Barriers to Meaningful Public Participation in Land-Use Planning: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review synthesizes global empirical evidence on the barriers that hinder meaningful public participation in land-use planning. Guided by the Reporting Standards for Systematic Evidence Syntheses (ROSES), the review employed the PICo framework to formulate the research question and systematically searched in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025. Sixty-six articles met eligibility criteria, and 58 high-quality studies were retained following appraisal using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). Inductive thematic analysis identified six overarching categories of participation barriers: institutional, socio-economic, political, cultural, procedural, and technological constraints. These themes encompass 21 sub-themes, including weak legal mandates, bureaucratic fragmentation, elite capture, limited transparency, socio-economic inequality, restrictive cultural norms, late-stage consultation, inaccessible information, and the growing digital divide. Findings show that such barriers often overlap and collectively restrict communities' influence over planning outcomes, particularly in centralized or resource-constrained governance systems. The review highlights the need for strengthened legal frameworks, improved transparency, culturally attuned engagement strategies, socio-economic support mechanisms, and hybrid digital–physical participation models. By consolidating fragmented evidence across multiple world regions, this review contributes a comprehensive understanding of the structural, procedural, and contextual factors that impede inclusive and equitable land-use planning. The synthesis offers practical guidance for policymakers and provides a foundation for future research aimed at enhancing participatory land governance.

Keywords: Public participation; Land-use planning; Participation barriers; Governance; Spatial planning; Community engagement; Digital divide; Institutional constraints

INTRODUCTION

Public participation has become a central principle in modern land-use planning, widely recognised for enhancing transparency, improving decision-making, and ensuring that development outcomes reflect the needs and aspirations of affected communities (Healey, 1997; Innes & Booher, 2004; Reed, 2008). Across global planning systems, from urban redevelopment to rural land allocation, participatory processes are promoted to build legitimacy, support social inclusion, and minimise conflict between authorities, investors, and local populations (Fung, 2006; Lane, 2005). When participation is substantive, stakeholders can influence planning outcomes, contribute local knowledge, and safeguard community interests, leading to more sustainable and socially acceptable land-use decisions (Pretty, 1995; Richards et al., 2004).

Despite its normative appeal, effective participation remains difficult to achieve in practice. In many countries, participatory exercises continue to be implemented in symbolic or tokenistic forms, offering communities limited influence over planning outcomes (Arnstein, 1969; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2008). Citizens may be consulted late in the planning cycle, provided with incomplete information, or excluded altogether due to structural, institutional, or socio-economic disadvantages (Quick & Bryson, 2016; Hickey & Mohan, 2005). These challenges raise concerns about participation as a democratic tool within land governance, particularly as land-use decisions increasingly involve competing interests, rapid urbanisation, and complex multi-stakeholder environments (Beierle & Cayford, 2002; Van Assche, Beunen, & Duineveld, 2014).

Land-use planning is especially sensitive to participatory deficiencies because land carries deep economic, cultural, and political significance (Booth, 2011; Zoomers, 2010). Planning decisions shape settlement patterns, infrastructure provision, conservation priorities, and development rights, directly affecting livelihoods, identity, and place-based belonging (Healey, 2010; UN-Habitat, 2015). Where engagement is weak, mistrust grows, conflicts escalate, and planning outcomes may disadvantage marginalised or vulnerable communities (Lefevre, 2015; Meerow & Newell, 2017). Global case studies consistently report elite capture of planning processes, opaque decision-making, institutional rigidity, insufficient legal mandates, and limited access to communication channels, all of which restrict community influence even when formal participatory frameworks exist (Miraftab, 2004; Nemcova, 2018; Sinclair & Diduck, 2009).

Although numerous studies have examined participation in land-use planning across regions such as Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America, the literature remains fragmented (Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007; UN-Habitat, 2009). Many empirical works focus on specific countries or cities, offering valuable but localised insights without collectively mapping global patterns of constraints that undermine participatory effectiveness (Laurian & Shaw, 2009; Legacy, 2010). Existing reviews similarly tend to emphasise general participatory principles, legal frameworks, or specific tools such as GIS-based engagement, rather than providing a systematic thematic synthesis of the barriers communities face worldwide (Brown & Chin, 2013; Haklay, 2010).

Given these gaps, a systematic literature review (SLR) is necessary to consolidate empirical evidence, identify recurring challenges, and clarify how institutional, socio-economic, cultural, technological, and political factors shape participatory outcomes across diverse planning systems (Higgins et al., 2011; Shaffril et al., 2021). Following rigorous protocols such as the Reporting Standards for Systematic Evidence Syntheses (ROSES) and applying quality appraisal tools including the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), this review synthesises global studies published between 2015 and 2025 to develop a comprehensive understanding of participation barriers (Haddaway et al., 2018; Hong et al., 2018).

The purpose of this SLR is threefold. First, it identifies the core barriers that constrain community engagement in land-use planning across global contexts. Second, it categorises these barriers into overarching thematic dimensions to enhance conceptual clarity. Third, it offers actionable insights for planners, policymakers, and relevant stakeholders seeking to strengthen inclusive and equitable planning processes. By synthesising evidence from multiple world regions, this review contributes to debates on participatory governance and provides practical guidance for improving participation mechanisms in land-use planning (Fung, 2015; Gaventa, 2006).

The need for the current systematic literature review (SLR)

Although a substantial body of empirical research has examined public participation in land-use planning, existing studies remain highly fragmented across regions, governance systems, and planning traditions. Most empirical works focus on specific national, regional, or project-based contexts, offering valuable but localized insights that are difficult to compare or generalize across different planning systems (Laurian & Shaw, 2009; Legacy, 2010). As a result, there is limited consolidated understanding of the structural and contextual barriers that consistently constrain meaningful participation at a global level.

Previous reviews on participatory planning have largely adopted narrative or thematic approaches, often concentrating on broad participation principles, legal frameworks, or specific engagement tools rather than systematically synthesizing empirical evidence on participation barriers (Brown & Chin, 2013; Haklay, 2010). Such reviews frequently lack transparent selection criteria, explicit quality appraisal, and replicable synthesis

procedures, limiting their ability to identify cross-contextual patterns or assess the robustness of existing findings (Halevi et al., 2017; Higgins & Green, 2011).

In this context, a systematic literature review (SLR) is necessary to bring greater methodological rigor, transparency, and comparability to the study of participation barriers in land-use planning. By applying explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, standardized quality appraisal, and structured synthesis techniques, SLRs enable the consolidation of diverse empirical findings into coherent thematic insights (Haddaway et al., 2018; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Given the diversity of planning systems, governance arrangements, and socio-political conditions across Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Oceania, a systematic approach provides a stronger foundation for identifying recurring barriers and explaining how they vary across contexts.

Accordingly, the primary purpose of this SLR is to systematically synthesize empirical evidence on the barriers to meaningful public participation in land-use planning across global contexts. By reviewing fifty-eight high-quality empirical studies, this review identifies dominant thematic patterns, highlights gaps in existing scholarship, and clarifies how institutional, socio-economic, political, cultural, procedural, and technological factors shape participatory outcomes. The findings aim to support planners, policymakers, and scholars in designing more inclusive, transparent, and context-sensitive participatory planning processes.

