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## Mainstreaming coastally just and equitable marine spatial planning

*Planner and stakeholder experiences and perspectives on participation in Latvia*

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*Published in:*  
Ocean & Coastal Management

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2023.106681](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2023.106681)

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*Publication date:*  
2023

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Tafon, R., Armoskaite, A., Gee, K., Gilek, M., Ikauniece, A., & Saunders, F. (2023). Mainstreaming coastally just and equitable marine spatial planning: Planner and stakeholder experiences and perspectives on participation in Latvia. *Ocean & Coastal Management*, 242, Article 106681. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2023.106681>

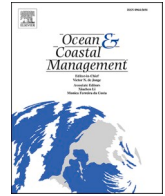
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# Mainstreaming coastally just and equitable marine spatial planning: Planner and stakeholder experiences and perspectives on participation in Latvia

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Just and equitable transformations  
Blue economy  
Marine spatial planning  
Principles of participation  
Coastal communities

## ABSTRACT

Community participation and influence are vitally important for meeting the multidimensional sustainability aims of marine spatial planning (MSP) and more specifically for procedural and distributive justice. While participation has received substantial research interest, we identify a need to: 1) develop equity-based principles for coastal community participation that can be used to assess and reform MSP practices; 2) generate rich empirical accounts of coastal community participation and representation linked to real-world MSP practices. Here we present the results of a study that synthesizes critical MSP and blue justice scholarship to develop principles and indicators of coastally equitable and just planning. Drawing on interviews with planners and stakeholders and analysis of planning and legal documents, these principles are used to assess participatory processes linked to Latvian MSP practices in the period 2015 to 2019. Our analysis shows that equitable and just MSP needs to be based on participation that is timely, inclusive, supportive & localized, collaborative, methodical and impactful. When applied to the Latvian case these six principles provide a comprehensive and versatile heuristic approach to assess participation in MSP. In the context of Latvian MSP practices, we revealed a fundamental challenge of maintaining inclusive and localized participation throughout the full planning cycle. To counteract the successive narrowing/hardening of participatory space our results indicate a need for continuously promoting diversity of voices and perspectives, opportunities for collaborative sense making, visioning and critique. This will help to bridge diverse MSP divides (e.g., between land and sea, between local, national, and global values and priorities, between science and local knowledge, and between blue growth, conservation, and justice goals). If applied more generally in research and as part of MSP evaluation an equity-based approach can promote the mainstreaming of coastally just and equitable MSP practices. Finally, considering contextual factors (e.g., history, culture, power, legislation) that shape participation and representation is crucial when applying the equity principles to a particular MSP setting to acknowledge and accommodate its particular characteristics and challenges.

## 1. Introduction

Ocean-based transformations to sustainability require that all four dimensions of justice, that is, capability, recognitional, procedural, and distributive justice are considered in their own right and as a necessary condition for the effectiveness and efficiency of conservation, climate,

energy and blue economy policies and management systems (Tafon et al., 2023). Furthermore, while long-term ocean-based transformational changes must be structural and systemic, they must also be locally inclusive, driven, and enabling (Louey 2022). At the epicentre of critical debates on ocean transformations to sustainability is an emergent blue justice scholarship focused on bringing attention to limited

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2023.106681>

Received 22 March 2023; Received in revised form 1 June 2023; Accepted 1 June 2023

Available online 23 June 2023

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integration of justice in ocean governance and marine spatial planning (MSP) in particular (Gill et al., 2023; Bennett et al., 2021; Germond-Duret et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2019a; Jentoft and Chuenpagdee 2022). Just and equitable transformations seek to remediate a wide range of socioenvironmental injustices inculcated in current ocean practices, including nonrecognition of specific identities, rights, and knowledge and value systems (Saunders et al., 2020; Tafon et al., 2023), inequitable distribution of risks, benefits, burdens, and responsibilities (Bennett et al., 2019; Jentoft and Chuenpagdee 2022), and limited commitment toward harnessing diversity and conflict to transform negative social relations and build ocean literacy and capacity (Tafon et al., 2022). Given differential capacities to participate effectively in MSP and to adapt to climate change and other stressors and threats, just and equitable transformations to sustainability also recognizes interdependencies between nature and communities and seek to strengthen the capabilities of the weakest and most vulnerable, human and nonhuman, to live a flourishing life (O'Connor and Kenter 2019; Caillon et al., 2017; DeRoy et al., 2019).

Of all the interrelated justice dimensions, procedural justice and specifically participation seems to be the single most researched topic in the critical MSP and related blue justice scholarship. Focus here is on who holds decision-making power, and who participates, how, why, when, and with what level of influence (Tafon et al., 2019a; Saunders et al., 2020; Flannery et al., 2018; Tafon 2018). Some scholars argue that unchecked power, the predominance of a techno-managerial rationality, and the lack of engagement in pluralistic mapping that visualizes and integrates people's multidimensional relations to the sea often conjoin with the politics of knowledge co-production, planners' limited reflexivity, and stakeholders' differential adaptive and responsive abilities, to exclude or marginalize community value and knowledge systems that do not readily follow dominant scientific cognitive logics of ocean sustainability and human-nature relationships (Gee et al., 2017; McKinley et al., 2019; Trouillet 2019). Many thus argue that stakeholder engagement in MSP is best described as consultative rather than participative (Flannery et al., 2018; Tissi re and Trouillet 2022), where participation is seen in ideal terms as an inclusive, sincere, bold, deliberative, equity-informed and truth-seeking dialogue in which decision-makers listen carefully and differently, allowing participants to pose difficult questions, being responsive to those questions, and letting this dialogue process inform agonistic planning decisions (Tafon et al., 2022).

The unit of analysis in much of this work is often the coast or community (e.g., Jentoft 2020; Louey 2022; Evans et al., 2023), and for good reasons. The coast is the intersecting place of land and sea; of diverse people and cultures; of the local, national, and global; of administrative jurisdictions and societal institutions (Tafon et al., 2022). The coast is also a place of widespread unsustainable and inequitable development patterns; of magnified climate change effects and adaptation challenges; and of a multiplicity of uses and governance interventions, including nature conservation, aquaculture, tourism, and large-scale climate, energy, blue economy infrastructure projects, such as port development, windfarms, oil and gas development, shipping, and blue carbon (Gill et al., 2023; Morrissey 2021; Cinner et al., 2011; Kelly 2022). Coasts are also home to diverse communities, e.g., small-scale fishers who contribute toward food security, poverty alleviation, and social cohesion (Jentoft 2020; Jentoft and Chuenpagdee 2022), but also other communities of interests, including recreational groups. Representation of diverse coastal communities in planning processes and recognition of their interests in decision-making is therefore essential if MSP is to deliver equity and justice in coastal areas.

Yet there is evidence that coastal communities are often underrepresented and marginalized in ocean governance, resulting in planning processes that are exclusive of or unresponsive to the needs and aspirations of coastal groups (Domingue 2022; Jentoft 2020). Despite this, there is limited scholarship focused on challenges and prospects for community just and equitable MSP beyond small-scale fisheries.

Furthermore, very few (e.g., Smith and Jentoft 2017) have examined the participation (and related issues) of coastal municipal authorities, who have de jure power (which may vary between contexts) to represent and defend coastal interests and needs in MSP.

Starting from the premise that coastal community participation, representation and influence are indispensable to meeting the aims of MSP and ocean transformations to sustainability, this paper reviews and synthesizes critical MSP and blue justice scholarship to develop six equity-based principles of coastal community participation (i.e., timely, inclusive, collaborative, supportive and localized, methodical, and impactful) that support shared decision-making and action. We define coastal community participation as either the direct or indirect participation of coastally connected people in MSP and blue economy processes, with direct participation implying individuals representing themselves during this process and indirect participation implying representation through other groups, which could be an elected coastal municipal government (with or without jurisdiction in the sea), an association connected to the coast or sea, or any other organised group. We then use Latvian MSP experiences to examine the extent to which coastal communities and municipalities participate and influence MSP and with what distributive outcomes and impediments to community aspirations.

Section 2 elaborates a framework of community justice and six related principles that centre coastal participation and influence as a pathway to locally just transformations to sustainability. Section 3 outlines our research methodology. Section 4 is the results and analysis, which unravels specific community participation and representation challenges in the Latvian MSP. These include limited capacity and enthusiasm by coastal municipalities to effectively participate and represent coastal communities, how planners championed powerful marine interests, and limited opportunities for smaller localized sectors and the general public to participate in MSP. Section 5, discusses and assesses the findings of the case in relation to the six equity-based principles of coastal community participation in MSP practice. Section 6 concludes the paper.

## 2. Six equity-based principles of coastal community participation in MSP

MSP has received wide critique recently as an exclusionary system, with some seeing it as exhibiting signs of the "post-political condition" (Tafon 2018). As local participation in many national processes is often hampered by diverse factors, (e.g. a lack of mandate, resources and knowledge), participation in MSP has therefore come to be seen by some as a little more than an illusion (Flannery et al., 2019) or depicted through a range of catch phrases, such as "window dressing" (Tafon et al., 2019b), "tokenistic" (Clarke and Flannery 2020), "therapeutic" (Tafon 2019), or "lip service" (Flannery et al., 2018). These depictions of MSP as being at arm's length from locals is not exclusive to domestic processes, but also applies to transboundary MSP processes (Morf et al., 2019b; Ansong et al., 2021). The catch phrases are a resounding call to decentre top-down MSP and related sustainability transformation activities (e.g., linked to blue growth/economy, energy security and transitions, climate change, and post-COVID-19 economic recovery), or to rethink their decoupling from life below, above and near water in terms of effects on community wellbeing and livelihoods, place identity, health, culture, tourism, fisheries, human-nature relationships and interdependencies, and the vulnerabilities and needs of nonhuman nature (O'Connor and Kenter 2019; Morrissey 2021; Louey 2022; Jentoft 2020). In other words, they are a plea for MSP planners, states, global institutions, and maritime industry to adapt MSP to accommodate broader sustainability transformation activities to local sociocultural, ecological, and economic conditions, values, visions, practices, knowledge systems and needs (O'Connor and Kenter 2019; Leong et al., 2019; Jay 2022; DeRoy et al., 2019). A key challenge for MSP is how to reinvent itself into a truly nature positive (Saunders et al., 2020) and community inclusive, just, and responsive governance practice

(Flannery 2023; Gissi et al., 2019; Gilek et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2018).

Below we set out six equity-based principles of coastal community participation that are useful for evaluating (community) participation in MSP. They promote shared decision-making and action in ocean governance and MSP, with the aim to advance coastally just, efficient, and effective transformations to sustainability. By just, we mean identifying, prioritizing, and enabling the engagement of communities likely to be most affected by ocean-based sustainability transformations and who face additional barriers to effective engagement (Kelly 2022). Efficiency means localizing or adapting MSP and related transformation projects to situated sociocultural, economic, and environmental conditions, where community involvement and buy-in e.g., through co-design and benefit-sharing, are key to the efficiency of MSP. Effectiveness means taking steps to meet the expectations and needs of involved and affected communities. The principles can be used to discern or direct community engagement in MSP, as well as in a range of sustainability transformation activities, including blue growth and the blue economy. They are also relevant in conservation and climate mitigation related contexts, whether they be land or sea based.

**Timely:** Early and active stakeholder participation have long been recognised as a fundamental aspect of good environmental governance. Coastally equitable and just MSP engages affected coastal communities early-on and throughout the planning process. This is essential for understanding and defining the priorities of MSP and for mapping, integrating, monitoring, and improving implementation strategies (Smith and Jentoft 2017) in relation to effects on place-based material (e.g., homes, fishing, tourism, environmental conditions) and nonmaterial (e.g., culture, place identity, health, socio-natural relationships etc.) concerns (Kelly 2022). Of course, mapping and spatializing community biocultural needs and values linked to the sea is onerous (Béné and Friend 2011; Kidd and Shaw 2014), especially knowledge systems and intangible and emotional values and relationships to nature and place (Gee et al., 2017; DeRoy et al., 2019; Caillon et al., 2017; Leong et al., 2019). While engaging a range of coastal identities at the initial, agenda-setting phase of MSP (when the who's, what's, how's, when's, and where's of MSP and related sustainability transformation activities are decided prior to public consultations) is likely to be impossible, this challenge can be addressed by opening up such spaces for coastal municipalities. Involvement of coastal authorities early-on in MSP is not only an ethical question but is also a legal requirement in many contexts (they have legal mandates to represent communities). Importantly, coastal authorities can also facilitate a two-way communication, as they can liaise between powerful actors and the communities they represent.

**Inclusive:** Including a diversity of sustainability values and interests, knowledge types and justice claims in MSP should facilitate integration of minority and opposing views of sustainable ocean and coastal futures. People-related inclusion is informed by vulnerability and wellbeing characteristics at the intersection of disability, age, gender, economic status, organizational capacity, and where applicable race, ethnicity, religion. Sector-based inclusion relates to existing and potential sectors, including informal and small-scale sectors such as fisheries, coastal tourism, aquaculture, recreation, and where applicable, community offshore renewable groups or associations. Lastly, organization-related inclusion identifies and involves diverse place- and interest-based organizations or groups, including environmental non-governmental organizations at various scales, local grassroots movements, small-scale fishers, and where applicable, scholar activists, Indigenous Peoples, and ethnic groups). As ocean stewards and defenders, these environmental justice communities are key agents in reversing or improving the negative social and ecological externalities of MSP-related sustainability transformation policies and practices (Bennett et al., 2021; Domingue 2022).

**Supportive and localized:** Supportive, equity-based MSP identifies and seeks to transform barriers to effective community participation. Support includes organizing safe and accessible spaces e.g., citizen science (Flannery et al., 2019) for affected communities, where open,

passionate and honest debates around community-informed sociocultural, biocultural and ecological values, visions, challenges and transformation pathways are encouraged (Leong et al., 2019; DeRoy et al., 2019; Caillon et al., 2017). Acknowledging, for instance, that some groups are far less organized and have limited mobilizational capacity, as a first step toward equity-informed support would entail de-homogenization of sectors or groups, that is, acknowledging heterogeneity, such as the differential capacities between SSFs and industrial fisheries, or between SSF men and women. Within small-scale fishery, this could mean organizing targeted (bespoke), small-scale fisheries meetings in which issues specific to the livelihoods and practice of male and female SSF groups are discussed separately (and where needed, together) and remedies explored. Community-supportive MSP also privileges taking participation to communities through organizing participation locally, which can address important obstacles to community participation relating to time, logistics and power imbalance (Tafon et al., 2023).

**Collaborative:** An equity-based engagement in MSP goes beyond mere consultation in which coastal communities are invited to simply comment on set options. A collaborative MSP adopts a co-production approach, by exploring localized sustainability issues, threats, options, opportunities, and solutions with, not for, communities. The argument for this is that people are more motivated to act and learn more when a large sustainability issue is framed locally, for instance how climate change negatively affects the birds that people are accustomed to seeing in their surroundings (Wilsey et al., 2022) or how communities perceive or are socially and economically affected by ocean interventions, including MSP (Flannery et al., 2019; Leong et al., 2019), ocean conservation (Mann-Lag et al., 2021) and climate mitigation e.g., offshore wind energy (Tafon et al., 2019a). A collaborative process also engages with the broader environmental justice community (e.g., local and international NGOs, youth, and scholar activists) and offers better opportunities for agonism (honesty, passion, trust, mutual respect, community learning and empowerment), which is useful for depolarization of positions, co-production of knowledge and action, and transformation of unsustainable practices and institutions (Tafon et al., 2022; Bennett et al., 2021).

**Methodical:** MSP can facilitate coastally just and equitable transformations to sustainability if it makes use of innovative methods that facilitate accessibility of information and maximum participation of communities. This includes using alternative and innovative modes of communication and participation, such as online resources, social media, local newspapers and media (Tafon et al., 2023). In today's digital era where youth prefer to chat online rather than talk in-person, localization and digitalization of participation (e.g., through chat functions such as WhatsApp, Twitter etc.) can address key barriers to participation, such as time, logistics, and difficulties to express oneself orally or in public. Furthermore, methods such as citizen science (Flannery et al., 2019), participatory GIS and mapmaking (Trouillet 2019), serious gaming (Abspoel et al., 2021) storytelling, online surveys and data localization (Wilsey et al., 2022), arts-based approaches (Strand et al., 2022) and beach walks can facilitate better community engagement and joint sense-making in ocean planning and action. Importantly, the methods used must be accessible to all, appropriate for the purpose of the engagement, and evaluated and adapted in response to feedback from participants.

**Impactful:** Communities are interested in whether their participation in MSP is meaningful and makes a difference (Wilsey et al., 2022), which calls for learning and reflexivity to be an integral part of MSP (Toonen and van Tatenhove 2020). The impact of community engagement in MSP must be assessed, and lessons learned used to improve future community engagement processes, i.e., implementation, monitoring, and review of plans. A community-focused evaluation of participation in MSP can be based on process and outcome criteria (Beierle and Cayford 2002; Rowe and Frewer 2004). With process criteria, we may ask: Is the process locally based, inclusive, early-on and



continuous? Is it fair, and flexible? Does it frame MSP and ocean transformation with respect to local issues, values, visions and opportunities? Is communication and participation accessible, adaptive and collaborative? In terms of outcome criteria, we may ask: Has the process closed the gap between science and lay knowledge (Saunders et al., 2019b), human and nature, land and sea, (Jay 2022) etc.? Are community views, values, visions and challenges considered and integrated in decision-making? Does the process affect community support of plans? Is there social learning, community empowerment and co-production of knowledge and action? Has the process contributed to transformation of institutionalized practices and rules in any way (Tafon et al., 2022)?

### 2.1. A couple of caveats about the equity-based principles

First, while the framework presented above should support community engagement practice and analysis in diverse sustainability transformation practices, its application in any given context must not lose sight of broader structural factors that condition practice, such as national and international policy and regulation, globalized market positionalities, social status, ecological conditions, disproportionate climate change effects and adaptive capacities, as well as historical power relations, cultural norms and informal rules that shape and steer environmental citizenship and participation, including but not limited to how communities frame and perceive their role and agency it. The point is that while we see the six equity-based principles as essential to the wellbeing of marginalized communities, caution should be taken against their universalization across contexts and against the unwitting reification of community injustice or marginalization by the researcher or practitioner, which can lead to the imposition of an essentialized ideal of participation and inclusivity that is maladapted to the norms and cultures in which certain communities may be embedded. Indeed, as Haugaard and Ryan (2012) warn in their discussion on power, given fundamental differences in people's being-in-the-world, it would be erroneous to make universalizing normative judgements about concepts such as (un)freedom, (in)justice, or domination. Our point is that what may appear to the outside normative critic as a coastally unjust or exclusionary governance or intervention may conflict with the being-in-the-world of the designated "victim", who may or may not experience exclusion or may even resist the very idea that he/she should be included in ocean decision-making. This is not to cast doubt on the ethos and substance of community involvement and influence in environmental decision-making, but rather to suggest that participation can be complex and thorny in practice, especially in societies with a relatively limited democratic culture but also in societies with avowedly advanced democratic institutions.

Similarly, while we see community representation by others as complementary to direct participation and an alternative to community exclusion in MSP and ocean governance in general, representation can also reproduce injustices, if not informed by due consideration being given to potential differences (in terms of power, political and socioeconomic status, visions, values, interests, as well as definitions of the problem and its solutions) that may exist within communities or even between a given collective and those supposedly representing it. In fisheries, for instance, Jentoft and Chuenpagdee (2022) argue that there exist fundamental differences between small-scale fisheries and large-scale fisheries, so that any attempt at homogenization of the sector may lead to powerful fishery actors representing interests that do not reflect the experiences and needs of small-scale fishers. Araos (2023) makes a similar point in a case of climate infrastructure planning in New York City. The author shows how city officials sidestepped input provided by communities in favour of the rationality of technical expertise, and how a community, which may be thought of as sharing common interests as is often the case in the participation literature, hold conflicting views on how to plan for a sustainable future.

## 3. Methodology

Our case study approach is comprised of semi-structured interviews, and the analysis of diverse planning documents, reports, and regulations. They include, the Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia 2030(2010), the Latvian MSP plan (including its first draft (2016)), the Latvian Development Planning System Law (2009), the Spatial Development Planning Law (2011), the Procedures for the Development, Implementation and Monitoring of the MSP (2012), and stakeholder consultation protocols of the Latvian MSP. In total, 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021 with 15 individuals – coastal and regional authorities(1), MSP national authorities (2), Maritime Administration(1), Cultural Heritage authorities(1), affected coastal citizens(3), such as coastal fishers, residents and tourism entrepreneurs, as well as a representative of a nature conservation organization(1), scientists(2), terrestrial and coastal planners(2), and planning consultants involved in the MSP process(2).

With the interviews we sought insights into the diverse interests, experiences, perspectives and issues in relation to Latvian MSP more broadly and participation in particular. The sample selection process was informed by insights gained through our reading of the different Latvian MSP documents and the stakeholder consultation protocols, as well as the authors' own knowledge of the Latvian MSP process. All interviews were conducted in Latvian. Interview content, as well as planning documents and legislation, were analysed inductively following the six equity-based principles of community participation to evaluate participation in Latvian MSP. Key quotes and excerpts from the interviews and documents in Latvian were translated to English to illustrate the main findings related to how stakeholder participation is regulated and how this translates into practice and is experienced. Due to Covid-19 pandemic related restrictions and social distancing measures in place, 10 of the total 12 interviews were conducted online. Restrictions also made it difficult to meet and develop rapport with coastally situated stakeholders, thereby limiting the number of interviewed coastal residents and entrepreneurs as well as the diversity of coastal experiences. As a result, the sample relied on the authors' pre-existing channels of communication and network, which also had a strong positive influence on the response rate. Furthermore, in order to increase knowledge on coastal participation issues, we also relied on the perspectives of other MSP participating stakeholders, in addition to the direct experiences of the coastal respondents that we recruited. Finally, for the sake of readability, and due to space constraints, our understanding of the institutional arrangements of Latvian MSP and coastal planning is not presented in the body of text. Readers interested in this will find it in a separate, supplementary file.

### 3.1. MSP in Latvia. A tale of two halves: From NGO-led participation to ministry-led strategic planning

Officially, the Latvian MSP process took place from January 2015 to May 2019 (Veidemanis et al., 2017). The first phase of the formal MSP process, that is, the identification and engagement of stakeholders and the development of the first draft of the Latvian MSP (January 2015-mid-2016) was, with mandate from the Latvian government, driven by the Baltic Environmental Forum (BEF), a contracted environmental non-governmental organisation with long experience in stakeholder engagement and planning. Following provisions laid down in Latvia's spatial planning law and drawing on its own experience with conducting stakeholder processes, BEF mapped and invited three broad categories of participants with different degrees of influence (see Table 1). As specified by the regulations on Latvian MSP procedures, this firstly consisted of an MSP Working Group (MSP WG), comprised mostly of representatives of ministries but also the Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments as a representative of coastal municipal interests. This group had significant influence over the subsequent process and contributed to steer the direction and priorities of MSP in its early

**Table 1**

Recognised stakeholder groups and their roles as part of the Latvian MSP process identified by the plan developers drawing on Latvian laws and regulations.

Recognised stakeholder groups	Grounds for recognition	Role and influence in MSP
<b>MSP Working Group (MSP WG)</b> Representatives of ministries, regional governments, Latvian Association of Local Coastal and Regional Governments, Environmental and Fisheries Advisory Council, and Latvian Port and Transit Business Associations (for full list see <a href="#">Supplementary Table 1</a> ).	Establishment of an MSP WG, its role and those obliged to take part are defined in the regulatory Latvian MSP procedures (2012).	<b>MSP “pundits”: Shaped and steered the priorities &amp; direction of MSP.</b> The MSP WG is responsible for preparing the terms of reference for the MSP process, which include a justification for Latvian MSP and the requirements for: i. assessing the current status and trends in the sea, ii. identifying institutions responsible for providing evidence, iii. describing permitted uses, iv. public participation v. the “graphical” section of the plan, which includes maps of environmental conditions, current and planned sea uses (regulatory Latvian MSP procedures 2012, Item 24).
<b>“Target” Stakeholders</b> Representatives of economic sectors (aquaculture, ports and maritime transport, energy, tourism and recreation), interest groups (cultural heritage, environment NGOs) as well as institutions (ministries, state institutions, associations, unions and federations, businesses and regional and local governments).	Participation of the public is required by the regulatory Procedures for the Public Participation in the Development Planning Process (2009), the Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia 2030 (2010), Spatial Development Planning Law (2011) as well as regulatory Latvian MSP procedures (2012). Legislation does not distinguish between “stakeholders” and the “wider public”; this distinction was made during the BEF stakeholder mapping exercise.	<b>“Consultative group”:</b> <b>Identified during BEF stakeholder mapping exercise.</b> Stakeholders were involved in the initial planning stages – the assessment of current status and use, development of an evidence base and a common understanding of goals and needs. Additionally, during later stages – scenario analysis and permitted use identification. <b>Commenters:</b> The level and method of involvement was determined during the stakeholder mapping exercises carried out by BEF. Ultimately, the public were informed through public hearings, mainstream and social media and provided with drafts of MSP versions 1 and 2 as well as an online platform to provide feedback. Further, they were invited to hearings and regional seminars held in several coastal towns and the capital Riga.
<b>The Public (“commenters”)</b> Residents of coastal and non-coastal areas.		

(agenda-setting) stage. We have referred to this group as MSP “pundits” to capture their influence relative to others. The second group was comprised of what we term as “target” stakeholders identified by BEF as having a stake in MSP. Coastal interests were represented broadly in this group, through representatives of public institutions (e.g., local and regional planning regions, environmental and safety authorities), associations, unions, and federations, as well as economic sectors and thematic interests (e.g., aquaculture, ports and maritime transport, energy, tourism, environmental NGOs, and cultural heritage, among others) (BEF, 2014).<sup>1</sup> This group had a consultative role in the BEF-driven MSP process in the sense of actively shaping the initial planning stages (such as the creation of an evidence base) “consultative group”. The third group, which we refer to as “commenters” was comprised of the public, that is, coastal and non-coastal residents. This group had the least influence relative to the other two groups but could provide written feedback on draft plans and participate and express opinions during public hearings and “regional public hearing seminars” (henceforth: regional seminars) along with the “consultative group” (Table 1).

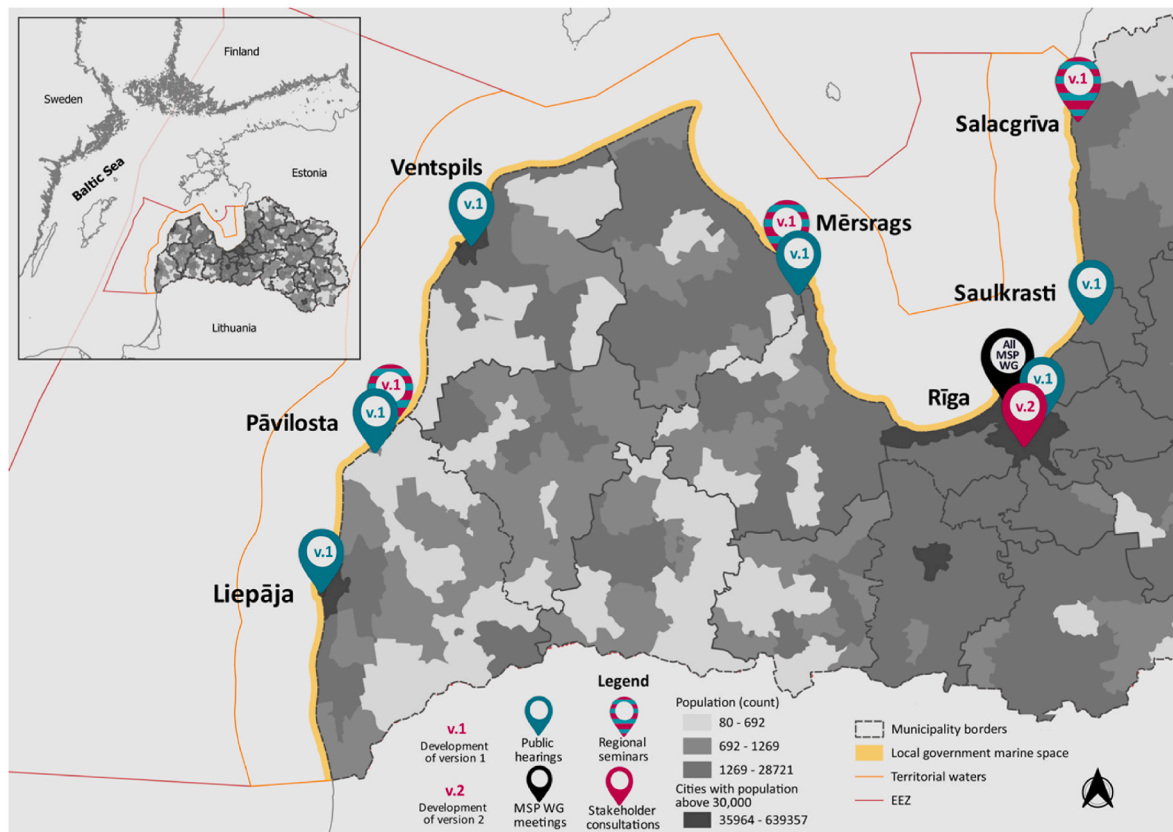
Between 2015 and mid-2016, BEF organized at least 21 participatory processes, including 5 meetings with the MSP WG, at least 9 in-person regional seminars for the *consultative group* and *commenters*, and 7 public hearings with the general public (*commenters*) and stakeholders (*consultative group*).<sup>2</sup> Additionally, a series of stakeholder consultations took place (*consultative group*). Furthermore, BEF reported that in an MSP WG meeting held in May 2016, a total of 385 participants attended, the majority being representatives of local municipalities, fishers, tourism, and transport sectors. All MSP WG meetings organised by BEF were held in Riga while most public hearings and all regional seminars involving stakeholders and the wider public took place in different coastal cities, towns, and rural areas during the initial phase of the first draft plan development (see Fig. 1). The BEF-led process culminated in the preparation of a first draft plan.

In May 2016, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development (MoEPRD) took over the planning exercise from BEF. We do not know the reason behind this change in planning responsibility. The Ministry was directly responsible for preparing the second and final drafts of the plan (see Fig. 1) based on the first version of the Latvian MSP. Between June and September 2017, during the development of the second draft, MoEPRD organized a series of consultation events with specific sectoral stakeholders (exclusively shipping and offshore wind-farms) in Riga as part of the BalticLINES project. The general public were invited to review the 2nd draft of the MSP online and were given two months to provide written feedback (see Fig. 2). A meeting with the MSP WG was then organised to discuss version 2 of the draft plan and the Strategic Environmental Assessment as well as the feedback received from the wider public.

Fig. 2 illustrates that the initial stages of the MSP process, i.e., those that were BEF-led and working towards version 1 of the plan, were much more intense in terms of engagement across all three stakeholder groups. This round seemingly explicitly sought to capture a diversity of coastal interests, with coastal publics, including small business interests (e.g., coastal tourism) given diverse opportunities to engage with the production of version 1 of the plan. Coastal communities also participated indirectly through representation by the Latvian Association of Local Coastal and Regional Governments as part of the MSP WG, and through coastal municipal authorities who had a consultative role throughout (i.e., representation by first and second tier municipal governments). The engagement of coastal community groups can therefore be described as timely in the sense of early and broad engagement, and as supportive and localized as MSP was actively taken to the coast in various public

<sup>1</sup> [https://jurasplanojumsdotnet.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/02\\_sabiedribas-lidzdalibas-iespejas\\_k-veidemane.pdf](https://jurasplanojumsdotnet.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/02_sabiedribas-lidzdalibas-iespejas_k-veidemane.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.varam.gov.lv/lv/juras-planojums?utm\\_source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](https://www.varam.gov.lv/lv/juras-planojums?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F).



**Fig. 1.** Locations of MSP Working Group, stakeholder and public engagement events organised by BEF during the development of draft one (version 1) and the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development during the development of the second draft (version 2) of the Latvian MSP.

hearings and regional seminars. The BEF-led process also had a collaborative character, especially for the MSP pundits who had an early opportunity to set the MSP agenda but also for the consultative group who were able to explore broad issues and options during the regional events.

These early high levels of engagement did not continue. Spaces for participation narrowed during the preparation of version 2 of the plan, with the process generally becoming less collaborative, less localised, and less inclusive. Participative spaces particularly closed down again for coastal municipalities and other coastal interests, while large marine sectors (shipping and offshore wind) were given greater recognition and influence during this phase. There was no longer any concerted effort to directly engage coastal communities in place-based or deliberative engagement. Coastal communities and the public, which included all Latvians, were merely asked for written reactions to draft plans.

The narrowing of participative opportunity over the course of an MSP process has been described elsewhere (Giacometti et al., 2020), where it is ascribed to the gradual “hardening” of the process and its outcomes. Early on, the scope for broad stakeholder involvement is greatest as the process is still soft: stakeholders need to understand the purpose of MSP, rules of process need to be developed, and an initial information and evidence base needs to be created. During later stages, as MSP becomes more defined and plans more developed, there tends to be less opportunity for shaping the process. Path dependencies begin to set in, and participation tends to be confined to consultation and obtaining feedback on final draft plans. Nonetheless, there is scope for ensuring fair representation of actors and stakeholders at all stages of the process, not least by choosing suitable arenas for continued engagement and appropriate forms of communication.

In the analysis that follows, we focus on four specific participation and representation challenges for coastal communities as perceived and experienced in the Latvian MSP process.

## 4. Results and analysis

This section presents an overview analysis of the roles of MSP planners, authorities and other stakeholders and the varying opportunities and degrees of influence that the MSP process offered for coastal community and stakeholder participation.

### 4.1. Specific community participation and representation challenges

#### 4.1.1. Coastal municipal authorities

As stated earlier, coastal municipal authorities can potentially play a crucial role in ensuring coastal community representation in MSP in their role as intermediaries between national and regional tiers of administration and local communities. In a coastally fair and equitable planning scenario, they should represent a diverse range of community interests; they should also be capable of influencing the MSP process to the same degree as other actors. This requires planning arrangements and processes that allow municipal authorities to effectively engage and be heard. It also requires a clear understanding of their mandate, capacity to participate, and the capacity to understand and speak for community interests.

The Latvian experience paints a mixed picture of the ability of coastal municipal authorities to represent community interests. Capacity issues hampering the participation of municipal authorities in MSP have previously been noted (Smith and Jentoft 2017). As members of the “consultative group” during version 1 of the MSP process, Latvian municipal authorities were invited to actively contribute proposals to the MSP plan but in practice, they often failed to do so.

Different actors offer different explanatory accounts for this alleged passivity or self-exclusion. The first is what appears to be limited opportunities for coastal participation offered by what a municipal planner perceives as a top-down MSP process, especially that driven by MoEPRD.







have a local organisation to turn to and then they get involved themselves ... Most active citizens express themselves through organisations. And this is not local or territorial planning, which affects the interests of an individual or an owner. (Latvian MSP planner).

Third, there is also confusion over whether coastal tourism falls within the remit of MSP or coastal planning, and a sense that municipal governments were against MSP regulating the tourism sector:

*There is a contradiction here. There is that thematic coastal plan which regulates it [tourism] and it doesn't quite fit in MSP. So, the bottom line is that tourism was part of the process, it was considered but does not appear in the final draft. There is also something else. The way I see it, coastal municipalities were against the idea that the sector [tourism], its potential development and interests, should be regulated in some way by MSP ... Municipalities said they want to have control over some things, and maybe that's also why tourism priority areas were removed from the plan (Latvian MSP planners).*

Fourth, the tourism sector feels neglected by the municipal authority, as expressed by a local coastal tourism entrepreneur who re-enacts a conversation that took place with a municipal authority:

*I couldn't attend [an MSP seminar] and called a municipal councillor from our village. I told them (...) "You should attend this seminar, it's important. There is talk about developing an offshore wind farm here. We can't let that happen. Somebody has to go there and tell them that we survive on tourism. If we lose tourism, we are left with nothing." They asked: "How do you know all this?" and I responded: "How? I have already attended two seminars." They were like: "And the representatives of the ministry [MoEPDR], have you spoken to them too?" Me: "(...) Of course. (...) " to which they said "You think that anyone can just say what they think, and it'll simply be taken into consideration? Is this all really worth it?" Me: "But if you don't say anything ... who else will defend us? Do you think anyone in Riga understands the significance of this?" "No, no, no, I do not know anything about this. (...) so what if I am a councillor? We make decisions about things like rent rates. Now, that I understand ... but wind farms, of course not! (...) " "And in the end they did not go. [coastal tourism entrepreneur]*

The example of the Latvian coastal tourism sector illustrates typical participation challenges commonly experienced by smaller and less organised sectors in MSP. For instance, although coastal tourism had been identified early-on as an important coastal community interest and included in version 1 of the MSP draft plan, provisions were subsequently removed from the final MSP plan. Although the reasons for this are not entirely clear, the fact that municipal authorities participated in MSP as mere participants rather than as co-developers of plans may have contributed to this. Municipal authorities were unwilling to defend coastal interests relating to tourism and did not want MSP to interfere with coastal tourism which was perceived to be a local planning competency. This effectively left local tourism actors with nowhere to turn and, in the absence of a champion, with very little representation and even less recognition in the later stages of MSP.

#### 4.1.3. Planners championing powerful marine interests

Given the diverging capacities of coastal communities and municipalities to represent themselves in the MSP process and the notion of MSP as an integrative tool, it is not unreasonable to expect planners to take an active role on their behalf. This could mean to purposely support actors and stakeholders with less representative power in the face of interests with strong representative power. The Latvian experience suggests that this has occurred in some instances, where planners have actively taken up the cause of an underrepresented sector, but not systematically or in a way that ensures equal representation of all sectors. Particularly coastal sectors have not always been championed, possibly also due to unclear remits of MSP versus other planning options more specifically related to the coast (see above). Coastal tourism, for

example, was not championed by planners in version 2 of the plan, while other specifically marine interests clearly were. One case in point is the offshore renewable energy sector, which is a powerful actor in many countries but did not show much interest in MSP in Latvia. Nonetheless, planners prioritized their stakes, often by explicitly assuming the role of wind energy advocates to ensure that the powerful shipping sector left space in specific areas for the future development of offshore windfarms.

*The renewable energy sector was initially absent, there was no clear [renewable energy] policy setup nor requirements for space at the time of planning. We, as a ministry [responsible for MSP], stepped up and fought in their place. They did not have any proposals at all, up until we got them involved in scenario development and made them all sit down at one table and identify areas of interest on maps. It was a big problem, we had to come up with everything from scratch (MoEPDR)*

*The energy sector did not have a driving force, that is, developers or entrepreneurs who could represent the interests of wind energy. So, we had to defend [their interests], reserve areas for windfarms because the shipping sector was ready to cover almost the whole sea. (MoEPDR)*

*We as planners having a long-term look tried to protect the wind farm interests because there will be a need to develop them somewhere in the future, so we tried to motivate and assure the shipping sector [to find a place for wind farm] in the Baltic Sea, especially near Ventspils and Liepāja [port cities on the Baltic coast]. (Latvian MSP planners)*

Similarly, the MSP planners also took the initiative and responsibility to prioritise conservation interests, noting that neither were environmental agencies active in MSP nor did the responsible Ministry lobby for environmental interests:

*Environmental protection interests and research sites [were included in the MSP], the way I see it, only thanks to us ... There was no big lobby coming from the ministry that we need them (...) and the Nature Conservation Agency was indifferent ... We took the initiative to include nature protection interests as a priority ... But this ended up being pushed back in some places, primarily to make space for windfarms, under the condition that studies of potential wind-farm sites would also evaluate impact on the environment. (Latvian MSP planners)*

#### 4.1.4. Representation challenges for the general public

Like municipal authorities and coastal tourism, the general coastal public (at least those who participated) had little to no influence in MSP, particularly in the second stage of the process. During the first phase of MSP, support was given by creating spaces for location-specific engagement, e.g., by organizing public hearings in different coastal locations and discussing locally relevant topics, but it is difficult to know who was able to or chose to participate in these meetings and who was not or did not. There is no evidence for bespoke methods of engagement for the public, such as targeted outreach to ensure broad representation, in particular disadvantaged groups (e.g., women, youth, disabled groups, ethnic minorities etc.).

Some MSP planners ascribe the limited influence of the public to a lack of knowledge and interest in marine issues:

*During the process [I felt] that the public does not have sufficient knowledge about the sea. It is something abstract to them. We [planners] can show and tell, but in the end ... well ... it is simply not a topic that seems relevant to the wider public (Latvian MSP planner).*

Inaccessible language and failure to respond to requests for simplified concepts was also considered an issue:

*I came to the conclusion [at the public hearings] that opinions differ mainly due to the fact that people [the wider public] do not comprehend [concepts used and the goals of MSP]. (Shipping sector representative)*

[MSP] is complicated, it is not easy [for a regular fisherman] to participate [in MSP] ... I was also of the opinion and shared the view that fishers have to be educated about MSP. Otherwise, it is difficult for them to understand. But nothing happened. (Representative of the fisher's federation and coastal fisher)

## 5. An evaluative analysis of Latvian MSP experiences against the six principles of coastal equitable and just planning

In this section we evaluate the application of the six principles of coastal equitable and just planning, introduced earlier, in Latvian MSP practice. In doing so, we highlight the extent to which these principles have been implemented, including challenges and limitations as well as ways in which these could be overcome to promote more equitable and just coastal planning in MSP settings. Fig. 3 gives an overview of our assessment.

**Timely and inclusive:** The production of version 1 of the MSP plan, which was undertaken by BEF, clearly included a wide range of sectoral and organisational stakeholders, not least unions and municipalities, and comprised in situ engagements with coastal communities and the public. The Latvian MSP Working Group, established to steer the development of the MSP, also included a wide range of stakeholders, including the Latvian Association of Local Coastal and Regional Governments, and the Environmental and Fisheries Advisory Council. Overall, a pluralistic approach was taken in version 1 of the MSP plan and multiple stakeholders were recognised and represented in key MSP development roles as plan makers. In phase 2 the planning process was skewed towards some large sectoral interests. Shipping, conservation, and renewable (wind) energy were given specific attention, with MSP planners sometimes assuming the role of wind energy and conservation advocates.

In terms of representation, it is unclear how effective the Latvian Association of Local Coastal and Regional Governments was in representing diverse coastal community interests. A concern was raised that it only sporadically attended meetings and that its key interaction in the

planning process was through stakeholder and regional planning meetings held during the first phase of planning. Also missing were ways to engage less organised and situated coastal sectoral interests, such as tourism. There is also no indication that the MSP process was informed by vulnerability and wellbeing characteristics at the intersection of gender, age, status, organizational capacity etc. Rather, planners adopted a sectoral approach to MSP throughout, arguing that MSP addresses organizational and not private interests. The weak organizational capacity of coastal tourism was recognised.

**Supportive and localized:** There were efforts, particularly during the development of version 1 of the MSP to meaningfully engage with coastal communities in situ. Several public forums in coastal regions were held as is evident in Figs. 1 and 2. What is not so clear is the extent to which this engagement influenced the substance or content of the final MSP or how public comments submitted as part of the development of version 2 of the MSP were taken into consideration. There is no evidence of novel engagement practices targeting specific coastal stakeholders to ensure that their voice is heard. Rather, explicit efforts were made to hold bilateral meetings with non-localized actor groups (including shipping, conservation and wind power) in version 2 of the MSP – where notably coastal tourism was excluded. It's also not evident that the representative coastal organizations or the coastal municipalities themselves were able to effectively represent the values, interests, or relations to the coast in their respective coastal communities. In fact, there is evidence to the contrary – in relation to coastal tourism's lack of representation during the MSP development processes and how this was reflected in the final Latvian MSP. This is underlined by some municipality representatives who saw their role as mere participants rather than as active co-developers of MSP. There is no evidence of efforts to identify and seek transformations of barriers to effective community participation, as seen in the lack of commitment either to represent or empower coastal tourism actors by coastal authorities and MSP planners.

**Collaborative:** The above has shown that a pluralistic approach was adopted to community engagement during the initial phase of planning,

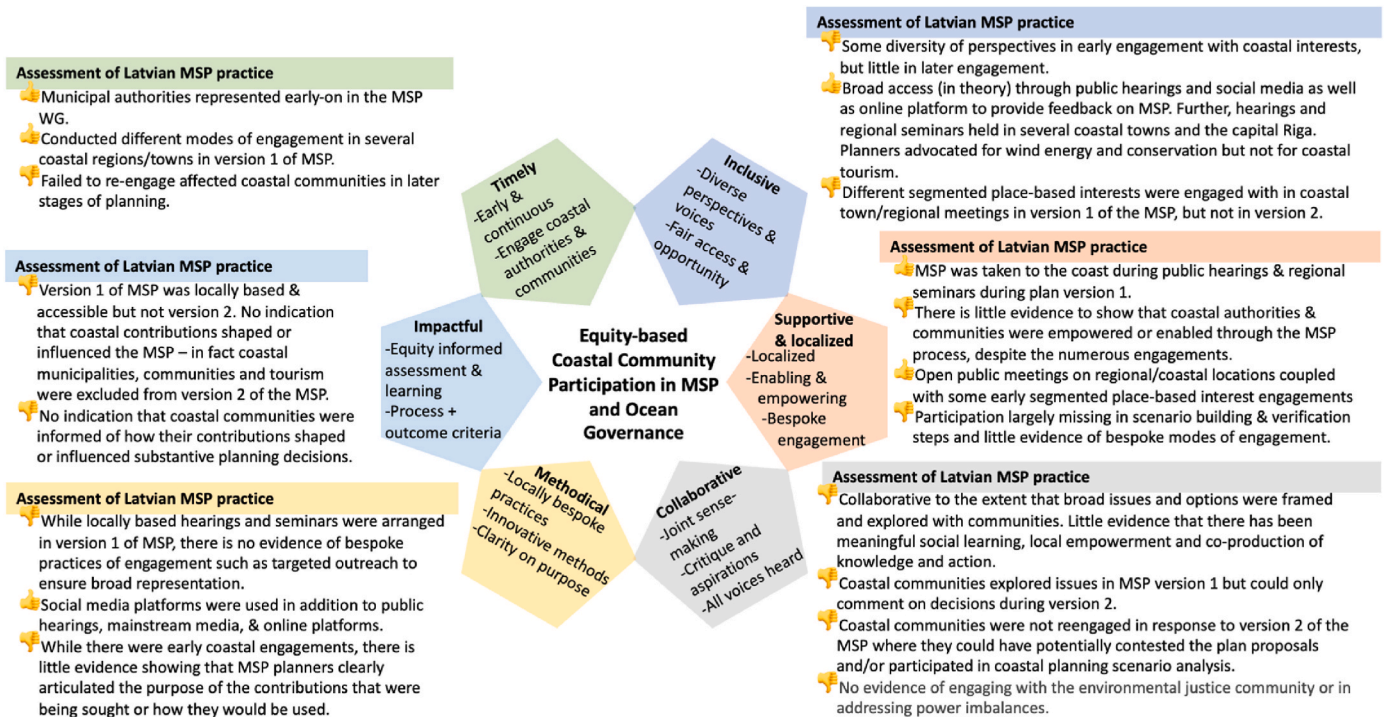


Fig. 3. Overview of the six equity-based principles of community participation and associated key indicators (centre star with surrounding boxes) and assessment of findings from the Latvian MSP case based on respective principles (outer text). The colours indicate which principle is being assessed using a 'thumbs up' (i.e., minimum requirements of the indicator are reached) and 'thumbs down' (minimum requirements are not met) logic.

and that phase 1 had elements of co-production in the sense of exploring the impacts of MSP on community interests. The MSP steering group was comprised of several key stakeholders and was tasked with setting the terms of broader stakeholder participation/engagement. The second tier of participants, the consultative group (Fig. 2), was engaged in diverse bilateral consultations, meaning they had roles where they could both explicitly 'make' the plan and in the later phases participate in the development of future solutions. They were also in a position to influence how their stakes were reflected in the plan in relation to others. Phase 1 therefore had opportunity for community learning and knowledge production.

What is not clear from our data is how engagements of the consultative group were promoted, framed or conducted, and importantly who did not attend. It is also unclear whether there was social learning and local empowerment, as well as co-production of knowledge and action, although this could possibly also manifest in processes outside of MSP.

The collaborative nature of the MSP process changed during the second phase, where coastal communities were not re-engaged. There was no opportunity, therefore, for contesting in dialogue the plan proposals and/or participate in coastal planning scenario analysis. This missing step, among others, reduces the deliberative aspects of the planning process and perhaps arguably even weakens the legitimacy of the substantive plan.

**Methodical:** A methodical approach was pursued throughout to ensure broad sectoral stakeholder representation in different tiers of participation and phases of engagement. A variety of modes of engagement undertaken – through social media, community engagements, written submissions, bilateral engagements, multilateral steering group meetings etc. This level of methodical engagement is less evident for the coastal communities and related local stakeholders, especially in phase 2 of the planning process. Also, there is little evidence of the adoption of targeted forms of engagement to help give voice to interests that were not adequately recognised or represented. Arguably, local conditions and needs are therefore only inadequately represented in the plan. While there were early coastal engagements, it was more difficult (given data limitations) to discern whether MSP planners clearly articulated the purpose of the contributions that were being sought or how they would be used.

**Impactful:** While municipalities have some (limited) planning competency for the first 2 km of the sea (see Table 1), it is unclear how this translated into coastal interests being substantively reflected in the final Latvian MSP. There is little overlap in process or substance between the coastal plan and the MSP, and no evidence that key aspects of the coastal plan were picked up and adopted in the MSP. No systematic effort has thus been made to integrate the two plans, neither by the MSP authority nor by the coastal municipalities actively pursuing this. Local private stakeholders and municipal representatives who participated in the MSP process reflected that they were not impactful in influencing the MSP. In further support of this view, coastal tourism, a key interests and concern of local communities, was in fact removed as an explicit zone from the final MSP.

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper we have argued that community participation and influence are vitally important for meeting the multidimensional sustainability aims of MSP. They are also a prerequisite of procedural and distributive justice in ocean-based transformations to sustainability. While participation has received substantial interest in critical MSP and blue justice scholarship, we identified a need: (1) to synthesize the mentioned scholarly insights to identify equity-based principles for coastal community participation that can be used to assess MSP practices and, ultimately, to reform MSP into a truly ecosystem-based and coastally inclusive, just, and responsive governance practice; (2) to generate rich empirical accounts of coastal community participation and representation, as well as associated blue justice prospects, deficits, and

challenges, linked to real-world MSP practices (such as the Latvian MSP studied in this paper). Such a rich and nuanced analysis of coastal community participation in MSP, we argued based on identified gaps in the literature, should include a broad consideration of the legal basis, institutional organization, identity/role of participating stakeholders. There is also a need to scrutinize who was absent, marginalized, underrepresented or excluded and reasons/arguments for how such deficits might be explained or remedied.

In response to these overarching research gaps, the following key conclusions can be drawn from our results. First, the developed equity-based principles of coastal community participation provide a comprehensive yet versatile heuristic approach to assessing participation and influence in MSP. Obviously, the identified principles must overlap to some extent to secure an exhaustive coverage of aspects of importance for equitable and just coastal community participation in MSP and ocean governance. For example, inclusive participation can be conceived as an overarching concept that also embraces collaborative participation. Given the purpose of the developed principles, we argue that it is important to keep them separate to allow assessment of overarching aspects of inclusivity, such as diversity of perspectives and fair access, as well as the more specific aspects of collaborative participation such as joint sense making. In this study, the equity principles were used successfully to analyse participation in Latvian MSP using an exploratory, retrospective approach. Such an empirically oriented approach to participation assessment could be incorporated in the evaluation of marine spatial plans and planning processes by developing indicators of relevance for the specific plan under study. Ultimately, specific challenges, deficits and opportunities identified in such assessments would provide an evidence base that promotes the mainstreaming of coastally just and equitable MSP practices, something we argue is important for MSP to be able to deliver on its ambitious multidimensional sustainability objectives.

Second, the empirical findings from the Latvian MSP process generated several key insights on opportunities and challenges linked to coastal community participation. In particular, the observed “two halves” of the planning process were revealing. While the first phase provided broad and often localized and timely access, participative spaces closed down in the subsequent phase which more squarely focused on the interests of large marine sectors. This revealed a fundamental challenge of maintaining spaces for inclusive and localized participation throughout the full planning cycle. This observed reorientation and “hardening” of participation can largely be understood in terms of changing aims/objectives at different stages of planning, where initially there is a need to foster broad engagement and knowledge and later, the focus is more on how to navigate and trade off various interests and values in the final plan (Giacometti et al., 2020). However, while such narrowing of participatory space at later MSP stages is understandable, this does not make inclusive, localised or supportive participation less important. The reason for this is both that procedural justice and equity are important elements of sustainability in their own right, and that evidence is mounting that procedural justice is instrumental to reaching economic and environmental MSP objectives (Saunders et al., 2020; Caillon et al., 2017; Kelly 2022; Morrissey 2021; Gilek et al., 2018).

When attempting to counteract the observed narrowing/hardening of participatory spaces in MSP, our analysis of the equity-based principles identifies several issues in need of continuous focus and efforts (Fig. 3). Especially, we would argue for a continuous focus on promoting diverse voices and perspectives, opportunities for collaborative sense making, visioning and critique, which is useful in bridging diverse MSP divides (e.g., between land and sea, between local, national, and global values and priorities, between science and local knowledge, and between blue growth, conservation, and justice goals. This may require a re-evaluation of what a full MSP process entails. MSP processes do not end with the production of a plan; neither should they be composed of only mandatory stages of participation. The Latvian case study



highlights the benefits that could be obtained from using diverse, localised and inclusive informal opportunities to broaden participatory spaces and to retain the “softness” of participation – including diverging visions and opinions – despite the need to make a decision regarding the final plan. Participation and the opportunity to dissent is also essential in the in-between stages of plan-making to help opinions to form, to help less powerful voices organise and to start the next planning round with the equity-based principles in mind.

Finally, while the equity-based principles can assist in discerning and or directing community engagement in MSP and in a range of sustainability transformation activities on land and at sea that affect community wellbeing, their application should be mindful of and adapted to broader factors that condition participation in environmental decision-making as well as cultural norms, informal rules and others, that shape people's being-in-the-world and ideas about role in environmental citizenship and participation. Likewise, while our framework extols the virtues of localized, bespoke MSP participatory processes, this should be seen as a call to complement, not replace, top-down processes that previous research has described as contributing toward the erosion of coastal community adaptive capacities, rights, justice, wellbeing and engagement in MSP and transformations to sustainability.

## