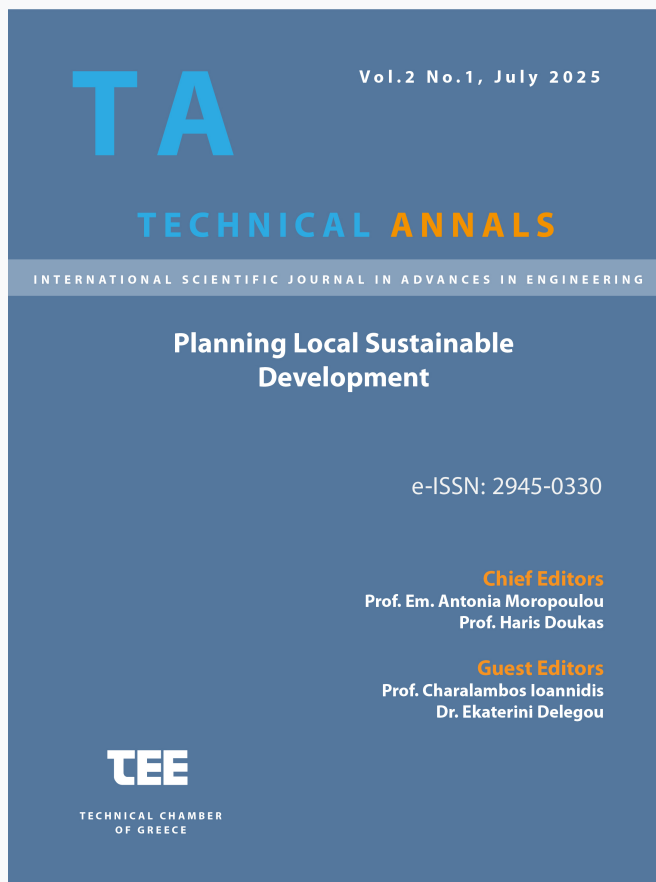


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# On contributing the citizen's voices to the Local Urban Plan: the case of South Kynouria

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**Abstract.** This article examines the role of citizen participation in the integrated protection and management of a place, within the context of contemporary territorial and urban planning. This is explored through the case study of the Local Urban Plan of the municipality of South Kynouria, on the eastern coast of the Peloponnese. The theoretical framework of the research approaches cultural landscape, and other forms of heritage that constitute it, as *heritage commons*. This highlights the fundamental connection between urban planning, cultural landscape protection, and citizen participation as inseparable dimensions of contemporary spatial planning. The action research was developed mainly through fourteen community-based participatory workshops in South Kynouria, aiming at the critical assessment of the methodological approach. The research poses crucial questions and field-tests whether and in what ways, participatory processes can deepen the understanding of place, enrich designing for place, and be mobilized as a substantial tool for participation and protection.

**Keywords:** Urban planning, participatory planning, heritage communities, heritage commons

## 1 Introduction

This article examines the initiative of “*Co-shaping our common place: Citizen Participation in the Territorial-Urban Planning of the South Kynouria Municipality*”, which was developed by the newly formed collective SIKRUKU. This organization focuses on studying, researching, educating, and engaging in matters concerning architecture, production of space, and resource management in the wider area of Leonidio and South Kynouria. SIKRUKU consists of architects and researchers Dina Danesi, Anna Zacharaki and Ion Maleas, who live and/or work in Leonidio, the capital of South Kynouria.

The necessity of the initiative emerges from the need to protect *topos* (meaning "place") around Greece, from threats that arise in the name of "development". The local

relevance of this issue is made apparent by the numerous events and initiatives being organized around the country dedicated to the sustainable future of our homeplaces. The decisive impetus, however, came from the announcement of the ambitious Urban Planning Reform Program "Konstantinos Doxiadis", which envisions urban plans for more than 70% of the country's territory, including the municipality of South Kynouria.

The Local Urban Plan is considered of critical importance in the context of a territory that has suffered from intense phenomena of urbanization-driven depopulation and administrative centralization. In recent years, however, Leonidio has experienced a revitalization, mainly through alternative tourism, particularly rock climbing. Leonidio, and the surrounding locations in South Kynouria and on the east coast of the Peloponnese, host more than 3.000 mapped climbing routes and have gained international attention and recognition. While providing much-needed opportunities, these developments also pose challenges for the area's sustainable spatial planning and the local community's participation.

The article begins with a short theoretical and conceptual overview, after which the "Konstantinos Doxiadis" Program is presented as an overarching institutional framework. The third section focuses on the municipality of South Kynouria as the territorial context of the implementation of our action-research, highlighting the spatial and social particularities and complexities of the area. The fourth section describes the structure of the participatory initiative, the methodology implemented, the fourteen participatory workshops and the various tools used for citizen awareness and mobilization. The fifth section attempts a partial evaluation of the (ongoing) process that followed, emphasizing its potentials and limitations within current urban planning dynamics in Greece. Finally, the article concludes with methodological reflections, highlighting the lessons learned from the experiential engagement of the authors and the community.

**Research questions.** The research questions examined in this article are the following: (a) To what extent does the existing institutional framework and the regulatory specifications of Local Urban Plans adequately address the requirements for the protection and management of cultural landscapes?

(b) Which participatory processes can activate local communities and meaningfully integrate residents' lived and experiential knowledge into Local Urban Plans? In this context, the article examines the methodology that was developed and implemented for citizen participation in the Local Urban Plan of the Municipality of South Kynouria.

## **2 Heritage as Commons: Theoretical Foundations of Participatory Landscape Governance**

**-Theoretical Framework.** The research is theoretically situated within what contemporary literature is conceptualized as the "public turn" in heritage management, namely the shift from state-centered, expert-driven, and technocratic approaches to heritage protection toward participatory, community-based, and governance-oriented models (Smith, 2006; Waterton & Watson, 2013; Schofield, 2014; Avdikos et al., 2023). The research builds upon fundamental theoretical positions such as:

**-Landscape as a Social Process.** The cultural landscape is conceived as a dynamic and continuously evolving product of the interaction between humans, place, and history (Sauer, 1925; Cosgrove, 1984; Ingold, 1993; Terkenli, 1996). It is not external to humans, nor a “natural” backdrop distinct from culture, but rather the domain of dwelling and experience, a vessel of memory, identity, and meaning, where humans and the environment coexist and mutually shape one another (Ingold, 1993).

**-Heritage as a socially negotiated process.** Heritage is not pre-existing but arises through processes of selection, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning (Smith, 2006; Harvey, 2001). What has transformed is not the object of protection itself, but our perception of what is worth preserving and transmitting to future generations. Its significance is relational: it depends on contemporary communities that continually assess what is valuable and worth transmitting to future generations, and what is excluded from heritage processes.

**-Heritage as a Common Good (Commons).** The protection of heritage is no longer considered as an exclusive field of experts, but rather a matter of shared responsibility. Heritage landscapes cannot be safeguarded solely through state or private mechanisms; they require collective forms of management and care (Ostrom, 1990; Dragouni & Lekakis, 2023). The commons approach introduces into the field of heritage concepts such as co-responsibility, co-management, and spatial justice.

**-Participatory Planning as Spatial Democracy.** Participatory planning can be understood as a form of spatial democracy, where protection, management, and enhancement of landscapes arise through collective, “bottom-up” processes (Arnstein, 1969). These processes recognize local systems of lived, empirical knowledge and memory as essential foundations for planning that is inclusive, just, and contextually grounded (Healey, 1997;). By valuing community knowledge and experience, this approach directly challenges top-down, technocratic planning models, thus fostering more equitable and socially embedded decision-making.

These perspectives shift the focus from the static protection of heritage to the dynamic care of place, which cannot exist without the communities that inhabit it. This conceptual evolution is reflected in international frameworks such as the Natchitoches Declaration (2004), the Faro Convention (2005), which introduces the notion of “heritage communities,” and the European Landscape Convention (Florence, 2000), which reconceptualizes landscape by affirming the value of all landscapes -including everyday and degraded ones- and emphasizing that their protection and planning necessitate meaningful community participation.

If the landscape is regarded as a public and collective good, intrinsically linked to quality of life and cultural identity, who determines what deserves protection, and who participates in its governance?