METHODOLOGY

Review Protocol-ROSES

The present systematic literature review (SLR) employed the Reporting standards for Systematic Evidence Syntheses (ROSES) as the principal review protocol, given its methodological robustness and comprehensive reporting structure, which collectively support the production of high-quality evidence syntheses (Haddaway et al., 2018). ROSES was selected over the more widely used PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) because PRISMA presents notable limitations when applied to non-medical fields. As documented by Haddaway et al. (2018), PRISMA poses twelve methodological concerns for non-health SLRs, including its strong emphasis on meta-analysis, its orientation toward biomedical research, and the use of terminology that does not fully align with broader social science review processes (e.g., the separation of “screening” and “eligibility”). In contrast, ROSES offers a more adaptable and inclusive framework, making it particularly suitable for systematic reviews that integrate quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method research designs. Guided by these two methodological references, this review followed four core procedures. First, the research question was formulated using Population, Interest, and Context (PICo) and insights drawn from prior SLRs. Second, a structured and systematic search strategy was implemented, comprising three stages: identification, screening, and eligibility. Third, the methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) developed by Hong et al. (2018). Finally, the relevant data were extracted from the selected studies and synthesized using inductive thematic analysis.

Formulation of the research questions

The research question is an integral aspect of any SLR. According to Shaffril et al. (2021b), the research question is the main reference for SLR as it assists authors in extracting crucial keywords for article searching purposes and guiding them in the data extraction process. The research question in this present SLR was formulated based on PICo a mnemonic typically used to develop SLR research questions based on qualitative review or synthesis (Lockwood et al., 2015). Before PICo, some ideas for the research question were generated by referring to past SLRs on climate change, such as Shaffril et al. (2020, 2019). Referring to PICo, the following keywords emerged as essential to develop the research question for this study: local communities and stakeholders (population), barriers to meaningful public participation (interest), and land planning processes globally (context). As a result, the research question formulated in this study is: What are the key barriers preventing meaningful public participation in land-use planning across global contexts?

Systematic search strategies

The third phase of this SLR refers to systematic search strategies composed of three main processes, namely identification, screening and eligibility. A standardized set of search strings was developed and applied consistently across Scopus and Web of Science, while Google Scholar was used as a supplementary source to capture potentially relevant studies not indexed in major databases

Table1. The search string

Database	Search String
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("public participat*" OR "community participat*" OR "citizen participat*"OR "public engagement" OR "community engagement" OR "citizen engagement"OR "community involvement" OR "stakeholder engagement" OR "stakeholder* engag*") AND ("land-use planning" OR "land use planning" OR "spatial planning" OR "urban planning" OR "development planning" OR "territorial planning" OR "land use" OR "land-use" OR "land governance") AND (barrier* OR challeng* OR obstacle* OR constraint* OR limitation* OR hinder* OR "participation barrier*"))
WoS	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("public participat*" OR "community participat*" OR "citizen participat*"OR "public engagement" OR "community engagement" OR "citizen engagement"OR "community involvement" OR "stakeholder engagement" OR "stakeholder* engag*") AND ("land-use planning" OR "land use planning" OR "spatial planning" OR "urban planning" OR "development planning" OR "territorial planning" OR "land use" OR "land-use" OR "land governance") AND (barrier* OR challeng* OR obstacle* OR constraint* OR limitation* OR hinder* OR "participation barrier*"))
Google Scholar	Public participation" AND "land-use planning" AND (barrier OR challenge OR obstacle OR constraint)"community engagement" AND "spatial planning" AND (barrier OR challenge)"citizen participation" AND "urban planning" AND (participation barrier OR limitation) (Search refined manually through title filtering within first 10 pages)

Identification

The initial step is the identification process, which identifies the appropriate keywords for the search process. Based on the research question, three main keywords were applied: local communities, barriers to public participation and land planning processes. Next, these three keywords were enriched; Shaffril et al. (2021b) accentuated the need to increase the main keywords to retrieve more relevant articles for SLR. To enrich the keywords, several synonyms, related terms, and variations for the main keywords were sought. This was carried out by referring to online thesaurus, keywords used in past studies, and keywords suggested by the database (Scopus) and by seeking expert opinions. As a result of this process, the following keywords included combinations of public participation, community engagement, land-use planning, spatial planning, barriers, challenges, constraints, and planning governance (see Table 1).

The search process involved two primary databases, Scopus and Web of Science, while Google Scholar was used as a supporting database. Scopus and Web of Science were selected as the primary databases as they offer multiple benefits, including advanced search queries, a vast range of multidisciplinary areas, as well as broader and more inclusive content coverage that includes journals about climate change (Shaffril et al., 2021a; Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020). As for Google Scholar, despite the concern expressed by Halevi et al. (2017) about its failure to control quality, Haddaway et al. (2015) and Gusenbauer et al. (2019) asserted that Google Scholar might serve as a strong supporting database with approximately 389 million documents retrievable from its database. Although Google Scholar indexes a wide range of materials, including grey literature, this review retained only peer-reviewed journal articles to ensure methodological consistency and robust quality appraisal using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). Grey literature such as reports, theses, policy documents,

and unpublished studies was excluded due to challenges in verifying methodological rigor, transparency, and comparability across sources, in line with best practices for systematic reviews in the social sciences. However, as advanced manual searching was considered integral to diversifying the search techniques to retrieve more related articles (Cooper et al., 2018), both Scopus and Web of Science were selected as the main databases in this study. The search string was developed based on several essential functions, such as field codes, phrase searching, Boolean operators, truncation, and wild card. In contrast, manual searching (until page 10) based on handpicking technique was applied in Google Scholar. In this process, 4530 articles were selected for the screening process. At this stage, no content-related exclusions were applied, as the purpose of identification is to comprehensively capture all potentially relevant studies before narrowing the dataset through more detailed evaluations.

Screening

In the second stage of the review, several screening criteria were applied to refine the articles identified earlier (see Table 2 for inclusion and exclusion criteria). The first criterion ensured that the selected studies were contextually aligned with the aim of this review, meaning that only articles examining public or community participation within land-use, spatial, urban, or development planning processes were retained. Studies that discussed participation in unrelated fields such as health, education, corporate governance, tourism, or environmental management without a planning component were excluded to maintain conceptual consistency. The second criteria concerned the timeline of publication. Articles published between 2015 and 2025 were chosen, consistent with the concept of study maturity, which suggests that a sufficiently long period is required for a research domain to generate an adequate number of publications to justify a systematic review (Alexander, 2020; Kraus et al., 2020).

