

Unsettling Youth Participation in Relational Space and Commons: Case Study Lusatia

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Abstract

This paper* examines youth participation in structural transformation in Lusatia, a post-coal region in eastern Germany. It argues that institutional frameworks rely on territorial and linear logics of participation that do not resonate with those they are meant to engage. Drawing on spatial theory and the commons, a relational perspective is proposed to explain the disjunction between scripted participatory formats and the contingent, affective, and situated ways in which young people relate to space and the future. While institutions and research often emphasize access, representation, and impact, this paper foregrounds empirical insights that show how participation frequently fails to engage with the multiple and uneven rhythms of everyday life. Reframing participation in relational terms opens a contingent terrain for more situated engagement with futures as at once inherited, envisioned, forged, enacted, and contested.

L'articolo esamina la partecipazione giovanile all'interno di trasformazioni strutturali in Lusazia, una regione post-carbonifera della Germania orientale. Il testo mette in luce come i quadri di riferimento adottati dall'amministrazione locale si basino su una logica lineare e territoriale della partecipazione che non trova risonanza con le persone che vorrebbe coinvolgere. Basandosi sulla teoria spaziale e sulla prospettiva dei *commons*, l'articolo propone una prospettiva relazionale per spiegare la disgiunzione tra i formati partecipativi previsti dalle istituzioni e i modi contingenti, affettivi e situati con cui i giovani si relazionano allo spazio e al futuro. Mentre le istituzioni e la ricerca mettono l'accento sull'accesso e la rappresentanza, l'articolo, basato su dati empirici, mostra come la spesso la partecipazione fallisca nell'intercettare i ritmi molteplici e diseguali della vita quotidiana. Inquadrare la partecipazione in termini relazionali apre un terreno contingente per un coinvolgimento più situato verso futuri intesi contemporaneamente come ereditati, immaginati, costruiti, messi in atto e contestati.

Keywords: youth participation; structural transformation; Lusatia.

Parole Chiave: partecipazione giovanile; trasformazione strutturale; Lusazia.

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Introduction: Ontological Disjunction in Participation

Youth participation has become a normative imperative in urban and regional planning. It is mandated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC, Art. 12) and institutional frameworks at various levels of governance. Yet youth participation is frequently perceived as failing to resonate meaningfully with young people or to unlock the co-creative potential of cooperation across structural hierarchies (Matthews, 2001; Löw-Beer and Luh, 2024). Representatives of organised interest and researchers generally attribute these shortcomings to failures in procedural inclusion, limited institutional commitment, or insufficient inclusion and influence relative to normative models of participation (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Hart, 1992; Arnstein, 1969). This paper, however, identifies an ontological disjunction between institutional participatory frameworks and lived experience as a structural reason for the limited resonance of participatory processes. This disjunction arises from how institutions frame space, time, and transformation as structured and goal-oriented, while in everyday life they are encountered as contingent and shaped by uncertainty.

In Lusatia, Germany, a region undergoing structural transition away from lignite mining and coal-based energy, explicit efforts have been made to involve young people in shaping the region's future. These efforts are supported by legal frameworks, including the Social Code (SGB VIII, Art. 8, 11), the Federal Building Code (BauGB, Art. 3), the Brandenburg Local Government Act (BbgKVerf, Art.19), and Brandenburg's State Diet Resolution 'Strengthening the Participation of Children and Young People in the Structural Transformation Process in Lusatia' (Landtag Brandenburg, 2022). Participation in this context is typically invited into pre-scripted frameworks organised around categories such as employment, infrastructure, and innovation (Zeissig *et al.*, 2023; Gailing and Weith, 2023). These frameworks are shaped by a strong territorial logic that assumes a fixed conception of space and a linear, outcome-oriented view of the future (Adam and Groves, 2007). In contrast, young people encounter spatial transformation in ways that are contingent, uncertain, and entangled with everyday struggles. While institutional frameworks and research emphasize the

importance of structural adaptation, this paper argues that an ontological disjunction grounded in spatial theory more effectively captures the difficulties in meaningfully engaging young people in participatory processes.

