

Agenda Inclusion with Participatory Foresight Methods and Social Legitimacy across Regional Development Strategies

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Abstract

The formulation of regional development strategies frequently encounters challenges related to stakeholder inclusion, agenda setting, and the establishment of social legitimacy. This paper investigates the mechanisms through which participatory foresight methods facilitate agenda inclusion in regional policymaking. By integrating theories of anticipatory governance and sociological institutionalism, the study explores how forward-looking participatory exercises enhance the social legitimacy of proposed regional strategies. The research employs a comparative qualitative methodology, examining multiple regional planning initiatives to understand how diverse stakeholder engagement in foresight activities translates into formal policy agendas. Findings indicate that participatory foresight not only broadens the epistemic base of policymaking but also acts as a critical mechanism for consensus building, thereby mitigating conflicts and fostering shared visions among competing interest groups. Furthermore, the perceived legitimacy of the agenda is directly proportional to the transparency and inclusivity of the foresight process. Ultimately, this research provides a comprehensive explanation of how long-term strategic foresight, when coupled with inclusive participatory frameworks, systematically lowers the barriers to agenda entry for marginalized regional issues. The insights generated offer substantial implications for public administrators and regional planners seeking to design more resilient, legitimate, and democratic development strategies.

Keywords: Participatory Foresight; Social Legitimacy; Agenda Setting; Regional Development; Anticipatory Governance

1. Introduction

1.1 Context and Problem Statement

Regional development strategies are essential instruments for guiding the economic, social, and environmental trajectories of sub-national territories. The process of formulating these strategies is inherently complex, involving multiple actors with diverse interests, asymmetrical power relations, and divergent visions for the future. A critical challenge in this context is agenda setting, which dictates which issues receive the attention of policymakers and which are marginalized or entirely excluded. Traditional approaches to regional planning have often been characterized by top-down, technocratic methodologies that privilege elite perspectives and expert knowledge, thereby restricting agenda

inclusion to a narrow set of priorities. This exclusionary dynamic can severely undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of regional policies, as strategies formulated without broad stakeholder input frequently face resistance during the implementation phase. Scholars have extensively documented how the failure to incorporate diverse voices into the policy agenda leads to suboptimal outcomes and a profound democratic deficit in regional governance structures [1].

To address these shortcomings, contemporary public administration has increasingly turned toward participatory methodologies aimed at democratizing the policymaking process. Among these, participatory foresight methods have emerged as particularly promising tools. Foresight involves systematic, medium-to-long-term forward-looking exercises designed to anticipate future developments, identify emerging challenges, and formulate strategic responses. When operationalized through a participatory lens, foresight transcends mere predictive analysis; it becomes a collaborative arena where various regional stakeholders, including citizens, private sector representatives, civil society organizations, and marginalized communities, co-create narratives about desired futures [2]. Despite the growing popularity of these methods, a significant gap remains in the academic literature regarding the precise mechanisms through which participatory foresight translates into formal agenda inclusion. Specifically, it is not entirely clear how the speculative and often abstract outputs of foresight exercises overcome the institutional inertia and political gatekeeping that typically characterize regional policy agendas.

1.2 Research Objectives and Scope

This paper seeks to bridge the aforementioned gap by proposing that social legitimacy acts as the crucial mediating variable between participatory foresight exercises and successful agenda inclusion. Social legitimacy, defined as the generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs, is paramount in public policy [3]. The central thesis of this research is that participatory foresight methods generate substantial social legitimacy for specific issues and policy proposals by embedding them within a consensus-driven, future-oriented narrative. Once an issue acquires this robust social legitimacy, it becomes politically costly for decision-makers to exclude it from the formal regional development agenda.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to systematically explain the process of agenda inclusion through the dual lenses of participatory foresight and social legitimacy. By doing so, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework and empirical evidence illustrating how forward-looking stakeholder engagement alters the political calculus of agenda setting. The scope of the research encompasses the design, execution, and outcomes of regional strategic planning processes, focusing specifically on how marginalized or newly emerging issues gain traction and ultimately secure a place on the formal policy agenda. The subsequent sections of this paper are organized to explore these dynamics in depth, beginning with a robust theoretical background, followed by the presentation of a conceptual framework, a detailed methodological exposition, an empirical analysis, and concluding with policy implications.

