was more likely to occur through informal practices or grassroots networks, rather than institutionalized processes. This uneven landscape of participation reflects underlying inequalities in access, resources, and representation, which in turn shape how justice is experienced within urban sustainability programs.

Barriers to Equitable Participation

While community participation was evident in various forms, the study found that significant barriers limited the ability of all groups to engage equitably in urban sustainability programs. These barriers reflected both structural and procedural constraints that undermined the inclusiveness of participatory processes. A primary barrier was socioeconomic constraints that prevented many residents, particularly from low-income households, from engaging fully in sustainability initiatives. Participation often required time, resources, or skills that were not equally available across the community. For instance, residents working long hours in informal sectors expressed difficulty in attending meetings or contributing to program activities. One participant noted,

“I want to join the meetings, but I work all day and by the time I come home, I am too tired. Participation feels like a luxury for those who have more time.”

This illustrates how economic inequality directly affects the capacity to engage in decision-making. Another significant barrier was the exclusion of marginalized groups, such as women, youth, and informal settlement dwellers, from formal participatory spaces. Although sustainability programs claimed to be inclusive, representation often skewed toward community elites or male leaders who already held authority. A female resident shared her frustration, stating, “

In the forums, it is always the same people who speak. Women are invited, but our opinions are not taken seriously.”

This exclusion highlights the gendered and hierarchical dynamics of participation, where power relations reproduce social inequalities rather than challenge them. The study also revealed that participatory processes were frequently tokenistic, designed to create the appearance of inclusion rather than genuine empowerment. Government agencies often organized consultation meetings as procedural requirements, without ensuring that residents’ inputs meaningfully shaped policy outcomes. As one community member observed,

“They ask us to attend workshops, but the agenda is already fixed. We are only given space to agree, not to suggest changes.”

Such practices reinforced a sense of disillusionment, as residents felt that their presence served symbolic rather than substantive purposes. Another barrier emerged from limited access to information and technical knowledge, which restricted residents’ ability to participate effectively. Many participants reported that technical language used in meetings, or lack of timely information about program details, created an uneven playing field between experts and community members. A youth participant reflected,

“The officials talk in complicated terms about climate adaptation, but we don’t really understand. Without clear explanations, how can we contribute?”

This highlights how informational barriers create epistemic injustices, where local knowledge is undervalued and community members are excluded by technical discourse. Finally, political and bureaucratic structures presented obstacles by prioritizing efficiency and elite interests over inclusive deliberation. Several participants described how sustainability programs were shaped

by top-down governance, with decisions driven by political agendas rather than community priorities. One activist remarked,

“The government listens when it suits their project, but when our demands conflict with their plans, they ignore us.”

Such dynamics reveal how institutional structures perpetuate inequalities by privileging certain voices while silencing others. Together, these barriers illustrate that participation in urban sustainability programs is not equally accessible to all. Socioeconomic constraints, exclusionary practices, tokenism, informational inequities, and structural governance issues combine to limit genuine community empowerment. Unless these barriers are addressed, the pursuit of social justice in urban sustainability will remain incomplete, as those most affected by urban challenges are the least empowered to shape the solutions.

Community-led Justice Practices

Despite the barriers to equitable participation, the study uncovered several practices initiated by communities themselves that demonstrated how social justice could be embedded within urban sustainability efforts. These community-led justice practices revealed how residents mobilized local knowledge, solidarity networks, and inclusive strategies to challenge structural inequalities and advance fairness in sustainability programs. One significant practice was the integration of local knowledge into sustainability initiatives. Communities often relied on traditional practices, neighborhood wisdom, and adaptive strategies developed over generations to respond to environmental challenges such as flooding or waste management. These practices reflected not only ecological awareness but also a deep sense of justice in ensuring collective well-being. As one elder resident explained,

“We know where the water will flow when it rains heavily. Our ancestors taught us how to build small channels, and we still use this knowledge to protect everyone in the neighborhood.”

Such examples illustrate how justice is practiced through recognition of local expertise, which ensures that sustainability is not imposed externally but grows from the lived experiences of residents. Another form of justice practice was the building of solidarity networks across neighborhoods and social groups. Residents often collaborated to pool resources, share labor, and support vulnerable members of the community, particularly in informal settlements. These networks served as informal safety nets that filled gaps left by formal institutions. A youth leader shared,

“When one family struggles, the whole community helps. For example, if someone cannot afford waste bins, others contribute so they are not left behind. This is our way of being fair.”

Such solidarity-based practices reflect distributive justice, ensuring that the burdens and benefits of sustainability are shared collectively rather than falling disproportionately on the poorest. The study also found that inclusive engagement strategies initiated by community groups fostered greater participation of marginalized voices, particularly women and youth. In several neighborhoods, women’s associations organized their own sustainability projects, such as composting or urban gardening, creating safe spaces where their contributions were recognized. One female participant stated proudly,

“In our women’s group, everyone has a voice. We decide together what to plant, and we share the harvest with families in need. This is justice for us.”