This ten-year window reflects a period during which global interest in participatory land-use governance has grown, driven by rapid urbanisation, decentralisation reforms, and expanding citizen-engagement agendas in planning systems worldwide (UN-Habitat, 2015). This timeline also ensures that the evidence base reflects contemporary planning practices, governance reforms, and technological developments such as digital participation platforms, which have become more prominent in the last decade (Haklay, 2010; Innes & Booher, 2004). Based on the identification process, the period of 2015–2025 produced 4,530 potential articles, indicating that the field has reached a level of maturity suitable for systematic synthesis (Kraus et al., 2020; Shaffril et al., 2024). Only peer-reviewed journal articles were retained, as these typically offer higher methodological transparency and more robust empirical grounding compared to conference papers, theses, reports, or book chapters, in line with SLR best practice guidance (Higgins et al., 2011; Haddaway et al., 2018). Articles not written in English were excluded due to translation constraints and to ensure consistency during data extraction and thematic analysis. After applying these screening criteria to titles and abstracts, 4410 articles were excluded, and 120 articles were retained for the eligibility assessment stage, where full-text evaluation was conducted to confirm methodological suitability and alignment with the review objectives. Explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied during the screening and eligibility stages to ensure transparency and replicability, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Screening and Eligibility Criteria

Criteria Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Type of Study	Empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods) Peer-reviewed journal articles	• Conceptual papers, theoretical essays, editorials, reviews • Conference papers, theses, books, reports • Non-empirical or non–data-driven studies

Focus of Study	Studies examining public, community, or citizen participation in land-use, spatial, urban, territorial, or development planning contexts• Studies that identify, analyse, or discuss barriers, challenges, or constraints to public participation.	• Studies focusing on participation in unrelated fields (e.g., health, education, business, tourism) • Studies on environmental management without a land-use planning component. • Studies discussing participation but not barriers.
Publication Type	Articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals	• Non–peer-reviewed materials • Grey literature (NGO reports, government documents, unpublished works)
Publication Timeline	Published between 2015–2025, aligned with study maturity (Alexander, 2020; Kraus et al., 2020	• Publications prior to 2015 • Forthcoming or incomplete manuscripts
Language	Articles published in English	• Articles published in languages other than English

Eligibility

Eligibility formed the third stage of this SLR, during which the relevance of each shortlisted article was assessed through manual examination of the title, abstract, and, where necessary, the full text, in line with recommended systematic review procedures (Higgins & Green, 2011; Haddaway et al., 2018). This phase ensured that only studies directly aligned with the objectives of the review were retained. During this process, several articles were removed because they did not provide a clear analysis of barriers to public participation in land-use or spatial planning. Some studies focused primarily on general planning processes without examining participation, while others concentrated on environmental management, disaster response, or policy implementation without a substantive land-use planning participation component. Articles were also excluded when participation was mentioned only superficially, when the study context fell outside land-use or spatial planning, or when insufficient methodological detail prevented reliable data extraction and appraisal (Hong et al., 2018). After applying these criteria, fifty-four articles were excluded, leaving sixty-six articles that satisfied the eligibility requirements and proceeded to the next stage of the review quality appraisal.

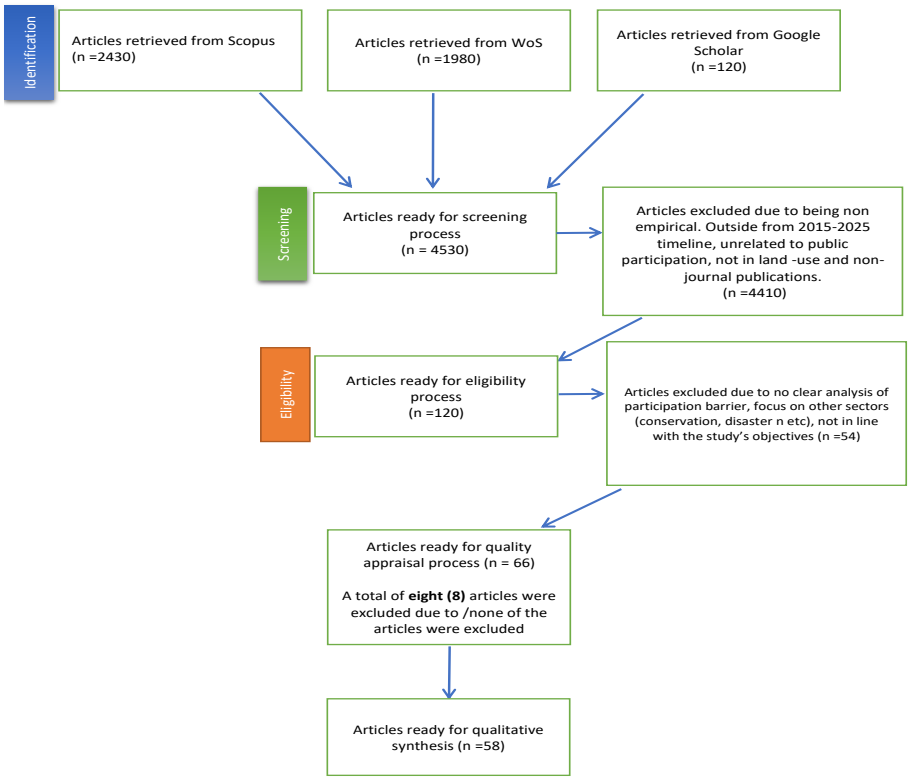

Fig.1. Flow diagram

Quality Appraisal

Quality appraisal constituted the fourth stage of this systematic review and was conducted to ensure that only methodologically robust studies were included in the final synthesis. The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) 2018 developed by Hong et al. (2018) was adopted due to its suitability for evaluating qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research designs, which reflects the methodological diversity of studies on public participation in land-use planning. MMAT offers a structured set of criteria covering the clarity of research questions, appropriateness of study design, adequacy of data collection techniques, coherence between data and interpretations, and overall methodological rigor. Each of the sixty-six eligible studies was assessed independently against the five MMAT criteria relevant to its methodological category. Articles that failed to meet at least three criteria were considered to have insufficient methodological integrity and were subsequently excluded, ensuring that the final synthesis was grounded in high-quality evidence. Through this process, eight articles were removed due to issues such as unclear sampling procedures, inadequate reporting of data collection techniques, or insufficient analytical detail. Fifty-eight high-quality empirical studies were retained for the qualitative synthesis. This appraisal stage strengthened the reliability and validity of the review findings by ensuring that only methodologically sound studies contributed to the thematic analysis.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Following quality appraisal, relevant information from the remaining fifty-eight studies was systematically extracted using a structured data extraction form, as recommended in systematic review guidelines to enhance transparency and reproducibility (Higgins & Green, 2011; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). This form captured key study attributes, including author(s) and year of publication, country and geographical region, research design and methodological approach, planning context (land-use, spatial, urban, or development planning), type of participation examined, identified barriers, challenges, or constraints, and main findings relevant to meaningful public participation. This structured extraction ensured consistency across studies and supported traceability during synthesis (Higgins & Green, 2011).

The extracted data were then subjected to inductive thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative analytic approach for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns across a body of evidence (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thomas & Harden, 2008). The process began with open coding, where segments of extracted text were labelled

to capture meaningful concepts related to barriers in participatory planning. Codes were iteratively compared, refined, and clustered according to their conceptual similarity, following established procedures for rigorous thematic analysis (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Through repeated cycles of comparison and abstraction, broader themes and sub-themes were generated, reflecting recurring patterns within the evidence base. This inductive approach allowed the themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than being imposed a priori, ensuring that the synthesis accurately reflected the diversity and nuance of global empirical studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thomas & Harden, 2008). The final thematic structure comprised six overarching themes institutional, socio-economic, political, cultural, procedural, and technological barriers each supported by multiple sub-themes. These themes formed the foundation for the findings and discussion sections of the review.

RESULTS

Background of the selected studies

A total of fifty-eight articles were analysed in this present SLR. Regionally, the highest number of studies originated from Asia (20 articles), followed by Africa (15 articles). In addition, ten articles were conducted in European countries, while eight articles were based in Latin America. The Oceania region contributed five articles. Within the Asian set, several studies were in Southeast Asian contexts such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Singapore, reflecting growing concern over participation in rapidly urbanising environments. In terms of year of publication, 2 articles were published in 2015, followed by 4 articles in 2016, 6 articles in 2017, 6 articles in 2018, 8 articles in 2019, 11 articles in 2020, 6 articles in 2021, 6 articles in 2022, 6 articles in 2023, and 3 articles in 2024. As for research design, most articles were qualitative (31 articles), followed by fourteen articles that deployed a mixed-method approach, and thirteen quantitative articles.