2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

2.1 The Dynamics of Agenda Inclusion

The study of agenda setting has long been a foundational pillar of political science and public policy analysis. Classical models emphasize the intense competition among various issues for the limited

attention of policymakers. The process by which a condition transforms into a formal policy problem requiring governmental intervention is not inherently rational or linear; rather, it is deeply political and socially constructed [4]. Agenda inclusion refers to the successful navigation of an issue through the complex filtering mechanisms of the political system, resulting in its formal recognition as a priority within a policy document or legislative program. In the context of regional development, agenda inclusion is particularly fraught because regional arenas often lack the rigid institutional boundaries of national governments, making the policy process more fluid and susceptible to external pressures.

Scholars have identified several structural and agential factors that influence agenda inclusion. These include the severity of the issue, the presence of policy entrepreneurs who actively champion specific causes, and the occurrence of focusing events that rapidly draw public attention. However, these traditional frameworks frequently overlook the systematic, long-term processes of issue cultivation that occur outside the immediate pressure of crises. Furthermore, critical policy studies have highlighted the phenomenon of non-decision making, wherein dominant coalitions actively suppress certain issues to maintain the status quo. Overcoming these barriers requires mechanisms that can aggregate diverse interests and present a compelling, unignorable case for inclusion. It is in this context that participatory approaches have gained theoretical traction, positing that broader democratic engagement can disrupt entrenched power dynamics and force the inclusion of previously sidelined issues.

2.2 Participatory Foresight as a Policy Tool

Participatory foresight represents a paradigm shift from traditional, expert-driven forecasting to inclusive, dialogic exploration of the future. The fundamental premise of foresight is that the future is not pre-determined but is something that can be actively shaped through present decisions. Methods such as scenario planning, Delphi surveys, backcasting, and future workshops are utilized to systematically explore alternative futures and identify robust strategic options [5]. When these methods are democratized through broad stakeholder participation, they serve multiple functions beyond mere cognitive anticipation. They act as boundary objects, facilitating communication and mutual understanding among actors who possess different epistemological backgrounds and normative commitments.

The literature on anticipatory governance highlights that participatory foresight processes create safe spaces for deliberation, where traditional hierarchies are temporarily suspended, and innovative ideas can be freely explored [6]. By focusing on the medium-to-long-term horizon, stakeholders are often able to abstract themselves from immediate zero-sum conflicts and engage in a more collaborative search for shared values and common goals. This future-oriented deliberation is highly conducive to uncovering systemic regional challenges, such as demographic shifts, climate change vulnerabilities, and technological disruptions, which might otherwise be ignored in short-term political cycles. Consequently, participatory foresight generates a rich repository of ideas, visions, and strategic priorities that are deeply rooted in the contextual realities and aspirations of the regional populace.

2.3 The Role of Social Legitimacy

While participatory foresight generates valuable insights, the transition of these insights into formal policy agendas is not automatic. The translation process relies heavily on the concept of social legitimacy. In sociological institutionalism, legitimacy is understood not merely as a legal or constitutional mandate, but as a broad social sanction. Policies and agendas that are perceived as legitimate encounter lower implementation costs, higher compliance rates, and greater resilience against political shocks [7]. For regional development strategies, social legitimacy is derived from both the

substance of the proposed policies and the procedural fairness of the process through which they were developed.

Theoretical contributions emphasize that participatory processes inherently boost procedural legitimacy by demonstrating a commitment to democratic norms, transparency, and inclusivity [8]. When diverse stakeholders perceive that their voices have been genuinely heard and integrated into the foresight exercises, they confer legitimacy upon the outcomes of those exercises. This socially constructed legitimacy acts as a powerful currency in the political marketplace. Decision-makers, seeking to minimize political risk and maximize public support, are highly incentivized to adopt agendas that already possess strong societal backing. Therefore, social legitimacy functions as the critical bridge, transforming the visionary outputs of participatory foresight into concrete imperatives for agenda inclusion.

3. Conceptual Framework: Foresight and Legitimacy

3.1 Mechanisms of Knowledge Integration

To elucidate the relationship between participatory foresight, social legitimacy, and agenda inclusion, this paper advances a comprehensive conceptual framework. The first component of this framework involves the mechanisms of knowledge integration facilitated by foresight activities. Regional development issues are characteristically wicked problems, characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and divergent stakeholder values. Addressing such problems requires the synthesis of multiple forms of knowledge, including expert scientific data, bureaucratic administrative knowledge, and the lived, experiential knowledge of local communities [9].

Participatory foresight methods provide the structured methodologies necessary for this integration. Techniques such as scenario building allow stakeholders to combine quantitative demographic projections with qualitative narratives about community resilience and cultural identity. This synthesis produces a more holistic understanding of regional dynamics, ensuring that the resulting agenda is not merely a reflection of technocratic priorities but is grounded in the multidimensional realities of the region. The process of jointly constructing knowledge also fosters epistemic trust among participants. As stakeholders collaborate to map out future challenges, they begin to view the resulting problem definitions as shared, objective realities rather than partisan claims, thereby laying the cognitive groundwork for legitimate agenda setting.