Its protection cannot be limited solely to land-use regulations or technical planning instruments. It also requires active care, consultation with local communities, and participatory decision-making processes. From this perspective, the cultural landscape is not only a field of study but also a field of responsibility. Any policy affecting it-from Local Urban Plans to broader development strategies- must be designed with and for the residents, the local actors, and the custodians of the place.

Heritage is not merely a “tradition to be preserved” but a social contract of shared responsibility between communities, the state, and scientific institutions (Lekakis, 2020). The theory of the commons shifts attention from the question of “what should be protected” to that of “who has the right and responsibility to participate” in defining and caring for heritage (Bollier, 2014, Dragouni & Lekakis, 2023). Reflecting on the spectrum of participatory processes, Arnstein (1969) distinguished levels ranging from “manipulation” to full “citizen control,” noting that formal consultation mechanisms often operate symbolically, legitimizing decisions that have already been made. Smith (2006) emphasizes that the dominant, state-controlled narrative of heritage often functions as an “authorized heritage discourse,” monopolizing the definition of value and marginalizing social groups from shaping the future of their places.

Participatory planning, in contrast, recognizes citizens as co-creators of heritage rather than passive recipients of decisions. It is grounded in the equality of scientific, local, and experiential knowledge, and in collaboration among institutions, experts, and social groups (Sandercock, 2003). Participation represents a political stance that transforms the very nature of protection. At the same time, it is an educational practice, through which knowledge of mindful care for a place becomes embedded within community practices over time, enhancing their long-term resilience.

In sum, urban planning is not merely a tool for organizing space or managing resources; it also formalizes and enacts society’s relationship with heritage, embedding in practice its values, priorities, and judgments about what is worth preserving, transforming, or adapting to the present. Without institutional foresight and careful planning, space becomes vulnerable to arbitrary or commercial exploitation, risks losing its collective memory, and may be reduced to a mere consumable product.

### **3 The Urban Planning Reform Program "Konstantinos Doxiadis"**

Greece is currently undergoing the most important urban planning reform of the recent decades, with the Urban Planning Reform Program "Konstantinos Doxiadis". Local Urban Plans are assigned to private firms through public competitions carried out by the Technical Chamber of Greece. They are funded by the European Commission’s Recovery and Resilience Facility, while the project is being operated by the Ministry of Environment and Energy. The Local Urban Plans are designed at the municipal scale and define the overall strategy of spatial organization and the development of each territory, specifying land uses, settlement boundaries, zones of urban development or protection, building conditions, zones of productive activities, agricultural land, areas of special protection, etc. In parallel, they must incorporate measures concerning sustainability and resilience, natural disasters, natural resource management and social cohesion.

The official processes of implementation and the legal framework (laws N. 4447/2016 · N. 4782/2021 · N. 3422/2005 - and the Aarhus Convention) require citizen participation; in this case through comments on [the Ministry’s digital participation platform](#). However, media outlets around the country did not report on the extensive urban

planning initiative, nor did they inform citizens about their rights or the available methods for participation.

**The case of the South Kynouria Local Urban Plan.** Upon the commissioning of the ΤΠΣ of South Kynouria to a private design and planning consultancy, it became evident that there was a lack of information and citizen participation in processes that would determine critical parameters for the future of the territory. This realization became the kernel of an independent and citizen-led initiative aimed at fostering information sharing and participation, seeking to bridge the gap between the technical processes and vocabulary of urban planning on the one hand, and the lived, empirical knowledge of local citizens.

This initiative was developed by the local collective SIKRUKU and named “*Co-shaping Our Common Place*.” It was conceived as a complementary, rather than antagonistic, process, intended to run in parallel with the institutional process of the ΤΠΣ. Through the gradual development of a network comprising key representatives, stakeholders, and a team of advisors, an ecosystem of cooperation was established. Within a short period of time, SIKRUKU experimented with various participatory tools, organizing 14 community workshops, mobilizing inhabitants of all ages, professions, and backgrounds. The initiative gathered data and opinions about the area, the production and the memory of place, of local identities, and highlighted the broad social implications of the Local Urban Plan. The methodologies employed and the key findings that emerged from this process, demonstrate how local mobilization and a cooperative approach can substantially enrich urban planning and function as a shield for the protection of place.

#### **4 The municipality of South Kynouria as a territorial context of implementation**

The research presented here was conducted in the municipality of South Kynouria, which administratively belongs to the Regional Unit of Arkadia, in the Region of the Peloponnese (according to the “Kallikrates Program”, law N. 3852/2010, ΦΕΚ 87/Α/2010). The municipal capital is Leonidio, and the spatial sub-units that comprise the municipality are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The various settlements form what are called Municipal Communities (MC) which in turn form Municipal Units – (MU), which in turn form the Municipality. MU’s correspond to municipalities prior to the “Kallikrates” reform. With the “Kapodistrias” plan (law N. 2539/1997), MC’s ceased being Primary Local Governments Local Authorities (O.T.A.) and no longer retained independent budgeting or decision-making powers. This reform marked the beginning of the end of the community administrations that had been in place since 1912

| Municipal Units                   | Municipal Communities (inhabitants)  | Settlements  |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| M.U. KOSMA (253 inhabitants)      | M.C. Kosma (253)   | Kosmas, Moni Elonis, Pigadion  |
| M.U. LEONIDIO (5.315 inhabitants) | M.C. Leonidio (3.792)<br>M.C. Agios Vasilios<br>M.C. Vlisidia (32)<br>M.C. Kounoupia (52)<br>M.C. Mari (60)<br>M.C. Paleochori (121)<br>M.C. Peleta (225)<br>M.C. Pigadi (172)<br>M.C. Platanaki (49)<br>M.C. Poulithra (394)<br>M.C. Pragmatefti (204)<br>M.C. Tsitalia (158) | Vaskina, Leonidio, Moni Karyas<br>Agios Vasilios<br>Vlisidia, Fylatika<br>Kounoupia, Chouni<br>Vigla, Marion<br>Paleochori<br>Amygdalea, Peleta<br>Loggarion, Pigadion, Fokiano<br>Platanaki<br>Poulithra, Pyrgoudion<br>Livadion, Pragmatefti, Sabatiki<br>Tsitalia |
| M.U. TYROS (1.677 inhabitants)    | M.C. Pera Melana (225)<br>M.C. Sapounakeika (433)<br>M.C. Tyros (1.019)  | Livadi, Pera Melana, Petra<br>Paralia, Sapounakeika<br>Ag. Christoforos, Elliniko, Kryoneri, Paleochora, Paralia Tyros, Tyros  |

**Geocultural context.** South Kynouria is composed as a marginal but cohesive territory, where mountains meet the sea and geomorphology has for centuries defined the potential and limits of human settlement. For a large part of its history, the area communicated with the outside world through the sea, something that contributed to the conservation of its natural and cultural capital (Faklaris, 1990). It was in this region that the cultural group of Tsakonia emerged, developing a distinct local identity expressed through particular dances, characteristic embroidery patterns, distinctive folk costumes, and, perhaps most notably, a unique local language. In the 1950’s, the construction of the road connecting to Astros gradually impacted the character of this isolation. The narrow coastal front, the hilly intermediary zones, and the mountainous region of Parnonas, which descends toward the Myrtoan sea, combined with the neighboring gulf of Argos, constitute a highly dynamic and varied spatial landscape. Today, the same geomorphological particularity serves as a development resource.

Leonidio has emerged as an international climbing destination, the old pathways of shepherds and craftsmen are being reinterpreted as hiking trails, old, abandoned mansions are converted into guesthouses, while agricultural landscapes are being redefined between abandonment, tourist exploitation and new forms of cultivation. The mountain settlements of Parnonas, with the stone houses and squares, the forests, the water springs, and the simple life of the few inhabitants that remain, are now under threat from the potential installation of wind turbines. At the same time, coastal settlements are impacted by the weight of out-of-plan construction, the pressure of tourist development, the rise in real-estate prices, and the challenges of climate change.