To investigate this disconnect, the paper develops an analytical lens that conceptualizes participation as a spatio-temporal collective process by combining the concepts of relational space and the commons. A relational understanding situates space as socially and temporally produced, constituted through interrelations, positionalities, disjunctions, and embodied practices (Lefebvre, 2014 [1946]; Massey, 2005; Shields, 2013). From this perspective, futures are not predefined targets but emerge through negotiation between settled and unsettled conditions of everyday life (Viderman *et al.*, 2023). Transformation is therefore not understood as an event but as an ongoing condition shaped by overlapping rhythms, interruptions, and temporal dissonance. In turn, the concept of the commons emphasizes a collective and relational dimension of engagement (Stavrides, 2016; Chatterton, 2016). It foregrounds tensions between institutional scripts and situated practices of negotiating access, recognition, and shared meaning. Framing futures as commons makes it possible to understand how collective horizons are imagined, accessed, or foreclosed, not as abstract policy principles but as contested terrains embedded in the assemblages of human and non-human relations (Metzger, 2016).

Empirically, this paper draws on a qualitative case study conducted in Lusatia in 2024 to examine how youth participation is shaped under the logics of territorial transformation, and how it is encountered and negotiated through the situated experiences of young people. The empirical study consisted of three components, as illustrated in Figure 1. First, a document analysis of policy and spatial strategies published between 2019 and 2023 focused on structural frameworks and debates surrounding participation in structural transformation. This included the federal strategic agenda for structural change, notably the work of the Commission on Growth, Structural Change and Employment, along with key legislation and planning documents at the federal, state, and regional levels. These were

complemented by regional funding guidelines and evaluation reports on financial allocations in Brandenburg's Lusatia. Youth-specific documents encompassed relevant legislation, strategic plans, participation reports, and position papers, which together delineate the institutional and structural conditions shaping youth participation in the context of structural transformation. The analysis followed a qualitative, interpretive approach focused on identifying how participation and transformation were discursively framed and operationalised across scales. Second, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted in the first half of 2024 with stakeholders from politics, administration, and representatives of organised interest at various levels of governance to explore how participation is understood, operationalised, and linked to broader planning and development strategies such as the Structural Development Act for Coal Regions (Strukturstärkungsgesetz StStG, 2020). While guided by core themes derived from the document analysis, such as institutional understandings of participation, procedural design, and perceived challenges, questions were tailored to each interview partner to reflect their field of expertise, professional domain, and area of experience. Third, two gender-specific focus groups were held with 13 young people aged 17 to 21 in April 2024 in the town of Sedlitz. The decision for gender-specific groups was based on the expectation that lived experiences might be shaped by gendered social norms, and that separate settings would allow for more open and self-reflective discussion. All participants were enrolled in vocational training, and no compensation was provided. The discussions were structured around open prompts concerning everyday experiences of place, transformation, spatial change, and expectations for the future. By contrasting institutional frameworks with the situated perspectives of young people, the paper shows that participation is not experienced merely as a question of access, but as a deeper ontological dissonance rooted in how space and time are encountered. The following sections develop the analytical lens of relational space and the commons, examine the institutional frameworks that shape youth participation in Lusatia, and present focus group findings to illuminate the ontological disjunction between institutional framings of participation and the lived experiences of young people.

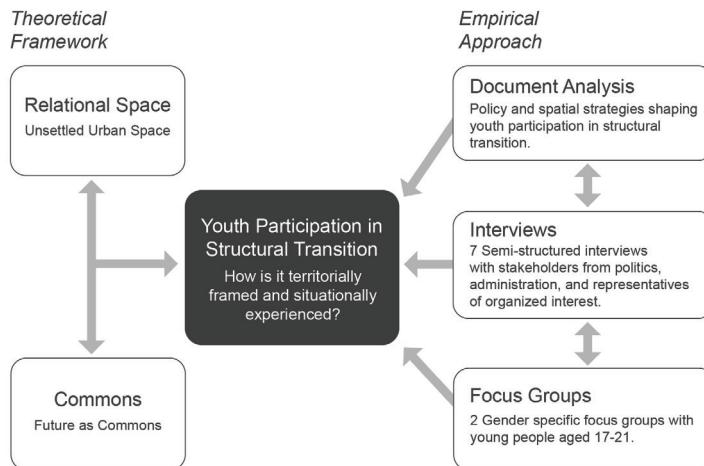


Fig. 1 Methodological components of the study.

Source: Own graphic.