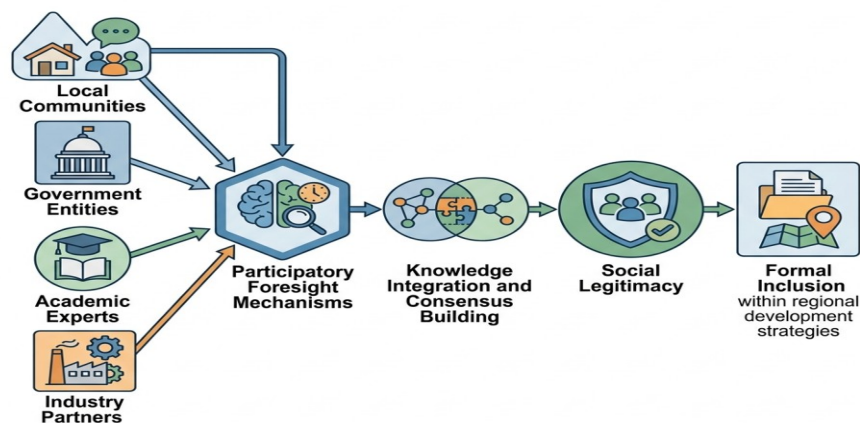


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Agenda Inclusion Dynamics

3.2 Translating Legitimacy into Policy Action

The second component of the framework details the translation of socially legitimated foresight outcomes into policy action. The framework identifies three distinct dimensions of legitimacy generated through participatory foresight: input legitimacy, throughput legitimacy, and output legitimacy [10]. Input legitimacy relates to the representativeness of the participants; throughput legitimacy concerns the transparency and fairness of the deliberative process; and output legitimacy refers to the effectiveness and problem-solving capacity of the proposed strategies.

When a regional issue emerges from a foresight process that scores highly on all three dimensions, it acquires a formidable status. The framework posits that this high degree of social legitimacy exerts coercive, normative, and mimetic institutional pressures on regional authorities [11]. Coercively, organized stakeholder groups mobilized during the foresight process can demand the inclusion of their prioritized issues. Normatively, the shared visions establish new standards of appropriateness, making it politically unviable to ignore the consensus. Mimetically, regions may adopt these inclusive agendas to align with broader national or international best practices in democratic governance. Consequently, the barriers to agenda entry are systematically dismantled, allowing novel, long-term, and community-endorsed issues to permeate the core of regional development strategies.

4. Research Methodology and Case Selection

4.1 Research Design and Data Collection

To empirically investigate the proposed conceptual framework, this study adopts a comparative qualitative research design based on multiple case studies. Qualitative methodology is particularly well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena, untangling causal mechanisms, and understanding the contextual nuances of policymaking processes [12]. The research examines regional planning initiatives across different institutional contexts to identify cross-cutting patterns regarding how participatory foresight influences agenda inclusion. The focus is specifically on regional authorities that have explicitly integrated long-term foresight exercises into their most recent strategic development cycles.

Data collection for this study involved a triangulation approach to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. The primary data source comprises extensive semi-structured interviews with key actors involved in the regional development processes. These actors include regional planners, foresight facilitators, representatives of civil society organizations, private sector stakeholders, and local politicians. The interview protocols were carefully designed to elicit detailed narratives about the evolution of specific policy issues, from their initial identification in foresight workshops to their eventual inclusion or exclusion in the final strategy documents. Secondary data sources encompass a comprehensive review of official policy documents, strategic plans, foresight reports, workshop minutes, and public consultation feedback forms. This rich documentary evidence provides the necessary context and allows for the objective verification of the subjective accounts provided during the interviews.

Table 1: Profile of Selected Regional Development Case Studies

Case Region Identifier	Primary Foresight Method Utilized	Stakeholder Participation Level	Key Issue Successfully Included in Agenda
Secondary Industrial Region	Participatory Scenario Planning	High (Citizens, NGOs, Industry)	Just Transition and Green Reskilling
Coastal Tourism District	Collaborative Backcasting	Medium (Business, Local Gov, NGOs)	Climate Adaptation and Coastal Retreat
Rural Agricultural Basin	Delphi Surveys and Future Workshops	High (Farmers, Tech Firms, Youth)	Digital Infrastructure and Smart Farming
Metropolitan Periphery	Visioning and Cross-Impact Analysis	Low (Mainly Experts and Bureaucrats)	Transport Connectivity (Traditional)

4.2 Analytical Approach

The analytical approach employed in this study is rooted in thematic analysis and process tracing. Thematic analysis was utilized to systematically code the interview transcripts and documentary evidence, identifying recurring patterns related to stakeholder mobilization, knowledge integration, legitimacy building, and political negotiation. The coding framework was developed both deductively, drawing from the theoretical constructs of anticipatory governance and institutionalism, and inductively, allowing novel insights to emerge directly from the empirical data.