The remains of the pre-industrial era —mills, waterwheels, wine presses, lime and charcoal kilns, threshing floors, cisterns, wells, dry-stone walls and terrasses, old

pathways— constitute a coherent system of efficient and minimally invasive exploitation of natural resources. These traditional infrastructures have supported the local communities for centuries and are also exemplary countermeasures to climate change. This historical course constitutes a dense network of paths, memories and practices, where prehistoric installations, Tsakonian words and Ottoman tax records meet climbing walls and international remote workers. The current situation, with an appropriate management plan, presents a unique opportunity to reinforce the municipality and redefine its developmental course through notions of sustainability, social cohesion and respect of place.

**Settlement and urban planning organization.** The municipality comprises 22 properly defined settlements, which vary significantly in their structure, form, and urban planning. The following tables present the institutional framework of South Kynouria, concerning urban and territorial planning. The absence of an overall coherent plan puts additional pressure, creating regulatory problems, territorial inconsistency, incompatibility of uses, and landscape degradation.

**Table 2.** The institutional and urban planning framework of South Kynouria. Greek technical terminology has been translated accordingly: Presidential Decree (*ΠΔ*), Royal Decree (*ΒΔ*), Government Gazette (*ΦΕΚ*), Approved Town Plan (*ΠΣ*), General Urban Plan (*ΓΠΣ*), Spatial and Settlement Organization Plan for Open Cities (*ΣΧΟΟΑΠ*). The official reference of each institutional act (e.g. Government Gazette issue, Royal Decree, or administrative assignment) is provided in parentheses to ensure traceability, credibility, and ease of verification

| Institutional tool  | Type Of Decision / Year / (official reference of institutional acts) | Area   | Application status  | Main issues   |
|---|--|--|---------------------|---|
| Characterization of traditional settlements                                   | Government Gazette / 1978 / (ΦΕΚ Δ 594/1978)                         | Leonidio, Poulithra, Peleta, Sapounakeika, Melana, Kosmas, etc.. | In force            | General building restrictions for morphological protection.                             |
| Presidential Decree on Settlement characterization                            | Government Gazette / 1998/ (ΦΕΚ Δ 908/1998)                          | Tyros, Sapounakeika, Melana, Coast of Tyros - Sapounakeika       | In force            | Protection classification between settlements and coastal fronts.                       |
| Approved Town Plan of Leonidio  | Government Gazette/ 1925 (ΦΕΚ Α 361/1925)                            | Leonidio   | Not implemented     | Obsolete - non-application acted both protectively and inhibitingly.                    |
| Special Building Regulations  | Government Gazette / 1977 / (ΦΕΚ Δ 98/1977)                          | Leonidio   | In force            | Determination of prior to 1923 settlement boundaries.                                   |
| General Urban Plan Leonidio   | Government Gazette /1987 / (ΦΕΚ Δ 218/1987)                          | Leonidio   | Not implemented     | Completion of stage A only – permits outside the framework of <i>Local Urban Plan</i> . |
| Spatial and Settlement Organization Plan for Open Cities Leonidio - Poulithra | Commissioned / 2002  | Leonidio and coastal zone  | Not completed       | Attempt to organize the coastal front without any final institutional outcome.          |
| Spatial and Settlement Organization Plan for Open Cities Tyros                | Commissioned / 2003  | Tyros  | Partially completed | Only stage A was completed.   |

|  |   |                                  |  |   |
|--|---|----------------------------------|--|---|
| Detailed Town Plan for the Coast of Plaka - Lakkos | Royal Decree / 03.09.1873   | Not implemented                  | Building Coefficient 1,0 - continuous Urban Blocks along the coast | Absence of public spaces, undefined coastline, conflict with highly productive agricultural land. |
| Detailed Town Plan Port of Plaka                   | Royal Decree / 21.01.1914   | Not implemented                  | Building Coefficient 1,0 - continuous Urban Blocks along the coast | Incompatible with current use (beach), high construction pressure, need for immediate review.     |
| Characterization "Historic area"                   | Government Gazette / 2010 / (FEK AAI 451/2010)                      | Leonidio                         | In force   | Institutional recognition of historical and cultural landscape.                                   |
| Characterization "Archeological area"              | Government Gazette / 2012 / (544/AAI/2009, 68/AAI/2012)             | Poulithra - Ancient Polychni     | In force   | Fortified coastal zone settlement. Classical - Hellenistic  |
| Characterization "Archeological area"              | Government Gazette / 2012 / (544/AAI/2009, 68/AAI/2012, 282/B/1969) | Plaka Leonidio - Vrisies/Prasies | In force   | Ancient city, port, fortifications, underwater remains. Mycenaean - Archaic - Classical           |
| Characterization "Archeological area"              | Government Gazette / 2012 / (544/AAI/2009, 68/AAI/2012)             | Paleochori Leonidio              | In force   | Mycenaean tombs, evidence of an unknown settlement.   |
| Characterization "Archeological area"              | Government Gazette / 2012 / (544/AAI/2009, 68/AAI/2012)             | Kotroni Voskina Leonidio         | In force   | Extensive Mycenaean cemetery. Probable settlement at the site of Kornitsa.                        |

**Table 3.** Framework of protection of environment and international institutional recognitions that highlight local environmental wealth and heritage

| Status                 | Type Of Decision / Year / (official reference of institutional acts) | Area  | Importance   |
|------------------------|--|---|--|
| Natura 2000            | GR2520006  | Parnonas Mountain - Malevis monastery         | High biodiversity, unique forest ecosystems.                                 |
| Natura 2000            | GR2520005  | Leonidio gorge - Elonas monastery - Mana Cave | Combination of ecological, geological, and cultural value.                   |
| National Park          | Government Gazette / 2010 / (FEK AAI 353/2010)                       | Parnonas - Moustos wetland                    | Multilayered institutional protection of natural landscapes.                 |
| Wildlife refuge        | Government Gazette / 2001 / (FEK B 329/2001)                         | Koromilia - Vaskina                           | Protection of fauna and natural habitat.                                     |
| UNESCO Biosphere (MaB) | Approved / 27.09.2025  | Parnonas - Maleas                             | International recognition of cultural landscape and sustainable development. |

**Local Background.** The existence of local communities and numerous associations (Panjika Cooperative, Tsakonia Archive, mountaineering club, agricultural cooperative, trade association, educational and cultural association, etc.) has fostered a local culture of cooperation and solidarity. Such organizations constitute a network of communal cohesion and local care that is encouraging for the participation of citizens in urban processes.

## 5 The structure of the participatory initiative

### 5.1 Mission and objectives of the initiative

The primary objective of the initiative was to enrich the official urban planning process by proposing a framework that would allow the contribution and incorporation of local empirical knowledge. To achieve this aim, the project was structured around four specific, well defined and attainable objectives:

1. to achieve a level of understanding and familiarization with the Local Urban Plan, alongside co-education on sustainability-related issues
2. to collectively examine the local challenges, facilitate the emergence of the local knowledge and the co-creation and formulation of proposals
3. to submit the outcomes of these collective processes to the official citizen participation platform
4. to empower residents to actively engage in the planning processes, by expressing their views during the official public consultation phases of the local proposed plan

Beyond these specific objectives, the initiative aimed to mobilize the community around the protection and care of the area and its natural and cultural landscape. It sought to enhance awareness of social, environmental and economic balance, to strengthen the cohesion among residents, and foster a culture of participation and co-creation, positioning the process as a foundational framework for future local initiatives.