Theoretical Framework: Grounding Participation in Relational Space and Commons

Urban space does not carry static connotations. Particularly in regions undergoing structural change, it is experienced as continuously reconfigured, made and unmade, and shifting across time and meanings. Relational conceptions of space emphasize that it is constituted by a plurality of material and imagined interrelations (Lefebvre, 2014 [1946]), produced through overlapping trajectories of political, social, and cultural life that resist closure or singular meaning (Massey, 2005). Space is produced through time as it unfolds in repetition and disruption, shaped by the uneven pacing of everyday life (Lefebvre, 2014 [1946]). Shields (2013: 31) describes urban space as «a process and a horizon of meanings», a temporally charged field of contested possibilities. It carries the sediments of past ways of living and provides the terrain through which futures take shape. This understanding of space draws attention to how transformation is not experienced as a singular moment of change but as an ongoing and often ambiguous condition. The contingency of these futures can be grasped through the conceptual lens of unsettled space, understood as a relational

condition shaped by shifting rhythms, contested meanings, and spatial efforts to restore or negotiate a sense of grounding (Viderman *et al.*, 2023). Rupture and reorientation, rather than exceptions, appear as structural features of urban development. The rhythms of political, economic, social, and cultural reconfigurations shape how societies understand which futures are possible, desirable, or (already) foreclosed. Rather than being defined by territorial stability or developmental endpoints, space becomes a lived temporal horizon.

Urban space is the materialization of past imaginaries. At the same time, it shapes collective orientations toward the future. As Adam and Groves (2007) argue, the future is not an empty or neutral space awaiting institutional inscription. It is already embedded in present-day actions, assumptions, and power structures. Their analysis of institutional temporal regimes echoes Freeman's (2010) concept of chrononormativity, referring to the ways in which time is organised around socially sanctioned expectations of life progression. Linear, outcome-driven conceptions of time are privileged, while experiential rhythms such as uncertainty or exhaustion are marginalised. These frameworks not only favour scripted futures but also determine who is authorised to imagine and inhabit them. In contrast, temporal experience is shaped by rupture, ambiguity, and reorientation, especially for those whose social position renders their futures least secure. Structural transformation is thus not simply a territorial shift or temporary dislocation but an embedded and often precarious condition. This perspective suggests that participation should be understood not just as presence or involvement in scripted futures but as negotiation within the relational spatial and temporal fields.

The concept of the commons provides a complementary lens to relational space. In response to structural challenges and recurring capitalist crises, the commons has gained prominence in urban transformation debates (Stavrides, 2016; Dellenbaugh *et al.*, 2015). Although the idea of the common good is embedded in the legal and normative traditions of European welfare states, it often remains abstract and politically inert (Jessop, 2002; New Leipzig Charter, 2020). In contrast, emerging practices, particularly in activist settings and, to some extent, in urban policy, challenge market-driven and individualistic models of

society (Stavrides, 2016). These practices engage directly with shared resources and spatial justice through concrete and often conflictual negotiations across arenas of contestation, such as public space, housing, and the communalization of technical and social infrastructure (Dellenbaugh *et al.*, 2015).

The commons has traditionally been associated with the collective management of natural resources, framed as bounded, resource-based systems based on shared ownership and value extraction (Ostrom, 1990). While this early approach emphasised the territorial dimension of the commons, recent work redefines commons as a social and spatial practice rooted in collective agency and contested meaning (De Angelis, 2007; Chatterton, 2016). Stavrides (2016), for example, conceptualizes urban commons as porous zones of encounter that enable forms of becoming and shared political action. In his view, commons is a practice of forging shared ground across difference. It takes shape in the interstices of dominant systems, where alternative ways of relating, organising, and inhabiting space are continually negotiated through situated and open-ended struggle. The topology of the commons is further complicated through the consideration of more-than-human entanglements. Metzger (2016) argues for an understanding of commons as assemblages of heterogeneous relations made up of humans and non-humans shaped by mutual enhancement rather than extraction. This perspective extends the analysis of commons beyond tangible materialities to also include intangible dimensions such as creative atmospheres, shared urban lifeworlds, and the textures of collective existence. In this sense, the commons is not only a terrain of negotiation and building collective agency (Leitheser *et al.*, 2022), but «complex organisms and webs of connections» (Chatterton, 2016: 407), that produce micropolitics that «can spread mimetically and virally through decentralised swarming, networking and infiltrating, countering and corroding the dominant regime as they connect» (Ivi, 411). The commons represents attempts to collectively inhabit uncertainty.