The developed themes

Based on the thematic analysis, six overarching themes were identified across the 58 selected studies: institutional barriers, socio-economic barriers, political barriers, cultural barriers, procedural barriers, and technological barriers. These themes collectively describe the systemic, structural, and contextual challenges that hinder meaningful and inclusive public participation in land-use planning. In total, 21 sub-themes were generated, each representing a distinct barrier repeatedly reported across countries, governance settings, and planning systems.

Institutional barriers

Institutional barriers were highlighted across many contexts, particularly in African countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Mali, Botswana, and South Africa (Adebayo & Mensah, 2017; Mwangi & Otieno, 2018; Ndlovu, 2019; Toure, 2020; Sibanda & Ncube, 2015), but were also evident in Asian (Rahman & Hashim, 2018; Nguyen, 2022), Middle Eastern (Omar, 2019; Al-Hassan, 2021; Hussein, 2024), Latin American (Rodríguez, 2018; Castro, 2022), and European settings (Müller & Krause, 2016; Dimitriou, 2018). Four sub-themes were identified.

a) Weak legal mandates (IB1)

Several studies found that planning laws either lacked explicit requirements for public participation or framed participation as optional rather than mandatory (Adebayo & Mensah, 2017; Rodriguez, 2018). In these cases, planning authorities often engaged the public only after major decisions were already finalised. Similarly, in Jordan, Ethiopia, and Uganda, studies observed that legal procedures existed on paper but lacked implementation mechanisms or accountability structures, resulting in inconsistent application across districts (Al-Hassan, 2021; Alemu, 2021; Munyua, 2021).

b) Centralised decision-making (IB2)

Research from Kenya, Iraq, Vietnam, Malaysia, and South Korea (Mwangi & Otieno, 2018; Hussein, 2024; Nguyen, 2022; Akhtar, 2021; An & Park, 2017) demonstrated that decision-making power was concentrated among national or regional elites, leaving local communities with little influence over land-use outcomes. Even when consultations were conducted, they were often characterised by one-way communication, reinforcing top-down planning cultures. Several European studies echoed similar issues, noting that highly bureaucratised or state-driven systems (such as in Italy and Lithuania) also constrained community input during early planning stages (Bianchi, 2021; Pavlova, 2024).

c) Bureaucratic rigidity (IB3)

Studies from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Brazil, and New Zealand (Ndlovu, 2019; Dlamini & Moyo, 2016; Mulenga & Chanda, 2020; Santos, 2019; Green, 2019) described administrative procedures that were lengthy, complex, and inaccessible. Communities often struggled to navigate technical forms, approval stages, and meeting protocols. In many cases, planning departments lacked adequate staff, financial resources, or training to run inclusive participation programmes. These limitations contributed to delays, inconsistent communication, and consultation fatigue among participants.

d) Fragmented institutional roles (IB4)

Fragmented institutional roles created confusion in countries such as Italy, Malaysia, Mexico, Chile, and Colombia (Bianchi, 2021; Akhtar, 2021; Lopez, 2020; Rodríguez, 2018; Castro, 2022). Overlapping responsibilities between ministries, councils, and planning boards led to duplicated processes or contradictory messages about participation requirements. In other cases, authorities engaged the public through separate and uncoordinated channels, limiting the coherence of consultation exercises.

Socio -Economic Barriers

Socio-economic barriers were present across all regions and were especially pronounced in low-income, rural, and marginalised communities. These barriers included financial constraints, low literacy, livelihood and time pressures, and patterns of social inequality, all of which shaped who could participate and how effectively.

e) Financial constraints (SEB1)

It appeared prominently in Zimbabwe, Malawi, India, Argentina, Peru, and Fiji (Dlamini & Moyo, 2016; Nyirenda, 2020; Sivakumar, 2020; Ramos, 2023; Gutiérrez, 2017; Baker, 2023). Many residents lacked the resources needed to travel to town halls or pay meeting fees, and some were required to forgo daily wages to attend consultations. As a result, participation was often skewed toward individuals with stable incomes or flexible working patterns. In Malawi and Kenya, research noted that even minimal costs such as transport fares or childcare expenses were significant barriers for poorer households (Nyirenda, 2020; Mwangi & Otieno, 2018).

f) Low literacy and educational levels (SEB2)

Low literacy and educational limitations further restricted community members' ability to interpret planning maps, legal notices, and technical documents. This challenge was widely reported in Ethiopia, Pakistan, Colombia, and rural Australia (Alemu, 2021; Khan, 2016; Castro, 2022; Howard, 2024). Residents often expressed uncertainty about their rights or feared contributing due to lack of confidence. Several studies noted that authorities rarely adapted materials to local languages or simplified formats, reinforcing informational exclusion.

g) Livelihood and time pressures (SEB3)

Livelihood and time pressures were another critical barrier, particularly in agricultural, pastoral, and informal economic settings. Studies from Nepal, Bangladesh, Uganda, Mozambique, and Indonesia (Thapa, 2022; Haque, 2019; Munyua, 2021; Sonko et al., 2020; Suyanto, 2015) found that seasonal labour cycles, long working hours, and subsistence responsibilities left communities with little time to engage in planning processes. Meetings were

often scheduled during peak work periods, further reducing attendance. In some contexts, daily survival priorities overshadowed any perceived long-term benefits of participating.

h) Social inequality and marginalisation (SEB4)

In Botswana, Brazil, Pakistan, Fiji, and South Africa (Sibanda & Ncube, 2015; Santos, 2019; Khan, 2016; Baker, 2023; Ndlovu, 2019), certain groups such as women, migrants, or landless households were consistently excluded from planning discussions. These groups faced long-standing cultural and socio-economic barriers that limited their influence even when they were physically present at meetings.

Political Barriers

Political factors strongly influence the quality and credibility of public participation. Three sub-themes emerged: elite capture, limited transparency, and weak political will.

i) Elite capture (PB1)

Cases from Ghana, Mali, Uganda, Brazil, and Colombia (Adebayo & Mensah, 2017; Toure, 2020; Munyua, 2021; Santos, 2019; Castro, 2022). Powerful local leader's traditional chiefs, landowners, political brokers often dominated discussions and shaped decisions in their favour. This often-sidelined minority groups, women, youth, and poorer households. In Colombia and Brazil, for example, elites were found to influence zoning changes or land allocations that benefited commercial interests at the expense of community needs (Castro, 2022; Santos, 2019).

j) Limited transparency (PB2)

Limited transparency was a pervasive issue across Malaysia, Greece, Jordan, Spain, Chile, and Mexico (Rahman & Hashim, 2018; Dimitriou, 2018; Al-Hassan, 2021; González, 2020; Rodríguez, 2018; Lopez, 2020). Many studies highlighted that key planning documents were released too late, not publicly accessible, or only available in highly technical formats. This lack of openness prevented meaningful scrutiny and fuelled mistrust among communities. In several cases, authorities selectively disclosed information, sharing positive development impacts while omitting details on displacement, environmental risks, or compensation.

k) Weak political will (PB3)

Weak political will was also a major challenge. In India, Chile, Vietnam, and Italy (Sivakumar, 2020; Rodríguez, 2018; Phan, 2023; Bianchi, 2021), despite having participation frameworks in place, local governments lacked genuine commitment to involving communities. Consultations were often conducted only to satisfy legal requirements or to create the appearance of legitimacy. Several studies reported that planners rarely incorporated public feedback into final decisions, further demonstrating insincerity within political structures.