### 5.2 Methodological approach

**The methodological approach of Action Research.** The initiative adopted Action Research as its primary methodological framework, due to its capacity to bridge theory and practice. Action Research is based on a cyclical and iterative process of continuous improvement: diagnosis- planning- action- evaluation and reflection (Lewin, 1946). As Gilmore, Krantz, Ramirez (1986) succinctly describe it, Action Research is 'learning by doing': a group identifies a problem, undertakes actions to address it, evaluates the outcome and, if necessary, revises its approach. Central to this process is a relationship of cooperation and trust between the researcher and the community. Unlike methodologies that emphasize detached or neutral observation, Action Research is grounded in the active involvement of the researcher within the field. Its goal is not only the production of knowledge but also the generation of immediate and tangible change within real-world context. The project was based on the four fundamental principles of action research (O'Brien, 2001):

- *Circularity*: a process of continuous refinement of actions. Our open invitation to broad community participation led us to choose flexible methodological approaches for the continuous adaptation to emerging local dynamics
- *Participation*: individuals affected by an issue engage as co-creators of knowledge, generated through dialogue and collective inquiry. The team's goal was to build residents' capacity and understanding of spatial planning issues

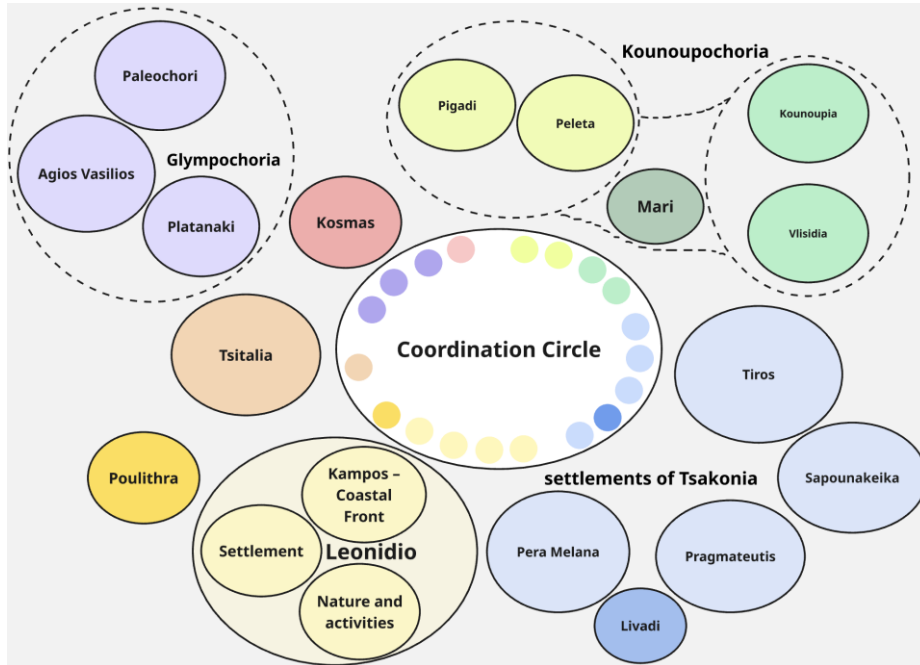
- *Orientation towards practice*: the process aims to formulate a Local Urban Plan that meets residents' needs and lived realities
- *Formative learning*: participants learn through engagement, collectively reflecting upon and revising their practices throughout the process

The approach is based on the assumption that experiential knowledge is equal to expert knowledge and that the two are complementary, particularly in the analysis of cultural landscapes in formation. Action Research thus functions as a coherent methodological link between cultural landscape theory, commons theory and participatory heritage management.

**Sociocracy as a complementary methodological approach.** Sociocracy is a modern non-hierarchical, consent-based system of organization and decision making, which was chosen to support inclusive, transparent and effective collective decision-making throughout the process.

The particular framework was partially implemented and adapted in this initiative. It provided a clear and functional structure for organizing and coordinating polyphonic participatory workshops and collectively addressing complex spatial issues. Based on this system, the community workshops of the initiative included: circular arrangement of participants, fixed roles of facilitators (assumed by the SIKRUKU members), and successive rounds of conversation-exploration-clarification and argumentation.

A sociocratic structure was adopted at the organizational level of the workshops, with each community forming an independent working circle that had clearly defined areas of responsibility corresponding to its spatial territory and conducted autonomous discussions. The spatial organization, aligned with settlements and municipal communities, was readily recognizable to local populations (Table 4). These structures have a long tradition as cohesive primary units of local self-government, dating back to the Ottoman period, and provided a coherent framework for the workshops. Community leaders assisted in grouping smaller settlements into culturally and historically coherent clusters, such as “Kounoupochoria,” the settlements of Tsakonia, and “Glympochoria” (Table 4). Although sociocracy typically designates one or two representatives per working group, in this case—also due to time constraints—elected community leaders assumed responsibility for communication and coordination with SIKRUKU.



**Fig. 1.** Working group organization chart. In the case of Leonidio, due to its size and complexity, the process was formulated into three spatial cycles: “settlement”, “agricultural plain and coastal front”, and “nature-activities”

**The dynamic identity as action researchers and inhabitants.** Throughout the research process, the SIKRUKU team took on various, shifting and often overlapping roles. This was due to our multiple statuses as residents of the Municipality of South Kynouria, as architects working within the territory, as workshop coordinators and facilitators, as researchers, etc. Locality—the shared experience and embodied understanding of place—functions as a “key” to establishing relationships of trust and cooperation between the research team, the community, and the Municipality. This enabled a fluid transition from a “research on a place” to one of “co-creating with a place”. The initiative is independent, local and self-organized, and driven by our identity as inhabitants. This distinction was necessary and decisive, both for maintaining the trust of local residents and for safeguarding the independence of the initiative, as its aim was to empower the voice of the community rather than to mediate it.

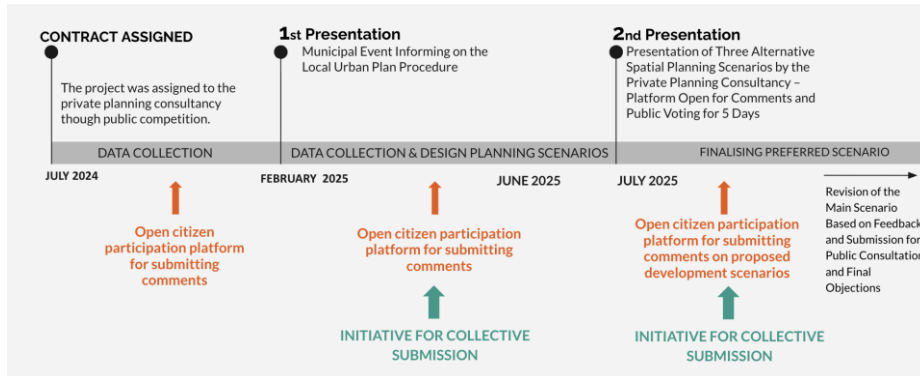


Fig. 2. Timeline of South Kynouria Local Urban Plan

### 5.3 The structure of the initiative

Given the short and particularly demanding timeline of 15 weeks for the mobilization and participation of the inhabitants, the process was organized with a clear structure, while allowing room for improvisation and adaptation. The initiative title was: “*Co-shaping our common place: Citizen Participation in the Territorial-Urban Planning of the South Kynouria Municipality*”, and its structure can be summarized as follows:

#### PHASE 0 | Project preparation

- Formation of the SIKRUKU team and planning of the initiative
- Preliminary research (archival and fieldwork) aimed at understanding the institutional process, the content of the *Local Urban Plan*, the formulation of objectives, and the definition of methodology of participation

#### PHASE 1 | Participatory research

As mentioned, the participatory research was based on community workshops. For their successful implementation, preliminary and parallel activities were needed concerning information and education. This phase was characterized by a circular nature (evaluation-action cycles), according to action-research methodology.

- **Participatory community workshops** of collective discussions concerning the thematic topics of the *Local Urban Plan* (land use, protection zones, infrastructure, etc)
- **Collection of data** concerning the institutional process, the history of local planning, the legislative framework, archival material, and the current planning situation of the territory
- **Mapping of potential and networking** with key stakeholders and representatives, associations, community organizations, the Municipality, the contracted design practice, local engineers, etc. This mapping/networking was done for consulting, support and participation
- **Parallel activities of information - awareness - education - interaction**
- **Analysis and categorization of collected data and synthesis of key findings**

**PHASE 2 | Publication of results and informing the *Local Urban Plan*- deliverables**  
Sharing the results with the Municipality, the contracted design office, and the communities. Submitting the findings to the official Citizen Participation Digital Platform.