Process tracing was subsequently applied to reconstruct the causal chains leading to agenda inclusion within each specific case study. This method is instrumental in unpacking the black box of policymaking, enabling the researcher to demonstrate how the inputs of participatory foresight sequentially generated social legitimacy and how this legitimacy, in turn, compelled policymakers to alter the regional agenda. By comparing the trajectories of successful agenda inclusion in cases with robust participatory foresight against cases where foresight was either absent or superficial, the analysis isolates the distinct impact of the participatory, future-oriented methods. This rigorous analytical procedure ensures that the findings are robust, credible, and capable of substantiating the theoretical claims advanced in the earlier sections of the paper.

5. Analysis of Agenda Inclusion Mechanisms

5.1 Foresight Processes and Stakeholder Mobilization

The empirical analysis reveals that the initial phase of participatory foresight acts as a powerful catalyst for stakeholder mobilization, which is a fundamental prerequisite for agenda inclusion. In the regions studied, traditional planning processes often struggled to engage a broad spectrum of the public, typically attracting only the most organized and highly resourced interest groups. However, the framing of foresight exercises around long-term, systemic challenges rather than immediate resource allocation

disputes fundamentally altered the participation dynamics [13]. By inviting stakeholders to envision the region over a twenty to thirty-year horizon, the process lowered the perceived stakes of immediate political conflict, encouraging a more diverse array of actors to participate, including youth organizations, marginalized community advocates, and emergent environmental groups.

This broadened mobilization had a profound impact on the epistemic foundations of the regional agenda. For instance, in the Secondary Industrial Region case, the utilization of participatory scenario planning brought to light the severe vulnerabilities associated with a purely technology-driven industrial transition. While expert models highlighted the necessity of automation and decarbonization, the experiential knowledge contributed by local labor representatives and social NGOs introduced the critical concept of a just transition. The foresight process provided a structured methodology to integrate these disparate knowledge types, resulting in comprehensive future scenarios that highlighted the disastrous social consequences of neglecting workforce reskilling. The collaborative nature of this knowledge production meant that the resulting narratives were deeply owned by the participants, transforming them from passive consultants into active champions of the emerging policy issues.

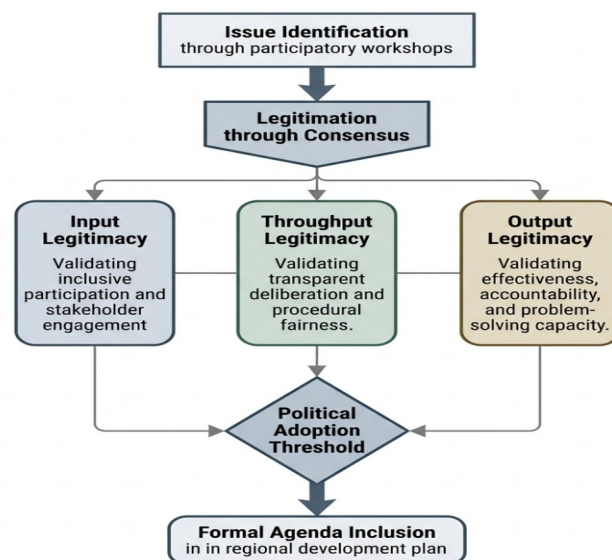


Figure 2: Process Flowchart of Issue Trajectory from Foresight to Policy Agenda

5.2 Legitimacy Construction and Agenda Entry

The subsequent phase of the analysis demonstrates how the stakeholder mobilization and knowledge integration achieved during foresight translated into robust social legitimacy, which ultimately forced agenda entry. The empirical data strongly supports the conceptual proposition that legitimacy operates along input, throughput, and output dimensions. The high level of inclusivity (input legitimacy) and the transparent, deliberative nature of the workshops (throughput legitimacy) inoculated the resulting foresight priorities against criticisms of bias or elite capture. When the aggregated visions and strategic priorities were presented to regional authorities, they were not viewed merely as the demands of special interest groups, but as the validated, collective will of the regional community [14].

This dynamic severely constrained the discretionary power of political gatekeepers. In the Rural Agricultural Basin case, traditional agricultural lobbies had historically dominated the regional agenda, marginalizing issues related to digital infrastructure and youth retention. However, the extensive Delphi surveys and future workshops built an overwhelming consensus around the necessity of smart farming

technologies to ensure long-term regional viability. The social legitimacy of this issue became so entrenched that local politicians recognized the substantial electoral and reputational risks associated with ignoring it. Consequently, digital infrastructure for agriculture bypassed the traditional incremental agenda-setting processes and was elevated to a top-tier priority in the formal development strategy.

Table 2: Impact of Foresight Methodology on Legitimacy Dimensions and Agenda Outcomes

Dimension of Legitimacy	Primary Mechanism of Enhancement	Outcome on Regional Agenda Setting
Input Legitimacy	Broad-based recruitment targeting marginalized and non-traditional actors	Diversification of the issue pool; introduction of novel, localized policy problems
Throughput Legitimacy	Transparent facilitation, iterative feedback loops, and equal speaking rights	Reduction of stakeholder conflict; formation of stable, cross-sectoral advocacy coalitions
Output Legitimacy	Integration of scientific data with local experiential knowledge	Enhanced perceived viability of proposed solutions; lowering of political adoption barriers

Conversely, in cases where participatory foresight was executed poorly or utilized merely as a symbolic exercise, the generation of social legitimacy was stunted, and agenda inclusion failed to materialize for novel issues. In the Metropolitan Periphery case, foresight was largely confined to technical experts and bureaucratic insiders, resulting in low input and throughput legitimacy. The resulting visions, while technically sound, lacked broad societal endorsement. As a result, when these priorities encountered political resistance during the formal planning phase, they lacked the requisite social backing to overcome institutional inertia, leading to an agenda that merely replicated past priorities. This contrast sharply underscores that the mechanism of agenda inclusion is not driven by the foresight methodology itself, but by the socially constructed legitimacy that a genuinely participatory process generates.

6. Conclusion and Policy Implications

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

This research provides a comprehensive explanation of how participatory foresight methods facilitate agenda inclusion in regional development strategies through the critical mediating mechanism of social legitimacy. The findings demonstrate that traditional, technocratic approaches to regional planning frequently fail to capture the complex, multidimensional challenges facing contemporary societies, thereby alienating crucial stakeholders and resulting in narrow, easily contested policy agendas. By integrating theories of anticipatory governance and institutional legitimacy, this paper illustrates that participatory foresight disrupts these entrenched dynamics. Foresight exercises shift the focus toward long-term, systemic thinking, which neutralizes immediate political hostilities and encourages a much broader and more diverse mobilization of regional actors [15].

The empirical analysis of multiple case studies confirms that when diverse knowledge bases are integrated through transparent and inclusive future-oriented deliberation, the resulting policy issues acquire substantial input, throughput, and output legitimacy. This robust social legitimacy acts as an undeniable political currency. Issues that are firmly grounded in legitimate consensus significantly lower the barriers to agenda entry, compelling decision-makers to formally incorporate them into regional development strategies to avoid political backlash and ensure smooth policy implementation. The study proves that agenda inclusion is not a random or purely elite-driven process, but one that can be systematically engineered through rigorous, democratic engagement with the future.

6.2 Implications for Regional Planners

The insights generated by this study offer profound implications for public administrators, regional planners, and policymakers. Primarily, it necessitates a paradigm shift in how regional authorities conceptualize and design citizen engagement strategies. Participatory foresight should not be treated as a peripheral or optional public relations exercise, but as a core component of the strategic planning architecture. Planners must invest significant resources in designing foresight processes that are genuinely inclusive, ensuring that marginalized voices and non-traditional actors are actively recruited and empowered to contribute.

Furthermore, policymakers must recognize that the legitimacy derived from these processes requires ongoing validation. The translation of foresight outputs into formal agendas must be transparent and traceable, ensuring that stakeholders can see the direct impact of their participation on regional strategies. Failure to do so risks generating consultation fatigue and eroding the very trust and legitimacy that these methods are designed to build. Ultimately, embedding participatory foresight into the institutional routines of regional governance provides a robust mechanism for continuously updating policy agendas, making regional development strategies more democratic, resilient, and capable of navigating the uncertainties of the future. Future research should seek to quantify the long-term implementation success of policies that gained agenda inclusion through foresight mechanisms, comparing their resilience against policies formulated through traditional technocratic means.

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