Cultural Barriers

Cultural norms and social structures shape how communities engage with planning processes. Three sub-themes were developed: cultural norms restricting voice, power distance, and gender-based exclusion.

l) Cultural norms restricting voice (CB1)

Cultural norms restricting open expression were reported in Sierra Leone, Pakistan, Thailand, Ethiopia, and South Korea (Kamara, 2018; Khan, 2016; Phoomlong, 2017; Alemu, 2021; An & Park, 2017). In these settings, speaking out in public forums was perceived as disrespectful or inappropriate, particularly for younger members or those of lower social standing. This created environments where only a few individuals typically older men or community elites felt comfortable sharing their views.

m) Power distance (CB2)

Power distance further limited participation, particularly in hierarchical cultures where deference to authority was expected. Studies from Iraq, Jordan, Vietnam, and South Korea (Hussein, 2024; Al-Hassan, 2021; Nguyen, 2022; An & Park, 2017) noted that many residents viewed officials and planners as unquestionable decision-makers. As a result, communities tended to listen passively rather than actively contribute, reducing the deliberative quality of consultations.

n) Gender-based exclusion (CB3)

Gender-based exclusion was a major concern in Nepal, Bangladesh, Uganda, and Fiji (Shrestha, 2023; Haque, 2019; Munyua, 2021; Baker, 2023). In several of these contexts, women faced cultural expectations that restricted their mobility, limited their confidence to speak in public, or assigned household duties that prevented their participation. Even when women attended meetings, they were often overshadowed by dominant male voices.

Procedural Barriers

Procedural barriers were among the most frequently reported constraints. Four sub-themes were identified: tokenistic or late engagement, limited access to information, poor facilitation, and exclusion of marginalised groups.

o) Tokenistic or late engagement (PRB1)

Studies from Malaysia, Lithuania, Uganda, and New Zealand (Akhtar, 2021; Pavlova, 2024; Munyua, 2021; Green, 2019) found where communities were often involved only at the final stages of planning. By this point, major development decisions such as land acquisition, zoning changes, or site selection had already been made. This reduced the value of participation to mere formalities and contributed to frustration among residents.

p) Limited access to information (PRB2)

Limited access to information was a major theme in South Africa, Egypt, Spain, Chile, and Colombia (Ndlovu, 2019; Girma, 2022; González, 2020; Rodríguez, 2018; Castro, 2022). Technical documents were often not translated into local languages, presented in inaccessible formats, or released too close to meeting dates. In some cases, documents were shared only with selected stakeholders, enabling information asymmetry that favoured interests.

q) Poor Facilitation and consultation design (PRB3)

In Zimbabwe, Malaysia, Greece, Australia, and Sri Lanka (Dlamini & Moyo, 2016; Rahman & Hashim, 2018; Dimitriou, 2018; Thompson, 2016; Wijesinghe, 2020), meetings were dominated by officials, held at inconvenient times, or conducted in places that excluded rural or low-income communities. Facilitation techniques rarely encouraged dialogue, and time allocated for discussion was often minimal.

r) Exclusion of marginalised groups (PRB4)

Marginalised groups including informal settlers, pastoralists, migrants, Indigenous communities, and low-income families were frequently excluded from planning processes in Ecuador, Botswana, Pakistan, and Colombia (Ruíz, 2020; Sibanda & Ncube, 2015; Khan, 2016; Castro, 2022). Their exclusion was attributed to structural discrimination, logistical challenges, and weak institutional outreach mechanisms.

Technological Barriers

This final theme relates to limitations connected to digital participation tools. Three sub-themes were identified: digital divide, inadequate platforms, and low digital literacy.

s) Digital divide (TB1)

The digital divide was a major issue in Malawi, Bangladesh, Ghana, and Fiji (Nyirenda, 2020; Haque, 2019; Adebayo & Mensah, 2017; Baker, 2023). In these settings, limited access to smartphones, computers, and broadband connections prevented residents from accessing online participation tools, planning documents, or virtual consultation sessions. In some areas, internet connectivity was unstable, expensive, or entirely absent.

t) Inadequate platforms or tools (TB2)

Inadequate online participation platforms were reported in Malaysia, Iraq, Vietnam, and Lithuania (Akhtar, 2021; Hussein, 2024; Nguyen, 2022; Pavlova, 2024). Although many governments adopted digital tools to widen participation, the platforms were often poorly designed, technically unstable, or insufficiently promoted. Several studies found that communities lacked clear guidance on how to use the platforms, resulting in extremely low digital participation.

u) Low digital literacy (TB3)

Low digital literacy further complicated matters. Studies from Nepal, Uganda, Peru, and rural Australia (Thapa, 2022; Munyua, 2021; Gutiérrez, 2017; Howard, 2024) highlighted limited familiarity with online systems, digital forms, and electronic mapping tools. Older participants, low-income households, and rural populations were particularly affected.

Table 3. The developed themes and sub themes

Study	Design	Country	Institutional Barriers (IB)				Socio-Economic Barriers (SEB)				Political Barriers (PB)			Cultural Barriers (CB)			Procedural Barriers (PRB)				Technological Barriers (TB)		
			IB1	IB2	IB3	IB4	SEB1	SEB2	SEB3	SEB4	PB1	PB2	PB3	CB1	CB2	CB3	PRB1	PRB2	PRB3	PRB4	TB1	TB2	TB3
Adebayo & Mensah (2017)	QL	Ghana	✓							✓	✓										✓		
Mwangi & Otieno (2018)	MX	Kenya		✓																			
Ndlovu (2019)	QL	South Africa			✓					✓								✓					
Mulenga & Chanda (2020)	QN	Zambia			✓																		
Alemu (2021)	QL	Ethiopia	✓					✓						✓									
Kaboré (2017)	MX	Burkina Faso	✓				✓	✓															
Kamara (2018)	QL	Sierra Leone					✓							✓									
Dlamini & Moyo (2016)	QL	Zimbabwe					✓												✓				
Okeke (2019)	QN	Nigeria							✓														
Girma (2022)	QL	Ethiopia																✓					
Nyirenda (2020)	QN	Malawi					✓		✓												✓		
Sibanda & Ncube (2015)	QL	Botswana								✓										✓			
Toure (2020)	QL	Mali	✓								✓												
Kouadio (2023)	MX	Ivory Coast																					
Munyua (2021)	QL	Uganda							✓		✓					✓	✓						✓
Rahman & Hashim (2018)	MX	Malaysia	✓	✓								✓					✓		✓				
Sivakumar (2020)	QN	India					✓						✓										
Liu & Chen (2019)	QL	China																					
An & Park (2017)	QN	South Korea		✓										✓	✓								
Khan (2016)	QL	Pakistan						✓		✓				✓						✓			
Thapa (2022)	QL	Nepal							✓														✓
Haque (2019)	MX	Bangladesh							✓							✓					✓		
Wijesinghe (2020)	QL	Sri Lanka			✓														✓				
Phoomlong (2017)	MX	Thailand												✓									
Suyanto (2015)	QL	Indonesia							✓														
Akhtar (2021)	MX	Malaysia		✓		✓											✓					✓	
Shrestha (2023)	QL	Nepal														✓							
Nguyen (2022)	QN	Vietnam		✓											✓							✓	
Omar (2019)	QL	Saudi Arabia																					
Al-Hassan (2021)	QL	Jordan	✓									✓			✓								
Elmira (2020)	MX	Azerbaijan				✓																	
Hussein (2024)	QN	Iraq		✓											✓							✓	
Mahdi (2018)	QN	Iran																					
Phan (2023)	QL	Vietnam											✓										
Ooi (2022)	QL	Singapore																					
Müller & Krause (2016)	MX	Germany		✓																			
Peterson (2019)	QN	Sweden																					
Dimitriou (2018)	QL	Greece			✓							✓							✓				
Ivanova (2020)	QL	Bulgaria																					
Kovač (2017)	QL	Slovenia																					
Bianchi (2021)	MX	Italy		✓		✓							✓										
Hughes (2022)	QL	United Kingdom																					
González (2020)	QN	Spain										✓						✓					
Tóth (2023)	QL	Hungary																					
Pavlova (2024)	MX	Lithuania	✓			✓											✓					✓	
Rodriguez (2018)	QL	Chile	✓			✓						✓	✓					✓					
Santos (2019)	MX	Brazil			✓					✓	✓												
Lopez (2020)	QN	Mexico	✓			✓						✓											
Castro (2022)	QL	Colombia	✓			✓		✓			✓							✓		✓			
Gutiérrez (2017)	QL	Peru					✓	✓															✓
Ramos (2023)	MX	Argentina					✓																
Alvarez (2021)	QL	Costa Rica																					
Ruiz (2020)	QN	Ecuador																		✓			
Thompson (2016)	QL	Australia																	✓				
Green (2019)	MX	New Zealand			✓												✓						
Martin (2020)	QN	Australia			✓																		
Howard (2024)	QL	Australia						✓															✓
Baker (2023)	QL	Fiji					✓			✓						✓					✓		