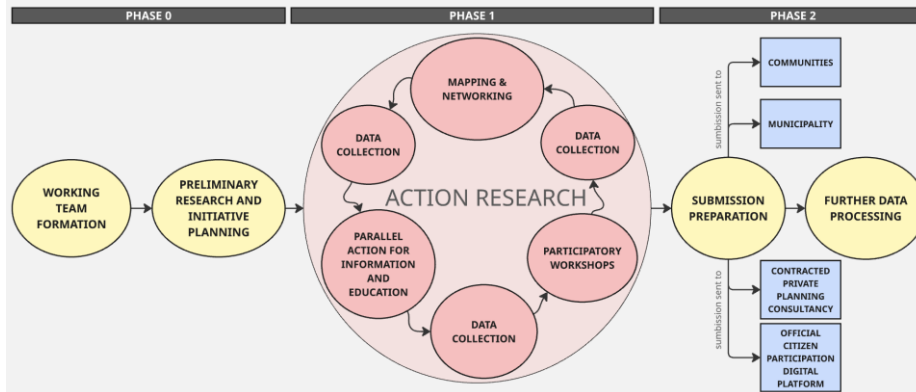


Fig. 3. Diagram of the initiative's methodological structure

**Mapping of potential and networking.** Emphasis was placed on social mapping and networking, which was seen as a critical condition for the success of a person-centered initiative. This allows for efficient and fruitful connections between individuals, organizations, and other local initiatives, thus reinforcing collective action.

- *Mapping inhabitants and creating a core group of collaboration.* Individuals of the various settlements that could make meaningful contributions were mapped, either as members of potential working groups and/or as part of a wider network of volunteers.
- *Mapping of associations* (commercial, cultural, mountaineering, etc.). Representatives of associations were contacted in order to present and allow the understanding of the initiative. In turn, these key representatives invite the members of their associations to participate.
- *Mapping engineers of the South Kynouria municipality.* The engineers were contacted and informed in advance, in order for them to participate in each of the community workshops, and to contribute their specialized knowledge. Unfortunately, the constitution of a specific working group of engineers wasn't possible.
- *Networking with specialized external consultants.* Communication networks were developed with professionals from the fields of territorial and urban planning, of heritage protection and management, participatory planning, sociocracy, non-violent communication, anthropology, etc. These collaborators served as important consultants and guides, offering continuous and/or occasional support and enriching the understanding of the subject and the process.
- *Collaboration with the Municipality of South Kynouria.* The approach to the Mayor was gradual, following the initiation of citizen information and awareness-raising activities. A comprehensive proposal for the implementation of the initiative was presented to the Municipality, with the aim of cultivating

cooperation and securing moral, communicative, and operational support. Institutional recognition and support from the Municipality were deemed necessary so that the call for participation would carry the required legitimacy and enhance the credibility of the initiative, encouraging broader citizen participation. Additionally, the Municipality facilitated the implementation of activities by providing part of the necessary infrastructure and equipment. The Municipality maintained an observer role in relation to the independent initiative, so that the project would not be burdened with political characterizations.

- *Networking with community leaders.* Through the Municipality, community leaders from all local communities were invited to a closed, in-person meeting.
- *Communication with the contracted private design and planning consultancy.* The team communicated with the planning consultancy responsible for the Local Urban Plan (ΤΠΣ) of South Kynouria, with the aim of establishing a communication channel, sharing information about our actions, explaining who we are and what we do, and creating favorable conditions for the acceptance of the outcomes of the initiative so that they could be taken into account by the engineers to the greatest extent possible.

#### **5.4 Parallel activities of information - awareness - education - interaction**

It quickly became clear that the first—and most essential—step was to inform residents about what Local Urban Plans are and why they directly concern communities and the Municipality as a whole. At the same time, it was considered necessary to organize activities that would enrich knowledge, establish a shared framework of understanding, and support participants' self-education on critical issues related to spatial planning and sustainability.

The strategy involved the use of multiple and diverse tools, as well as a daily presence in the central market, allowing information to spread organically throughout the community. This was not a fragmented information effort, but rather a steady, active presence within the social fabric. The activation methods tested included:

- **Initial presentation** of the initiative and open call for participation (19.12.2023)
- **Questionnaire for residents**, available in Greek and English
- **Questionnaires for community leaders**, sent to all communities through the municipal administration. These included targeted questions regarding key issues facing each community and potential solutions, and also served as a preparatory tool for the community workshops.
- **Permanent information and interaction point (“Interactive Corner”)**, where residents could receive information, discuss, and exchange views. This functioned as a small “field office” housed in the team’s architectural studio, supporting informational and participatory meetings (maps, questionnaires, informational materials, interactive tools). Although hosting it in a central municipal space was considered necessary, it was not possible to secure a suitable and easily accessible location.
- **Creation of a physical model of the area**, by the SIKRUKU team in collaboration with volunteers. The model attracted passersby, sparked discussions, and facilitated spatial understanding and expression.

- **Educational screenings and discussions**, focusing on the risks that arise when planning exceeds the carrying capacity of a place and how this alters the identity of small localities.
- **Conference: “Planning for Sustainability in the Municipality of South Kynouria.”** A thematic event on spatial planning, tourism, and sustainability, with the participation of experts from academia and the local community. The aim was to inform residents about the impacts of overtourism, highlight the boundaries between development and degradation of quality of life, clarify the role of spatial planning, and strengthen citizen participation in decision-making. The announcement of the upcoming community participatory workshops was made during the event, and an open invitation was extended to all. The conference concluded with an open discussion, during which concerns and expectations were expressed, confirming the need for participatory processes.
- **Dissemination of the initiative’s progress through digital media** (social media platforms, press coverage), aiming to increase engagement and inform citizens about their legal right to participate and provide input.
- **Other** smaller presentations, open discussions, informal interviews, and printed materials, aiming for the broadest possible dissemination of information and understanding.

This phase laid the foundation for developing a relationship of trust and dialogue with the local community and the municipal authority, preparing the ground for the subsequent stages of the participatory process.



**Fig. 4.** Photographs from the parallel activities of information - awareness - education - interaction

## 5.5 Participatory Workshops

**Introduction.** Participatory workshops constituted the core element of the initiative. As analysed above, they were organised into distinct working circles -inspired by

sociocracy- structured according to administrative and spatial criteria and aligned with local community boundaries. In the case of Leonidio, the process was further specified into three distinct spatial circles (table 4).

**Audience.** The invitation was open to all: including permanent and semi-permanent residents, farmers, livestock breeders, business owners, engineers, association members, and community representatives. Participants were able to take part in multiple working circles, depending on their roles and interests. Each circle was designed to address the thematic areas by identifying problems, opportunities, and future prospects (SWOT analysis) and where feasible, to proceed to the co-creation of proposals and the formation of a shared understanding of the region.

**Proposed key thematic axes.** In order to facilitate the workshop discussions, ensure flexibility, and given the complexity of the issues addressed in a Local Urban Plan, a list of proposed thematic axes was systematically assembled to guide discussion and prioritization. These thematics derived from multiple sources: outputs of parallel participatory activities, questionnaire responses, insights from open discussions with residents and engineers, case studies of other Local Urban Plans (ΤΙΣ), and input from the project team’s expert consultants.

**Table 4.** Thematic axes proposed for prioritization in each community workshop. The right column illustrates an example of the outcome following the circular prioritization process. Each participant voted verbally the three themes considered most significant for their community

| THEMATIC AXES  | VOTES per discussion |
|--|----------------------|
| Cultural Landscape (Tangible, Intangible, Natural)           | III                  |
| Tourism  | IIIIIIII (9)         |
| Rural Depopulation   | IIIIIIIIII (13)      |
| Mobility & Transportation                                    | IIII                 |
| Public & Community Spaces                                    | III                  |
| Waste Management   | IIII                 |
| Energy & Resources   | IIIIIIII (9)         |
| Housing  | II                   |
| Climate Change   | IIII                 |
| Protection Zones, Regulatory Frameworks, Planning Procedures | II                   |
| Land Use and Production Zones                                | III                  |
| Settlement Boundaries  | IIII                 |
| Issues Related to Stream Regulation and Management           | IIIIII               |
| Shelters for Emergency and Civil Protection                  | III                  |

**Structure of the workshops.** The initial plan for the community meetings included:

- *1st meeting*: An open meeting for all participants, focused on documenting problems, weaknesses, opportunities, assets and proposals (SWOT) related to the thematics of Urban planning that the participants highlighted. (implemented)
- *Interim events*: A series of educational activities – including lectures, discussions, workshops – organized in collaboration with scientific collaborators, and centered on key thematic issues emerged from the participatory process. These events aimed to strengthen participants' knowledge base and awareness, thereby fostering more informed, reflective and creative engagement during the proposal formulation phase. (partially implemented).
- *2nd and 3rd meetings*: Meetings dedicated to the co-formulation of proposals addressing the critical issues identified during earlier stages. The number of these sessions would be determined according to the needs of each community and the availability of its members. (not implemented-remains a possibility for the future).

In addition, the organization of meetings of secondary priority was examined under a best-case implementation scenario. Although these were not realized for reasons described in the following pages, they remain under consideration for future implementation. These include:

- *Cross-community thematic workshops*: A joint meeting involving participants or representatives from all communities, designed to facilitate discussion and alternative processing information around specific thematic areas. (e.g. water, energy and resources, housing).
- *Engineers' circle*: a specialized forum intended to provide technical expertise on issues related to the implementation of institutional procedures or examination of various possibilities from a technical perspective.
- *Coordination Circle of the Communities* (or of the Community Leaders): A central intercommunal body in which each community would appoint 2 representatives, with the aim of promoting the exchange of knowledge, experiences and ideas across the communities.

**Engagement with Communities.** In collaboration with the Mayor, a closed briefing meeting with all community leaders (and associations representatives) was organised to present the initiative. The objectives were mutual acquaintance, presentation of the proposed community workshops, addressing questions, and exploring the feasibility of organizing workshops in each community. The discussion also informed the grouping of the smaller community workshops. Following the meeting, community leaders undertook to invite residents, identify suitable venues within their communities, and coordinate with our team to schedule the dates and times of the workshops.



Fig. 5. The finalized meeting map, including groupings, dates, and times

**Workshop Implementation Process.** Workshop Implementation Process. Each workshop lasted approximately 2.5 to 3 hours and was held in a public space within each community. Seating was arranged in a circular layout to promote equal participation, collaboration, and direct visual contact among participants. Workshops were facilitated by our team (Anna Zacharaki, Dina Danesi), with open-form minutes recorded throughout each session. The specific schedule of each meeting—co-created with our nonviolent communications consultant—can be seen in the following table.

**Table 5.** Participatory Workshop Workflow

| Duration | Process                         | Description   |
|----------|---------------------------------|---|
| -        | Seating Arrangement             | Arrangement of the space in a circular layout to enhance equal participation, visibility among participants, and meaningful interaction.  |
| 15'      | Check-in                        | Brief self-introduction by participants (name, role, place of residence, and expectations from the meeting), to foster mutual recognition, build relationships, learn about one another, and map the human resources and capacities emerging through collective skills.   |
| 15'      | Introductory Briefing           | Presentation of the SIKRUKU initiative (role, objectives, methodology) and a concise explanation of the Local Urban Plans framework. Emphasis on the importance of residents' participation and presentation of the current workshop agenda.  |
| 20'      | Prioritization of Thematic Axes | The proposed thematic axes were presented in plain language and distributed in printed form. Each participant, following a circular order, identified the three themes they considered most important for their community. In this way, the workshop agenda was shaped "bottom-up," based on the priorities identified by the citizens.   |
| 1.30'    | Discussion                      | Structured discussion around priority themes. Each theme began with the participant with the most relevant experience, followed by contributions from all in a facilitated discussion that progressed from identifying problems and needs, to brainstorming proposals and identifying potential threats. Meeting minutes were recorded to support the preparation of a final workshop report. |
| 15'      | Check-out                       | Brief concluding statement by each participant regarding their experience of the meeting, impressions, views.   |
| -        | On-site Guided Walk             | Where feasible, a short, guided walk to observe on-site the issues raised during the discussion, enhancing our understanding of the area.   |

**Ethical Considerations.** All the aforementioned activities and processes adhered to basic ethical principles of participatory engagement. All participants were informed about the aims and use of the workshops and participated on a voluntary basis. Oral informed consent was obtained prior to their involvement, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. The material produced during the workshops (notes, maps, discussions) was anonymized and used exclusively for research purposes, ensuring the protection of personal data and the respectful representation of participants' perspectives.

## 5.6 Workshop Outcomes

In total, 14 workshops were realized during May–June 2025, with the participation of 239 residents. Over the five months of action research, both tangible and intangible aspects of the landscape were recorded, along with spatial and social weaknesses, land-use conflicts, as well as resilience practices of the communities, social representations, memories and residents' relationships with space. The results of the community workshops and the three thematic meetings held in Leonidio are not presented in this article. The key issues identified- such as water, tourism, resources, and energy, - constitute valuable material for planners and need further investigation and deeper analysis within the framework of spatial planning and the protection of the cultural landscape.



**Fig. 6.** Photographs from the Community Participatory Workshops in Pragmateuti, Livadi, Leonidio

## 6 Summary of key findings

**Introduction.** During the implementation of the methodology, it was becoming clear what worked well or partially, what required more time or training, what has not yet delivered results, which unforeseen dynamics emerged, as well as the limits of the institutional process and the lessons we gained as researchers.

### 6.1 Assessment of Objective Achievement and Stakeholder Responses

The level of effectiveness is assessed on the basis of the achievable objectives that were set during the design of the initiative.

Regarding the first objective - *to achieve a level of understanding and familiarization with the Local Urban Plan* - 239 people participated in the workshops, while many more were exposed to the information through the ‘Interactive corner’ and the complementary parallel activities. The fact that the workshops were held in central locations across all communities of the Municipality enhanced the dissemination of information. Based on informal local and provincial social networks, in which every public action becomes a subject of discussion, we estimate that the information was spread in a multiplicative way relative to the number of direct participants.

The structure of the scheme combining Parallel Activities + Participatory Workshops proved to be functional. The parallel activities served to inform the participants and to initiate the processing of the information received about this complex urban planning process. The workshops, designed with the cyclical, sociocratic setting, were inviting each attendee to participate and talk, deepening the understanding and reflection on the local challenges, as well as the community’s identity. Gradually, a “collective brain” began to take shape, as information circulated openly and freely among all participants.

Regarding the second objective - *to collectively examine the local challenges, facilitate the emergence of the local knowledge and formulate collective proposals* - its achievement was partial and was limited to the foundational stage of expressing local knowledge, memories, needs, challenges, priorities, and concerns about the future of the area, while a plurality of proposals was recorded. The consensual co-creation of proposals required more than one meeting, allowing for the gradual “fermentation” of shared positions.

Regarding the third objective *-to submit the outcomes of the collective processes to the official participation platform-* the systematic practice of keeping minutes across all workshops, along with their organization and digitization, enabled the production of a booklet titled 'Notes from Citizen Workshops on the Local Urban Plan - S.Kynouria', accompanied by a Summary Report of Initial Findings. This material was made publicly available through the Ministry's Citizen Participation Platform and was also shared with the contracted planning team, the local communities, and the Municipality, as part of an effort toward institutional integration and transparency, while reinforcing collective ownership of knowledge.

*Regarding the objective of empowering residents to participate in the official public consultation phases of the proposed local plan*, five out of the fourteen communities used the material produced during our workshop in order to independently submit comments through the Citizen Participation Platform. During the next Phase of Public Consultation on three planning scenarios (July 2026), despite a willingness to engage, the five-day timeframe was insufficient to enable a coordinated collective submission. Our team submitted comments based on critical observations gathered throughout the preceding collective processes. A fuller assessment of this objective will be possible following the final public consultation phase.

*With respect to its broader purpose*, the initiative contributed to the activation of local communities around the protection and care of the area and to the gradual formation of a participatory culture, marking a first, meaningful step.

*The Mayor* recognized the initiative as a point of reference and inspiration for further strengthening participatory practices within the Municipality. Building on this and following the completion of the community workshops, he organized meetings in each community, actively engaging with citizens. In this context, the municipal authority announced its intention to pursue more direct and systematic communication with the communities, aiming to listen, facilitate dialogue, and involve organizations, elected representatives, and citizens in the process.

*The contracted private design and planning consultancy* considered the material produced and organized within the framework of the initiative to be particularly valuable, expressed appreciation for the quality of the work, and noted that it is expected to provide critical support, particularly in the subsequent phase of study development and refinement.

## **6.2 Methodological Assessment: Elements that functioned effectively in Practice**

**Action Research as Methodology.** Choosing Action Research -a methodology that inherently allows for experimentation and iterative adjustment of the implemented process- proved well suited to a participatory project operating within an unpredictable socio-spatial context. This approach allows for flexibility, critical review and redesign, while rejecting rigid interpretations of process or notions of 'failure'. Instead, it frames implementation as a real-time learning process. The overall orientation of the program remained stable, although certain methodological tools did not evolve to the degree that they were originally anticipated.

**Sociocracy and the facilitation of the meetings.** In a context where collective projects frequently encounter obstacles due to the absence of structured processes, the adapted implementation of sociocracy served as a clear framework for polyphonic discussions and proved to be a valuable tool for strengthening and empowering collective processes.

The circular seating arrangement, equal allocation of speaking time and the consecutive rounds of opinion-sharing fostered a safe environment, encouraged active listening and enabled the systematic documentation of participants' experiences and needs. The facilitation of the discussions ensured flow, balance and focus, set time limits, reduced conflicts, thereby substantially increased the participants' willingness to engage in dialogue. This dynamic was particularly evident in the Leonidio's working circles, where discussions remained constructive despite the presence of participants with divergent and, at times, conflicting interests. The reflective question posed at the conclusion of each meeting revealed the clear desire to participate in spatial planning processes, as well as a clear demand for further meetings.

**The community-spatial structure of the meetings** proved effective, as it allowed discussions to be directly grounded in the lived experiences, narratives and needs of each local community. In designing the workshop structure, we deliberated between organizing the groups geographically or thematically.

**Multi-faceted information activities.** The combination of diverse information tools—including events, workshops, open discussions, interactive stations, documentation, questionnaires — created multiple entry points for participation and enabled engagement with audiences of varied profiles and characteristics.

**Ranking of the thematics.** The process of ranking the thematics at the beginning of each discussion enabled clear documentation of community-specific priorities, structured the dialogue in a bottom-up manner, and provided clear orientation for the discussion as a whole. In the single meeting where this step was not implemented the discussion lacked coherence, underscoring the importance of this tool. Furthermore, the process enabled our team —acting as facilitators at that time— to quickly grasp the context and concerns of each community.

### **6.3 Difficulties encountered and opportunities for improvement**

The project presented in this article represents a pilot initiative, whose principal challenge was insufficient financial resources. This limitation resulted in understaffing of the working group and restricted technical and organizational support, thereby constraining the availability of both subject-matter experts and facilitators for the workshops and discussions. Consequently, the original project structure had to be adapted as follows:

- Limitation of 3 meetings to a single session per community, during the phase I of our initiative's implementation. As a result, the consensus proposal procedures originally planned for the second and third meetings in each community could not be conducted

- Discussions focused solely on the thematic axes, emphasizing the documentation of local, experiential knowledge. However, the initial goal of establishing a shared vision for each community—which would have provided a common framework for subsequent deliberations—was not realized. This gap was particularly notable in Leonidio, where the size, population, and diversity of interests made the articulation of a unified reference point more challenging
- Grouping of the smaller communities (e.g. Peleta-Pigadi) to reduce the number of discussions
- Non-implementation of the Engineers' workshop
- Non-implementation of the inter-community thematic discussions (e.g. water, energy, housing), limiting cross community knowledge exchange
- Use of an “interactive corner” for limited hours instead of a permanent meeting space, reducing the consistency and continuity of engagement and limiting on-going dialogue and knowledge gathering

These challenges contributed to a high level of team stress, underscoring the need for institutional support to sustain participatory projects.

**Optimization Measures.** Reflection on the overall process identified several ways to enhance both the effectiveness and depth of participation:

- Involvement of members from the contracted design consultancy in discussions, providing technical support while learning through observation
- Active engagement of municipal representatives to gradually cultivate a culture of collective deliberation and consensus-based decision-making
- Inclusion of experts from the fields of participatory facilitation, cultural heritage, cultural geography, and social studies. This gives rise to the idea of a national platform cataloguing specialists in cultural management and participatory planning, while also functioning as a shared knowledge base, educational resource, and practical support system. The platform would enable communities and municipalities to access relevant expertise and procedural guidance, foster cross-sector collaboration, and support the institutionalization of contemporary participatory practices.

#### **6.4 Institutional Limitations of Urban Planning Reform in the Safeguarding of Cultural Landscapes**

With Law 4447/2016, Local Urban Plans (LUPs) were introduced as instruments intended to promote integrated and sustainable spatial planning across the Greek territory. However, both their technical specifications and their implementation remain insufficient to effectively support this objective. This is largely because the current specifications approach space primarily as a configuration of spatial units and land-use zones, rather than as an integrated and dynamic cultural and ecological web of human-nature relationships, as advocated by international doctrinal texts (UNESCO 2005; ICOMOS Natchitoches 2004).

More specifically, the prevailing framework does not adequately incorporate the following: the documentation of intangible values, narratives, community-place relationships, and embodied practices of inhabitation as interpretive dimensions of space; the mapping of natural and cultural resources within their historical depth and social

continuity; the systemic interrelation of ecological, anthropogeographical, and social parameters.

In addition, the existing specifications do not ensure that sustainability principles are embedded as constitutive—rather than optional—dimensions of planning. Critical parameters should be clearly defined and systematically assessed as non-negotiable requirements, including:

- the protection of natural and cultural resources
- the management of land as a finite resource
- the incorporation and enforcement of Carrying Capacity Assessments within defined thresholds, (Environmental-Tourism-Infrastructures etc.)
- social and economic resilience and cohesion
- the prevention of mono-functional development models (e.g., tourism monocultures)

As G. Spilanis notes, the technical specifications effectively “undermine the spirit of the law,” prioritizing narrow regulatory concerns while marginalizing environmental protection, social cohesion, and economic sustainability.

Consequently, planning risks reproducing unsustainable development patterns that intensify landscape fragility rather than enhancing resilience. Under these conditions, the sustainable trajectory of a place becomes disproportionately dependent on the discretion of the individual planner and on alignment with governmental agendas or vested interests, rather than being institutionally safeguarded.

These weaknesses are compounded by expedited procedures and restrictive timeframes, which often require planning consultants to design places they have scarcely engaged with.

At the same time, the lack of transparency and of public access to critical complementary studies—such as geological, transport, and carrying capacity assessments—undermines informed public scrutiny and weakens the democratic legitimacy of planning decisions.

### **6.5 Institutional Limitations of Citizen Participation in Local Urban Plans in the Greek Context**

According to international heritage charters and guidelines (UNESCO, ICOMOS, Burra Charter), Communities are not passive audiences of heritage policies, but legitimate actors in heritage processes. Although Greek legislation foresees participatory processes in the management of the natural and cultural landscape (Law 1126/1981; Law 3827/2010; Law 3422/2005, Article 24 of the Constitution), their implementation:

- remains largely procedural and has limited substantive impact, as it is often confined to fragmented or exclusively digital forms of engagement
- is activated at the final stage of the public consultation phase. Citizen participation is conducted within very tight timeframes and lacks systematic mechanisms to capture, analyze, and incorporate local knowledge
- does not rely on formal, institutionalized mechanisms for collaborative planning and co-creation

- is treated as an obstacle rather than as a valuable planning resource and is not incorporated into the final outcome
- functions as a mechanism for legitimizing pre-determined decisions
- is reinforcing top-down planning logics. Heritage management continues to be exercised primarily by central authorities and treated as a technical task for experts, detaching the landscape from its living social functions and excluding local communities from critical decisions about their future (Dragouni & Lekakis, 2023; Mallouchou-Tufano, 2016)

Citizens are not recognized as active knowledge holders, but rather treated as a ‘public to be informed,’ which undermines protection policies, fosters social tensions, and reinforces arbitrary and degrading practices, particularly in rural cultural landscapes.

In summary, the core problem does not lie in the absence of institutions, but in their ineffective implementation, in the persistent gap between planning and society, and in the lack of genuine participation and power-sharing. The effective protection and management of cultural landscapes presupposes meaningful collaboration between the state, experts, and local communities, the integration of lived knowledge into planning processes, and a transition from Local Urban Plans as instruments of land-use allocation to tools for designing and sustaining living landscapes.

**The Role of Experts and the Necessity of Local Participation.** While experts and technical professionals are essential for documenting and implementing urban plans, specialized knowledge alone is insufficient, as planning fundamentally concerns communities, human lives, and local networks.

The Tyros Local Urban Plan (2003) illustrates the consequences of top-down approaches. Its implementation stalled completely and was never finalized due to inadequate citizen engagement—leaving residents surprised by measures such as a 40% land contribution requirement—and insufficient institutional coordination, which generated repeated conflicts between services. Even technically compliant settlements were affected, showing that ignoring lived knowledge and local priorities undermines planning outcomes. This case highlights that effective urban planning depends on early engagement, transparent communication, and genuine collaboration among all stakeholders.

**Lack of Public Awareness and Communication Campaigns.** Throughout the process, citizens have not been informed by the state or the mainstream media about the plan’s context, objectives, significance, or their right to participate, resulting in limited engagement. Experience indicates that structured publicity campaigns, supported by competent authorities and local institutions, should precede each design phase and provide citizens with sufficient time to understand the process and contribute meaningfully. Without such a framework, participation risks remaining procedural rather than substantive.

## **6.6 Concerning the institutional digital platform for the participation of citizens and other participatory methods**

With regard to the digital platform for citizen participation, while it constitutes an essential instrument for procedural transparency, empirical evidence indicates that it is insufficient as a stand-alone participatory tool. Rather, it functions as the final step in a

broader participatory sequence, serving primarily as a repository of submitted views. As such, it cannot substitute embodied and dialogical processes of meaningful engagement, including collective reflection, exchange of perspectives, collaborative development of proposals and attentive listening as prerequisites for shared understanding and collective position-building prior to formal submission.

Within the highly multidimensional field of spatial planning, and in the absence of complementary tools that foster activation, comprehension, dialogue and collective deliberation, the platform tends to attract contributions from a narrow segment of the public. Participation is largely confined to individuals who are both digitally literate and already familiar with planning and development procedures, implicitly marginalizing other social groups whose lived experience and perspectives remain equally relevant but institutionally underrepresented. As a result, contributions recorded on the platform are predominantly individualistic, reproducing existing exclusions and undermining the collective and public dimension of the process.

The aforementioned are clearly observable in the publicly accessible data of the platform itself, where the very small number of submitted comments reveals the restricted and non-representative nature of participation. This shortcoming is particularly critical given that Local Urban Plans constitute a strategic framework shaping the future of more than 70 percent of the national territory.

By contrast, during the initiative “Co-shaping our common place”, the most substantial participatory method—besides the community workshops—emerged through the establishment of a permanent physical space for interaction in Leonidio, referred to as the Interaction Corner. Conceived as a form of civic cafe, the space was equipped with participatory tools and designed to host complementary activities such as screenings, workshops, public discussions, interactive mapping and questionnaires. Although limited in scale, in practice it played a significant role for inclusive, continuous and everyday engagement.

Empirical observation indicated that its relative effectiveness was closely linked to specific spatial and social conditions: a central location within the settlement, low thresholds for informal and spontaneous visits (for example, through the provision of coffee), and the availability of both indoor and outdoor areas. While the spatial capacity and duration of the initiative constrained its reach, these conditions nevertheless proved critical in demonstrating how such a space can operate as a genuine hub of daily participatory life and as an enabling infrastructure for the local public sphere.

**The Necessity of Institutional and Community Synergy.** The experience highlights a critical gap and the subsequent need for processes that bridge the chasm between the technical expertise and the experiential knowledge of residents, such as: a) collaboration with local engineers, who possess an intimate understanding of the area’s particularities and constraints. b) Direct, in-person resident participation, that could be facilitated through a structured local entity, staffed by both local and specialized professionals (engineers, social researchers, participatory process facilitators, and cultural management experts), serving as a shared knowledge repository. A fundamental requirement is that this local structure operates with creative autonomy and initiative, responding to observations from the field and driven not by profit motives, but by a genuine commitment to the place.

## **7 In lieu of a conclusion: methodological reflections and lessons from the field**

**The factor of locality in the participatory practices.** The dual role of our team -as residents and practicing architects within the area of focus proved to be a critical advantage to the participatory process. This locality provided access to tacit, everyday knowledge and allowed for continuous field observation, enhancing the accuracy, validity, and adaptability of the methodology to real-world conditions. A shared local identity fostered trust and encouraged participation among residents, while professional expertise offered practical knowledge and orientation during meetings.

Despite these advantages, close ties to the field may introduce bias, overrepresentation of certain voices, or the exclusion of others, requiring reflexivity and proactive effort to capture internal divergences.

In conclusion, the integration of local professionals and researchers in similar projects, proves to be highly effective and is proposed as a formal element to be institutionalized, strengthening the validity, continuity, and impact of participatory initiatives.

**Knowledge as a community resource.** Acting as both residents and practicing architects within the area of focus, enabled a continuous, cumulative knowledge production within an ever-active feedback loop. Unlike conventional research—which has a defined beginning and end, often followed by the researcher's departure—the factor of team's locality ensured that knowledge remained in situ. It became part of the local reserve and collective memory, acquiring longevity, depth and generative potential—remaining available for further processing and use. Knowledge, thus, functions as a community resource: an intangible asset that continues to grow, returns to the community whenever needed and supports long-term collective practices. The process resembles sowing, knowledge takes root, develops organically and, under favorable conditions, yields fruits that are reinvested into the place.

**Methodological transferability.** The project's organizational phases, the methodological approach, the structure of the community working circles—with their clearly defined domains—, as well as the various tools for activation, awareness-raising and interaction, are highly transferable. They can be applied to diverse planning projects, or different municipalities, as well as to Phase II of the Local Urban Plan, where planning becomes more site specific, ensuring adaptability to local contexts and needs.

**Collaborative learning acts as a means of protection.** In today's 'development'-driven reality, dominated by profit motives and short-term fragmented approaches, collaborative learning is proposed as a crucial strategy for shifting focus from narrow individualism towards the broader common good. Collective community learning enables the understanding of complex issues, cultivates a shared vocabulary and builds the essential framework needed to protect our heritage, environment and sense of place.

**From mere 'space' into a 'place'.** Initially, the municipality was perceived by our team merely as a mapped space—a schematic representation defined by boundaries, coordinates, topographical features and landmarks. Gradually, this abstract impression gained depth and began to emerge through lived experience, becoming entangled with

people, narratives, and social relations. In this way, the municipality was transformed from mere ‘space’ into a ‘place’, understood as a complex mesh of inseparable layers of social and spatial relations. This perspective became visible only through our conscious presence and embodied engagement with the field.

**The historical institution of community.** The deliberate decision to hold the workshops locally, namely within each community, rather than inviting residents to join the workshops in the municipal capital, had a positive impact on the number of participants while simultaneously mitigating long standing-feelings of marginalization. The on-site experience prompted a broader reflection on the role and significance of the community as an institution.

Historically, community-based economies and collective systems of organization and governance constituted the core socioeconomic fabric of the Greek communities. Grounded in practices of self-governance, collective resource management and mutual support, these systems functioned as mechanisms of resilience during periods of uncertainty. Today, their relevance is re-emerging within contemporary debates on participatory governance and strategies of local resilience.

**The spatial dimension.** The geomorphology and spatial extents of the municipality, as experienced through repeated travel to distant workshop locations, contributed substantially to a deeper understanding of the place. The time spent traversing these routes, initially within a landscape unfamiliar to us and later within the same landscape re-framed through the discussions that unfolded during the workshops, enriched the ongoing analytical process and reinforced our reflections. From the researcher's perspective, spatial extent and mobility across the South Kynouria territory are not understood as neutral logistics, but as organic components of the methodology tested, and should therefore be incorporated into its overall evaluation.

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