This paper builds on relational perspectives to examine youth participation through the lens of space and the commons. The analysis is particularly guided by the time horizon as the logic of the commons offers a compelling way to understand how futures are collectively negotiated. Futures are embedded in

place, shaped by memory and expectation, and enacted through lived struggle. They are differentially accessible. For some, the future is an open horizon; for others, it is precarious or foreclosed. While institutions treat futures as fixed endpoints, this perspective foregrounds their situated and uneven character. Temporal horizons are embedded in place, tied to memory and expectation, and enacted through lived struggle. What is accessible or imaginable is not equally distributed. For some, the future is an open horizon; for others, it is precarious or already foreclosed.

The relational perspective developed here helps identify the limits of territorial imaginaries within youth participation frameworks in Lusatia. Institutionally framed futures often revolve around normative goals of growth, innovation, or sustainability, yet they obscure the situated and relational dimensions through which futures are lived. Youth participation is structurally positioned as dependent on adults and is functionally framed through the prism of access and institutional offerings (Hieb *et al.*, 2015). Young people are not defined solely by age but by transitions between dependence and autonomy, opportunities and constraints, and present demands and future uncertainty. Their spatial positioning reflects unequal access to infrastructures, formal decision-making, and opportunities (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015; Hieb *et al.*, 2025). Conceptualising young people through relational space and commons emphasizes their role as situated actors engaged in uneven negotiations over the terms of possible futures. In contexts of structural transformation, they relate to the future not as a goal set by policy but as a field of uncertainty shaped by their needs, attachments, aspirations, and identities. This framework repositions participation as a relational and contested process shaped by concerns about belonging, fairness, and recognition. Participation becomes a practice of commoning futures. It is an effort to engage with the unsettled present through the collective negotiation of possible futures.

It is important to note that while this paper develops a conceptual distinction between participation 'as it is practiced' through institutionalised routines and participation 'as it could be' within a relational horizon of meaning, it nonetheless uses the term 'participation' throughout to refer to both. This dual use is

deliberate, as it foregrounds the central tension explored in the analysis. The two understandings of participation are not framed as a binary pair between a flawed model and its alternative. Rather, their coexistence within the same term highlights a relational dissonance that shapes how participation is framed, enacted, and experienced in practice.

Policy Context: Territorial Logic of Participation

When Germany's federal government decided in 2019 to phase out coal and transition to a low-carbon economy, the regions where lignite had long shaped both economic structures and regional identities were expected to be most affected. This applied in particular to eastern Germany's regions such as Lusatia, which had already borne the social and economic rupture of the 1990s, following the abrupt shift from a planned to a market economy (Günzel *et al.*, 2024). Lusatia (Lausitz) is a historically and culturally distinct region spanning parts of Germany's states (*Länder*) of Brandenburg and Saxony and extending across the border into Poland. It has long been shaped by extractive economies, especially lignite, and marked by successive transitions, from post-war industrialisation under socialism, through post-reunification industrial and demographic decline, to the most recent coal phase-out. Despite this sequence of decisive upheavals, institutional trajectories reveal a continuity that reaches back to the region's estate-based organization in the early modern period, where authority was structured through hierarchical, territorially anchored, and corporatist logics (Neitmann, 2014). Since the 1990s, the region has been staged as a space of opportunity, supported by large-scale investments in landscape restoration and presented as a test bed for realising the post-reunification vision of flourishing landscapes (Gürtler *et al.*, 2020). Yet this aspirational framing contrasts with the lived experience of many residents. The region's social space remains characterised by scepticism toward symbolic promises and fatigue from continuous transformations whose benefits are perceived as unevenly distributed (*Ibidem*). Participatory efforts are thus introduced into an atmosphere already shaped by prior ruptures and unmet expectations. As one interviewee noted, «people are tired of being told the future will be better». To address the anticipated socio-economic impacts of the coal

exit, in 2020, the German Bundestag enacted the Structural Development Act for Coal Regions (Strukturstärkungsgesetz Kohleregionen StStG). The law provides a financial and institutional framework for supporting affected regions, including Lusatia. It allocates up to 40 billion euros nationwide, with approximately 10.3 billion earmarked for the Brandenburg part of Lusatia (Landtag Brandenburg, 2024).