Table 4. The themes and sub-themes

Institutional Barriers (IB)	IB1 – Weak or absent legal mandates IB2 – Centralised decision making IB3 – Bureaucratic rigidity IB4 – Fragmented institutional roles
Socio-Economic Barriers (SEB)	SEB1 – Financial constraints SEB2 – Low education and literacy levels SEB3 – Livelihood/time pressures SEB4 – Social inequality& marginalisation
Political Barriers (PB)	PB1 – Elite capture & political interference PB2 – Limited transparency PB3 – Weak political will
Cultural Barriers (CB)	CB1 – Cultural norms restricting voice CB2 – High power distance

	CB3 – Gender based exclusion
Procedural Barriers (PRB)	PRB1 – Tokenistic or late consultation PRB2 – Information accessibility issues PRB3 – Poor facilitation/consultation design PRB4 – Exclusion of marginalised communities
Technological Barriers (TB)	TB1 – Digital divide (lack of internet, devices, or connectivity) TB2 – Insufficient communication platforms TB3 – Low digital literacy

DISCUSSION

Notably, the findings of this SLR reveal that communities across different regions face a complex and interconnected set of barriers that prevent them from participating meaningfully in land-use planning processes. Based on the thematic analysis, six major categories of barriers were identified institutional, socio-economic, political, cultural, procedural, and technological barriers each consisting of multiple sub-dimensions. Although these barriers manifest differently across countries, the evidence indicates that they often overlap, reinforce one another, and collectively shape the degree of community empowerment in planning. Institutional barriers were found to be the strongest determinants of participation, especially in countries with centralised governance systems or weak regulatory structures. Similar to how demographic factors influenced farmers' adaptive behaviours in the sample article, several studies linked meaningful participation to the strength of legal mandates, institutional clarity, and decentralisation (Adebayo & Mensah, 2017; Pavlova, 2024; Rahman & Hashim, 2018). Where laws were vague or non-binding, communities were less likely to be involved early in the planning cycle, resulting in participation that was symbolic. In places where planning authority is heavily centralised, such as Vietnam, Iraq, Malaysia, and South Korea, communities reported minimal influence over decisions because critical choices were made at higher administrative levels (Nguyen, 2022; Hussein, 2024; Akhtar, 2021; An & Park, 2017). These findings indicate that institutional strength directly correlates with the likelihood of achieving meaningful participation, just as older farmers' experience increased their diversification ability in the farmers' study.

Access to information played a similarly critical role. Communities with better exposure to planning information demonstrated greater readiness to engage effectively in consultations. Studies in Ethiopia, Colombia, Greece, and Spain revealed that individuals who had prior knowledge of planning rules, land rights, or development impacts were more likely to challenge proposals, ask questions, and demand accountability (Alemu, 2021; Castro, 2022; Dimitriou, 2018; González, 2020). Conversely, those with limited access to information or overly technical documents were less confident and often acted as silent listeners. This aligns with the farmers' article, where those with greater climate knowledge were more likely to adopt adaptation practices. In the planning context, information empowerment similarly enhances individuals' ability to participate meaningfully.

Socio-economic factors also played a dominant role, just as age, education, and livelihood diversification shaped farmers' adaptive strategies. Communities with stable income, higher education levels, and better literacy demonstrated greater capacity to navigate planning procedures (Nyirenda, 2020; Howard, 2024; Khan, 2016). In contrast, low-income households struggled to attend meetings due to transport costs, time constraints, or daily wage dependence (Dlamini & Moyo, 2016; Ramos, 2023; Baker, 2023). The review shows that participation is often a privilege, particularly in low-income contexts where meeting attendance competes with livelihood survival. Like how resource-limited farmers struggled to diversify crops, resource-constrained citizens face reduced ability to participate, resulting in unequal representation in planning processes.

Political dynamics further complicate participation, with elite capture, selective transparency, and weak political will emerging as major obstacles. In Ghana, Brazil, Uganda, and Colombia, local elites dominated discussions or filtered community feedback, suppressing dissenting voices (Adebayo & Mensah, 2017; Santos, 2019; Munyua, 2021; Castro, 2022). Limited transparency, such as withholding documents or releasing them late, discouraged community engagement in Malaysia, Spain, and Chile (Rahman & Hashim, 2018; González, 2020; Rodríguez, 2018). These patterns mirror the farmers' context, where limited access to institutions or resources restricted their ability to adopt improved strategies. In the planning domain, political gatekeeping plays an equally restrictive role those with power use their influence to protect personal or institutional interests.

Cultural norms also shaped participation behaviours significantly. High power distance in Iraq, Jordan, Vietnam, and South Korea discouraged communities from questioning authorities, reflecting culturally embedded deference to hierarchy (Hussein, 2024; Al-Hassan, 2021; Nguyen, 2022; An & Park, 2017). Gender norms in Nepal, Bangladesh, Uganda, and Fiji limited women's ability to contribute, especially in public meetings dominated by men (Shrestha, 2023; Haque, 2019; Munyua, 2021; Baker, 2023). Like the farmers' example where age and social roles influenced decision-making, cultural norms in planning determine whose voice is valued and whose voice is silenced, often restricting meaningful dialogue. Procedural barriers such as late-stage consultations, inaccessible meeting venues, and poor facilitation were equally limiting. Studies in Malaysia, Lithuania, Uganda, and New Zealand (Akhtar, 2021; Pavlova, 2024; Munyua, 2021; Green, 2019) showed that communities were often invited only after proposals had been drafted, leaving little opportunity for influence. This parallels the farmers' challenges, where late access to resources reduced adaptation opportunity. In planning, late engagement results in community frustration, distrust, and the perception that participation is merely performative.