These practices highlight how marginalized groups created alternative spaces of empowerment when excluded from formal structures, thereby reconfiguring participation in ways that center justice. In addition, grassroots advocacy efforts demonstrated how communities actively contested exclusionary practices by demanding accountability from authorities. Residents organized petitions, demonstrations, and public campaigns to push for more equitable distribution of resources and recognition of community priorities. A local activist described,

“We went to the municipal office many times to demand fair allocation of clean water. At first, they ignored us, but after we protested together, they finally installed the pipes. Justice only comes when we fight for it.”

Such practices reveal the role of collective agency in advancing procedural justice, where communities challenge top-down governance and insist on being heard. Finally, the study observed that justice was also practiced through everyday ethics of care embedded in community life. Acts such as sharing food during crises, helping neighbors rebuild homes after floods, or organizing voluntary clean-up drives were not only environmental contributions but also expressions of fairness and solidarity. As one resident remarked,

“For us, justice is simple. It means no one is left behind. If one person suffers, we all suffer, so we help each other.”

These everyday practices highlight how justice is not always articulated in formal policy terms but is enacted through small but consistent acts of mutual care and responsibility. Collectively, these community-led justice practices demonstrate that social justice in urban sustainability is not only about formal participation but also about everyday actions, grassroots initiatives, and solidarity-based networks. By centering local knowledge, promoting inclusive spaces, and demanding accountability, communities carve out pathways to justice even when formal systems remain exclusionary. These practices reveal the transformative potential of bottom-up approaches in creating sustainability programs that are both environmentally effective and socially just.

Rethinking Participation as Justice in Sustainability Management

This research has far-reaching implications that require the paradigm shift in the concept of participation in the context of sustainability management. In prevailing managerial discourses, participation tends to be understood as an instrumental process: stakeholders are involved in order to gain some legitimacy, minimize opposition, or collect local information to provide congeniality to a pre-existing strategy (Peltola et al., 2023). This framing also runs the risk of producing communities as passive receivers of managerial goodwill instead of them being seen as active co-creators of justice. The results here undermine this reductionism in that programmed in urban sustainability are not merely about involvement but also about entrenching justice as a practical value of governance. Justice will not be achieved when communities are only consulted but when their voices, practices, and solidarities actively design, implement, and evaluate programs (Ruess et al., 2023). There are practical implications of this reframing to the operationalization of sustainability by managers. To treat participation as justice, it is imperative to shift the focus to tokenistic consultations to actual power-sharing

practices. The communities involved in this research revealed their ability to mobilize, pool resources and put local knowledge into action, but such abilities are often overlooked by managerial systems that ensure top-down efficiency logic (Gargano, 2021). Unless sustainability managers persist in using only procedural checklists of participation, they will miss the distributive and procedural aspects of justice that communities actively develop. This, as far as management is concerned, is not only unethical, but strategically shortsighted, since initiatives that fail to capture the spirit of justice usually cannot withstand the burden of local disengagement and distrust (Böhm et al., 2022; Vargas & Cooper, 2024).

In order to entrench the idea of participation as justice, the managers need to re-structure the process of governance in such a way that community-led practices could be a valid form of managerial knowledge. This entails establishing participatory design platforms in which decisions are not pre-programmed, but negotiated, where there is both upwards and downwards accountability, and where marginalized voices are institutionally protected (Lopes, 2023). A decolonization of management is the process of such a shift, in which standard frameworks of control and efficiency are replaced by relational and equity-based frameworks (Chordiya & Sabharwal, 2024). By redefining participation as justice, management becomes less of a regulation practice and more of a co-creation practice and the organizational legitimacy on the one hand is matched to democratic values and sustainability imperatives on the other hand (Jacobs et al., 2022).

Conclusion

It has been shown that community engagement is not a sidelining feature but a main factor of social justice in urban sustainability initiatives, where local practices, solidarities, and daily ethics tend to do what the managerial systems fail to do alone. By emphasizing the forms of community engagement that do not necessarily entail official consultation, the study reveals that justice is administered in distributive, procedural and relational ways, which require a redefinition of the sustainability management towards inclusiveness and power-sharing. The implication is explicit: managers and policymakers need to look at local knowledge as a strategic resource, equity as a principle of governance and community-based practices as viable co-management. This requires the rejection of tokenistic strategies in favor of participatory systems that incorporate the aspect of justice in all levels of decision-making. By so doing, sustainability management will be able to transcend the efficiency-based models to adopt co-creation models that are socially just and environmentally strong. In the end, the findings confirm the inability of urban sustainability to be achieved by technocratic only solutions, but it needs justice-focused practices, wherein communities are considered as essential contributors to the creation of sustainable futures.

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