Lusatia is a cross-border region, yet under the StStG its functional delineation follows administrative boundaries, with the Brandenburg and Saxony sections managed separately (Staatskanzlei Brandenburg, 2020). Although the discourse revolves around just transition and spatial cohesion, its implementation reveals a focus on territorially bounded planning logics, including infrastructure, human resource development, innovation clustering, and participatory governance (Gailing and Weith, 2023: 321-324). Despite the rhetoric of this state-led transformation, its core goals remain closely aligned with a performance-oriented logic of growth, efficiency, and territorial capital.

The implementation of this policy is structured through multi-level governance, with funding administered via two primary streams: one under states (*Länder*) authority, the other directly managed by federal agencies. In both streams, the Brandenburg state government plays a central role in programming and decision-making. The territorial logic of this framework is reinforced by the establishment of the regional structural development agency Wirtschaftsregion Lausitz GmbH (WRL), which is jointly owned by the state of Brandenburg and the districts designated as Brandenburg's share of the *Lausitzer Braunkohlerevier* (Lusatian lignite mining district). WRL is mandated to advise on project development, facilitate funding allocation in coordination with state authorities, and implement participatory processes involving regional stakeholders. It positions itself as a connector between state, district, and municipal authorities, with the stated aim of strengthening the region's competitiveness (Zeissig *et al.*, 2023). This institutional configuration reflects Germany's federal architecture, grounded in subsidiarity and reciprocal coordination between governance levels. The result is a territorially bounded regime focused on project delivery and financial accountability. Funding prioritizes

economic development infrastructure, such as industrial and business parks, energy and mobility systems, and research and innovation hubs, in designated regional centres, turning transformation into a spatially selective investment strategy focused on regional competitiveness (Zeissig *et al.*, 2023: 396-398). This logic extends into participatory processes, which are framed by concerns for efficiency, quantifiability, and alignment with policy targets.

In accordance with planning norms, StStG implementation was accompanied by participatory formats. However, as evidenced by public documents available on WRL's website and confirmed in interviews, primarily with stakeholders from the political sphere, participatory formats largely involved federal and state political actors, administrative authorities, municipalities, and selected representatives of organised business and civil society interests. Broader public involvement, including young people or representatives of organised youth interests, remained mostly limited to information-sharing. Interviewees across governance levels pointed to time constraints, political pressure, and procedural rigidity as limiting factors. In relation to youth participation specifically, interviewees noted that state-level authorities tended to uphold the subsidiarity principle more rigorously than many local governments. State authorities were described as more willing to recognise youth organisations and associations as independent actors, and to provide them with material and institutional support. This openness, however, was not reflected in the implementation of the StStG, where participation often depended on individual initiative and the administrative capacity of municipal authorities.

Some of these deficits have been addressed through the STARK programme, established under the federal stream of StStG, which funds local projects aimed at economic diversification, social cohesion, and skills development. In 2024 the Brandenburg Participation Fund (*Teilhabefonds Brandenburg*) was introduced as a dedicated funding instrument within STARK. It provides funding through 2027 for non-investment projects targeting children and young people, civil society, and start-up development (WRL, 2024). The projects are expected to contribute to an ecologically, economically and socially sustainable transformation. Although the STARK programme

formally promotes public engagement and youth participation, it is operationalised primarily through project-based funding tied to outputs such as professional requalification, innovation initiatives, and local transformation capacities. In this context young people are cast as future workers or innovation assets, and even (their) cultural initiatives are framed in functionalist terms. Culture is viewed, almost in Richard Florida's (2002) manner, as a 'pull factor' for skilled labour migration. Young people and cultural initiatives are deployed as central arguments of a soft rebranding strategy that counters national media portrayals of the region as fearful of difference and resistant to change. Concerns about right-wing political sentiments are not addressed directly, but are instead folded into this strategy: youth initiatives and cultural projects signal openness and modernity to prospective newcomers (Staatskanzlei Brandenburg, 2024; 2023).

The territorial framing of participation enjoys broad support across the political mainstream. Interviewees noted that all major parliamentary parties, except the radical right, endorse the transformation's core goals and principles. While this consensus ensures continuity, it also reflects a technocratic model of territorial governance rooted in ideas of territorial cohesion, functional equity, and Germany's corporatist tradition (Gailing and Weith, 2023). Participation is institutionally affirmed, yet remains tied to territorial and instrumental framings. Some interviewees expressed concern about this, noting that access to participation is conditioned by grant logic, financial access, organisational form, and alignment with programme metrics. Others described the persistent difficulty of recruiting young participants into existing formats. Although innovation is a central motif in transformation discourse, interviewees also highlighted a disconnect between this narrative and the daily realities of under-resourced municipalities. Under these conditions, participation risks becoming a mechanism of economic rebranding rather than a response to infrastructural or social deficits. Another functionalist dimension emerges in how institutional actors frame their role in supporting youth participation. Youth is portrayed as a life phase oriented toward obtaining qualifications, negotiating autonomy, and searching for self-positioning (BMFSJ, 2017). For many young people,

however, this phase is marked by instability and uncertainty. This perceived fragility is to be stabilised through guidance from associations, clubs, peer groups, formal educational institutions, and adult allies. Participation, in this framing, functions as a stabilising intervention.

Critical perspectives on youth participation likewise remain structured by a territorial logic. Scholarly and institutional critiques tend to focus on barriers to access, procedural fairness, representational gaps, or policy impact (Löw-Beer and Luh, 2024). They caution that although young people are increasingly invited into formalised processes, their actual influence remains limited. This is often attributed to a lack of political commitment or advocacy for youth perspectives within decision-making bodies.

While Brandenburg has introduced a state-wide youth parliament network and various forms of youth representation at the municipal level, such as commissioners for youth or youth advisory councils, these structures remain uneven, particularly in Lusatia, where they are largely absent, or tend to attract politically engaged individuals already attuned to institutional discourse. As discussed in interviews, participation is often framed as a preparation for future citizenship. In this sense, youth participation is folded into functionalist futures, even as the lived spatial and temporal experience of young people remains contingent and unsettled. While most critiques target the tokenistic design of current participation models, a deeper ontological gap persists, namely the one between how futures are conceptualised within institutional frameworks and how they are actually experienced by young people. From the perspective of relational space, institutional framing imposes a temporal and spatial fix that presumes alignment between institutional goals and lived experience. It leaves little space for contradiction and contingency. The commons is similarly bracketed. Rather than emerging as a shared field of ongoing negotiation over meaning and use of space, participation remains tethered to the validation of predefined political goals.

Focus Groups: Lived Temporalities and Contingent Futures

This section draws on two gender-specific focus group discussions centred on experiences of place, views on regional

structural transformation, and imaginaries of the future. Across both groups, a shared dissonance emerged between institutional framings of participation and the lived ways young people relate to change. Rather than encountering transformation as a predefined policy field or thematic intervention, participants experienced it through uncertainty, moral registers, and contradictory attachments to collective futures, grounded in the fragmented rhythms and interruptions of everyday life.

Participants described urban space primarily in terms of its use value, emphasising accessibility, social density, and everyday usability. Rather than aesthetic or symbolic value, centrality was associated with social presence, described as spaces where peers gather and daily life unfolds. One participant noted that being asked to leave or not having any space where one is allowed to stay can be deeply frustrating, expressing a broader dissatisfaction with the lack of informal indoor spaces for gathering. Another participant remarked that there simply are not many places where one can actually spend time, highlighting the importance of access to communal space as a condition of belonging. These views resonate with the conceptual vocabulary of relational space and the commons, even if not articulated as such.

Although environmental and economic improvements, such as cleaner air, landscape restoration, and emerging jobs in renewable energy, were acknowledged, participants primarily framed structural transformation through concerns about financial stability, job security, social inequality, and the viability of future independence. These concerns were articulated not in the language of territorial development, but as a contingent horizon shaped by present material conditions and structural uncertainty. This reflects not so much a rejection of institutional framings as the articulation of a different spatial and temporal logic altogether. It evokes relational space as assembled through proximity, lived experience, and moral evaluation. In the same vein, the future is not a horizon to be reached, but a condition to be endured, negotiated, and forged across categories of difference. In this sense, participation is not absent. It is simply not where institutions seek to locate or contain it. Institutional formats remain structured around abstract policy goals and normative visions, while young people engage with futures

through fragmented routines and relational entanglements. The future appears as a fragile horizon of shared meaning, to be assembled rather than assumed.

Participants' statements reflected a strong attachment to traditional social models of productivity, merit, and autonomy. Inherited traditional views of employment, responsibility, and family operated as central moral registers through which the future was evaluated. The view that work is primarily about providing for one's family was frequently expressed, and financial expectations were rooted in traditional wage-based models. One participant stated that if they were to have a family in the future, they would want to be able to afford everything, linking transformation to questions of long-term affordability and life planning. Another remarked that what had changed most were the prices, indicating that economic pressure was the most tangible effect of the transition. Several voiced resentments toward those perceived to receive support without contributing labour, with one participant noting that some people get just as much money as those who go to work. These sentiments echoed broader discourses of deservedness and social cohesion that structure regional political debates. *Bürgergeld* – the German basic welfare benefit – was frequently cited as an example of perceived unfairness, reinforcing a resentment discourse common in public debates in the region. In this context, value was equated with work, and social cohesion was seen as undermined by perceived undeservedness.

These concerns were particularly salient in the male group, where participants consistently identified traditional success markers such as stable employment and family formation as aspirational, yet increasingly out of reach. Wage levels in vocational tracks were described as insufficient. One participant noted that wages in the gastronomy sector are unfair and that deductions from pay are substantial. Their anxieties reflected a structural tension between ideals of economic self-reliance and the perceptions of a labour market as increasingly precarious. These concerns were closely tied to their own experiences of material vulnerability, especially in relation to housing costs (high rents), which were seen as a key barrier to moving out of parental homes and establishing independent households. This pattern of alignment with traditional notions of work,

merit, and familial responsibility, particularly among the male participants, corresponds with Bourdieu's (2012) interpretation of masculine socialisation as shaped by historically sedimented power hierarchies and structured by inherited assumptions about what counts as legitimate participation in society. These dynamics influence how young men orient themselves toward expectations of autonomy and social recognition. In this view, structural transformation was not associated with opportunity but with deepening insecurity.

While expressing sentiments shaped by competitive resentment, both groups simultaneously placed strong value on collective dimensions of space. There was consistent emphasis on togetherness, safety, and belonging, particularly in discussions about the future. These orientations, however, remained politically ambivalent. While participants emphasised the importance of shared spaces and open infrastructures, they also articulated exclusionary views grounded in perceived competition over scarce resources. This tension signals contested belonging. It gestures toward forms of commoning grounded less in idealised solidarity than in situated moral economies. What is shared is not only space, but uncertainty, suggesting that the lived social conditions remain fragmented and contested.

In terms of political engagement, participants did not reject institutional participation outright but voiced disillusionment with past experiences. One participant reflected that they never knew what happened with their input, while another described being asked about certain topics only occasionally and characterised the experience as more symbolic than substantive. Their previous involvement in formal participatory formats was described as a tokenistic presence. However, across both groups, participants emphasised that they lacked the vocabulary and confidence to engage with institutional formats. Many described a gap between their lived experiences and the technocratic language that characterizes participatory processes. This was not merely a matter of access but about shared feeling that meaningful engagement required knowledge and vocabulary they lacked. One participant summarised this tension by stating that they did not really know what direction things were heading and felt generally uninformed. Rather than indicating disengagement,

their distance from participatory structures stemmed from a perceived exclusion from the regimes of knowledge that determine what counts as a legitimate contribution.

The focus group data affirm the conceptual claim regarding the ontological misalignment between institutional frameworks and lived temporalities. For these young people, the future appeared not as a fixed endpoint but as a field of moral and material negotiation. Transformation was encountered less through policy instruments or development strategies than through everyday routines, shifting landscapes, material insecurity, and the affective uncertainties of imagining one's place in the future. At the same time, participants demonstrated a growing awareness of structural injustice and the challenges of building collective forms of life across difference. This unsettled lived temporality was shaped both by the region's broader structural transformation and by youth itself as a life stage marked by indeterminacy and shifting positionalities. Participation, in this context, lacked resonance with the immediacy of challenges experienced through the multiple, uneven rhythms of everyday life. Institutional formats remained structured around abstract policy goals and normative visions, while young people engaged with futures as contingent, emotionally charged, and situated within unsettled present conditions.

Discussion: Relational Futures

Participation has become a normative commitment across scales of governance, particularly in regions undergoing structural change. Yet, as the case of post-coal Lusatia demonstrates, participation is often tied to territorially defined strategic foresight and linear conceptions of time. Institutional frameworks tend to script engagement around measurable outputs such as innovation, growth, and regional competitiveness, framing people and urban cultures as territorial assets to be mobilised. These framings ensure administrative coherence and facilitate the efficient allocation of investment. Participation invited into these normative framings, as Löw-Beer and Luh (2024) show through their examination of four youth participation formats, may demonstrate good design and generate high initial engagement. However, despite thoughtful efforts such as offering funding for youth-initiated projects, supporting independent

youth-led workshops, or enabling self-organisation in advocacy groups, these formats still reveal persistent implementation gaps. Participants frequently reported a lack of follow-up, weak institutional feedback, or limited responsiveness among political decision-makers. This perception is present even in cases where participatory processes are supported by prominent institutions and designed with considerable care. In practice, participation often stalls in the space between ambitious commitments and structured expectations that remain confined within narrow institutional boundaries. Even impeccable participatory design cannot overcome the limitations of processes where the space for negotiation and impact is already defined in advance. As the focus group data also suggest, participation that is framed around the goal of validating or influencing predefined policy objectives tends to be perceived as symbolic. This paper's central argument is that the limits of participation do not necessarily stem from a lack of institutional commitment alone. Rather, they reflect a deeper disjuncture between how participation is framed within policy logic and how it is experienced within the unsettled lives of young people. By overlooking the situated dimensions through which space and time are experienced, institutional framings risk obscuring the complexity of transformation as it unfolds across intersecting and unequal social positions. This can intensify discontent among those who feel excluded from officially imagined trajectories. Questions of inequality, privilege, or social boundaries are often flattened by homogenising assumptions about (young) people and their aspirations. This disconnect becomes visible in the empirical fieldwork, where young people articulate their positions through comparisons of opportunity and recognition. Expressions of competitive resentment point to broader societal shifts toward individualisation and atomisation of societies.

This paper has argued that youth participation is not merely a matter of institutional access or representational inclusion. It constitutes a site of ontological disjunction between how transformation is scripted within territorial governance and how it is encountered in everyday life. Institutional efforts to foster engagement are grounded in a spatial logic of bounded territories and a temporal logic of predefined futures, while young people navigate transformation through the uneven terrains of

material struggle, everyday uncertainties, and contradictory attachments to shared life. Their aspirations are shaped by the fragmented rhythms of place, the weight of inherited narratives, and the instability of their life stage. As a social category, young people are structurally positioned within transformation itself. Their lives are marked by instability not only due to external change, but also because they are still in the process of forming identities, negotiating autonomy, and facing uncertain futures. They internalize, interpret, and contest dominant models of productivity, merit, and independence through the lived textures of everyday life. It is through these embodied negotiations that they begin to develop an awareness of structural injustice and of the fragile, uneven project of assembling collective futures. The analytical lens developed in this paper combines relational conceptions of space and the commons to examine the disjunction between institutional framings of participation and young people's situated experiences. By tracing how young people relate to the future through lived, situated practices, participation is repositioned as a process of co-producing shared temporal horizons. Futures, in this view, are not abstract endpoints to be delivered, but contingent terrains to be inhabited, contested, and reimagined. Participation becomes a practice of commoning the future, rooted in notions of space that are lived, rhythmic, and unsettled. It involves the negotiation of difference and the recognition of uncertainty as generative conditions for imagining various forms of collective life. From this perspective, participation is not simply a means to align the involved actors around predefined policy goals but a process that enables young people to build their own understanding of structural transformations and their sense of agency within them.

Unlocking the transformative potential of participation in regions like Lusatia means attending not only to access and impact but to the lived experiences of those whose futures remain unsettled. When futures are framed as relational and collectively inhabited, participation can be understood as a process shaped by the complex, layered, and often messy relations embedded in lived space. This perspective opens the possibility of moving beyond scripted forms of inclusion toward practices that are responsive to the multiplicity of spatial and temporal experiences. In shaping how those affected are included, planning either opens

or forecloses the horizon of possibility. For those to whom ready-made mechanisms for validating preconceived policy goals offer no meaningful orientation, situated practices that engage the uncertainties of relational space and support context-specific, diverse ways of making sense of common futures may resonate more deeply with their lived experience.

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