Finally, technological barriers are emerging as a new dimension of exclusion. The digital divide in Malawi, Bangladesh, Ghana, and Fiji (Nyirenda, 2020; Haque, 2019; Adebayo & Mensah, 2017; Baker, 2023), combined with low digital literacy in Nepal, Australia, Uganda, and Peru (Thapa, 2022; Howard, 2024; Munyua, 2021; Gutiérrez, 2017), significantly restricts online participation. As governments increasingly rely on digital platforms, communities without devices, connectivity, or digital confidence become further marginalised. Just as farmers with limited technology access struggled to adopt improved methods, digital exclusion now acts as a modern barrier to participatory planning. Although this review identified six comprehensive categories of participation barriers, it is evident that communities continue to face structural disadvantages that require systemic solutions rather than isolated interventions. In many countries, institutional weaknesses, socio-economic inequality, cultural norms, and political resistance converge, making participation inaccessible to those most affected by land-use decisions. The combination of these barriers indicates that improving participation requires more than procedural adjustments; it demands institutional reform, political accountability, socio-economic support, and culturally sensitive approaches that collectively empower communities. To further address this variability, the following subsection synthesizes how participation barriers differ across regions and governance systems.

Regional and Governance-System Variations in Participation Barriers

Beyond identifying common barriers, this review highlights how their configuration differs across regions and governance systems, as discussed in Section 5.1. While the barriers to meaningful public participation identified in this review recur across global contexts, their relative salience and configuration vary significantly by region, governance structure, and income context. The synthesis reveals that participation barriers are not uniformly experienced; rather, they are shaped by the interaction between institutional design, political authority, socio-economic conditions, and planning traditions.

In low- and lower-middle-income contexts, particularly in parts of Africa and South Asia, socio-economic barriers such as financial constraints, livelihood pressures, and low literacy levels emerged as dominant constraints on participation. In these settings, participation often competes directly with daily survival priorities, limiting communities' capacity to attend meetings, interpret planning information, or sustain engagement over time. These socio-economic constraints frequently intersect with weak institutional capacity and limited decentralization, resulting in participation processes that are formally inclusive but substantively inaccessible.

By contrast, studies from higher-income regions, particularly Europe and parts of Oceania, reported fewer material access barriers but highlighted procedural and institutional constraints as the primary limitations. These included late-stage consultation, technocratic planning cultures, bureaucratic rigidity, and limited responsiveness to public input. Although formal participation mechanisms were often well established, communities in these contexts frequently lacked meaningful influence over final decisions, suggesting that institutional maturity does not automatically translate into substantive empowerment.

Governance structure also played a critical role in shaping participation outcomes. Centralised planning systems, as observed in several Asian and Middle Eastern contexts, were consistently associated with top-down decision-making, weak local discretion, and symbolic consultation. In contrast, decentralised or multi-level governance systems did not necessarily guarantee meaningful participation, in several Latin American and African cases, fragmented institutional roles and elite capture constrained community influence despite the presence of participatory provisions. These findings indicate that participation barriers are less a function of formal decentralization alone and more closely tied to how authority, accountability, and decision-making power are distributed in practice.

Overall, socio-economic barriers dominate in lower-income and rural contexts, while procedural and institutional barriers are more salient in higher-income planning systems. Centralised governance structures consistently correlate with symbolic participation, whereas decentralised systems face risks of fragmentation and elite capture. These patterns indicate that participation barriers are governance-contingent rather than universal.

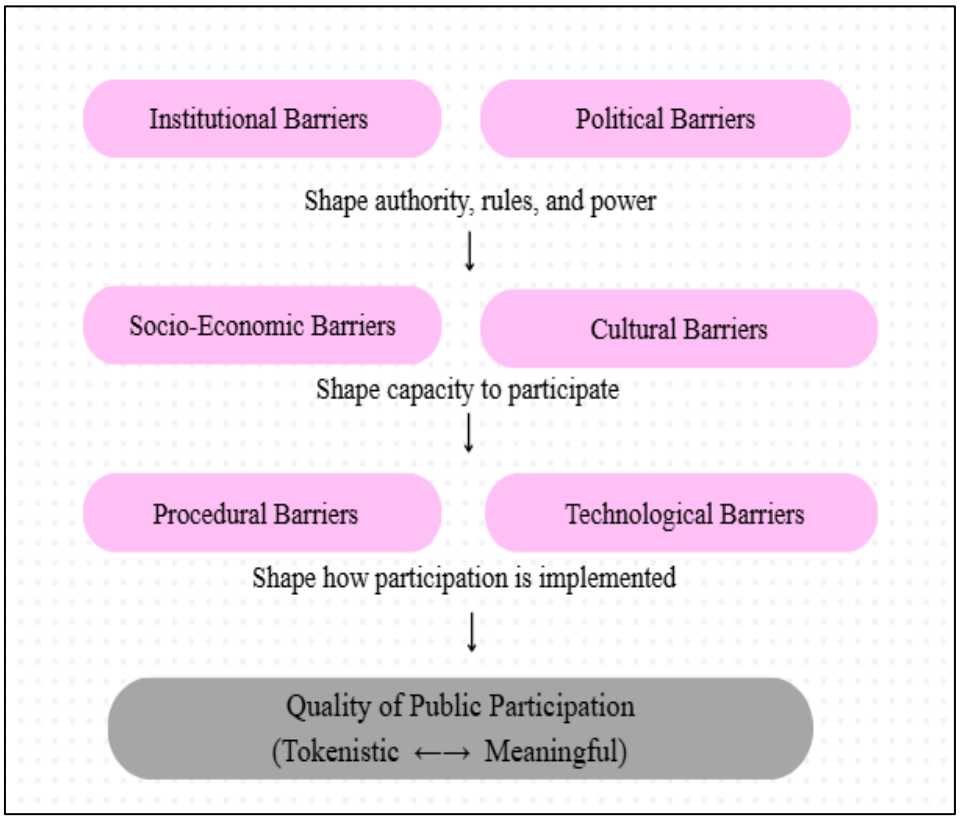

Fig.2. Conceptual framework synthesizing interrelated institutional, socio-economic, political, cultural, procedural, and technological barriers shaping the quality of public participation in land-use planning

Figure 2 synthesizes the review findings into an integrative conceptual framework illustrating how interrelated barriers shape the quality of public participation in land-use planning. Institutional and political barriers influence authority structures, decision-making rules, and power relations within planning systems. Socio-economic and cultural barriers affect communities' capacity and willingness to participate, while procedural and technological barriers shape how participation is designed and implemented in practice. Together, these interacting factors determine whether public participation remains tokenistic or progresses toward more meaningful and inclusive engagement.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review synthesised evidence from fifty-eight empirical studies to identify the core barriers that hinder meaningful public participation in land-use planning across Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Oceania. The review identified six overarching themes institutional, socio-economic, political, cultural, procedural, and technological barriers which collectively shape the inclusiveness, equity, and effectiveness of participatory planning processes. The analysis demonstrates that participation challenges are rarely the result of a single factor; rather, they emerge from the interaction of structural weaknesses, governance limitations, cultural hierarchies, and socio-economic inequalities embedded within planning systems.

Institutional weaknesses, including weak legal mandates, bureaucratic fragmentation, and centralised decision-making, were found to be the most persistent obstacles to meaningful engagement. These factors often set restrictive parameters around who is consulted, when engagement occurs, and how community feedback is incorporated into planning decisions. Socio-economic inequalities, such as financial hardship, low literacy, and livelihood pressures, further limit the ability of marginalised groups to participate. Political influences especially elite capture, selective transparency, and weak political will shape whose voices are privileged and whose concerns are sidelined. Cultural norms around authority, gender, and community hierarchy also play a crucial role in determining who feels confident to speak in public settings. Meanwhile, the rise of digital consultation introduces new forms of exclusion for individuals and communities affected by the digital divide or low digital literacy.

Overall, the findings confirm that barriers to participation are deeply systemic, requiring more than procedural reforms. Improving participation depends on addressing broader institutional, political, and socio-economic structures that determine how planning power is distributed. The insights from this review contribute to strengthening participatory governance by informing planners, policymakers, and scholars about the multi-layered dynamics that shape community involvement in land-use decision.

Recommendation for future studies

The findings of this review highlight several important directions for future research on meaningful public participation in land-use planning.

First, the evidence shows that existing studies are heavily concentrated in a limited set of countries, particularly within Africa, South Asia, and parts of Latin America (e.g., Adebayo & Mensah, 2017; Khan, 2016; Castro, 2022). Regions such as the Middle East, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Pacific remain significantly underrepresented. Expanding research into these areas is essential to capture the diversity of political cultures, planning traditions, and institutional contexts that shape participatory outcomes. Broader geographic coverage will strengthen the global applicability of future SLRs and reduce regional bias in participatory planning scholarship.

Second, very few studies employ comparative or longitudinal designs. Most existing research focuses on participation within a single country or planning episode (e.g., Rahman & Hashim, 2018; Munyua, 2021; González, 2020), limiting our understanding of how participation barriers evolve over time or vary across governance systems. Comparative studies such as cross-country analyses between different administrative structures could reveal how institutional reforms, decentralization initiatives, or shifting political environments influence participation. Longitudinal research tracking the same communities over time would provide insights into whether improvements in legal frameworks, procedural guidelines, or decentralised governance would translate into sustained changes in community empowerment.

Third, the rapid digitalization of public engagement calls for deeper research into digital participation. Several studies noted challenges related to digital exclusion, uneven internet access, and low digital literacy (Nyirenda, 2020; Haque, 2019; Howard, 2024; Thapa, 2022). However, few examined how platform design, accessibility, or user experience shaped digital engagement outcomes. Future research should explore hybrid participation models, the effectiveness of online consultation tools in low-resource settings, and strategies to prevent digital technologies from reinforcing existing social inequalities. Lastly, the review identifies an important gap in

outcome-focused research. While many studies documented participation processes or community perceptions (e.g., Dimitriou, 2018; Bianchi, 2021; Rodríguez, 2018), far fewer examined how public input influenced actual planning decisions, land allocations, conflict reduction, displacement patterns, or environmental outcomes. Future research should assess the tangible impacts of participation and identify which approaches genuinely enhance community influence versus those that remain largely symbolic. Such research will be critical to designing evidence-based reforms that strengthen participatory governance and improve planning outcomes

Recommendation for policymakers

The findings of this review provide several important insights that can guide policymakers in strengthening meaningful public participation in land-use planning.

First, the persistence of weak legal mandates and centralised planning systems across many countries (Adebayo & Mensah, 2017; Rahman & Hashim, 2018; Hussein, 2024; Nguyen, 2022) demonstrates the need for policymakers to establish clear, enforceable legal frameworks that embed participation at every stage of the planning cycle. Strengthening statutory requirements for early-stage consultation, mandating public disclosure of planning documents, and clarifying institutional responsibilities can reduce bureaucratic inconsistencies and prevent participation from becoming symbolic. These reforms can bring planning processes closer to communities and ensure that engagement is treated as a legal obligation rather than an administrative formality.

Second, socio-economic inequalities emerged as a major barrier to inclusive participation, particularly in low-income and rural settings (Nyirenda, 2020; Ramos, 2023; Dlamini & Moyo, 2016; Baker, 2023). Policymakers should therefore implement targeted support measures such as transportation subsidies, childcare assistance, community-based meeting locations, and compensation for lost work time to ensure that marginalized households can participate without bearing disproportionate costs. Simplifying technical information, translating materials into local languages, and using accessible communication formats can further help reduce literacy-related barriers (Alemu, 2021; Castro, 2022; Khan, 2016). These measures collectively ensure that socioeconomic status does not predetermine one's ability to engage in decision-making.

Third, political influences especially elite capture, selective transparency, and weak political will were found to significantly distort participation outcomes in several countries (Santos, 2019; Castro, 2022; Toure, 2020; Rodríguez, 2018). To address this, policymakers must strengthen transparency and accountability mechanisms, including mandatory public release of planning documents, open access to environmental or social impact assessments, and publicly traceable records of how community feedback influences final decisions. Anti-corruption safeguards and independent monitoring bodies can help curb elite capture and ensure that planning decisions reflect broader community interests rather than narrow political or economic agendas.

Fourth, cultural norms related to gender, hierarchy, and authority significantly shape participation behaviors (Shrestha, 2023; Khan, 2016; Kamara, 2018; An & Park, 2017). Policymakers should incorporate culturally sensitive engagement strategies, such as separate dialogues for women and youth, facilitated small-group discussions, or partnerships with trusted community leaders who can encourage participation among socially marginalized groups. Such culturally attuned strategies can help build confidence among participants who might otherwise remain silent due to social expectations or power dynamics.

Fifth, procedural reform is essential for improving the quality of engagement. Findings show that consultations are often conducted too late, poorly facilitated, or structured around one-directional communication (Akhtar, 2021; Green, 2019; Dimitriou, 2018; Wijesinghe, 2020). Policymakers should promote deliberative and iterative consultation models, ensuring that communities are engaged at problem identification, option evaluation, and decision-finalization stages. Training programs for facilitators, guidelines for inclusive meeting design, and community-led monitoring mechanisms can support more meaningful dialogue and reduce procedural exclusion.

Lastly, the rise of digital participation requires policymakers to address the risks associated with digital inequality. The review highlights substantial gaps in internet access, device availability, and digital literacy (Nyirenda, 2020; Haque, 2019; Howard, 2024; Thapa, 2022). To prevent digital exclusion, policymakers should promote hybrid participation models that combine online and in-person engagement, invest in community ICT

centers, and implement digital literacy targeting low-income and rural populations. Online platforms must also be designed with usability, linguistic accessibility, and user support in mind (Akhtar, 2021; Hussein, 2024; Pavlova, 2024). By addressing these technological barriers, policymakers can ensure that digital transformation enhances, rather than restricts, public involvement.

Overall, the findings indicate that strengthening meaningful public participation requires systemic and multi-level reforms that address institutional weaknesses, reduce socio-economic inequalities, promote transparency, respect cultural dynamics, enhance procedural design, and ensure equitable access to both physical and digital participation spaces. These recommendations can guide policymakers in creating more inclusive, accountable, and democratic land-use planning systems that genuinely reflect the needs, knowledge, and aspirations of the communities they serve.

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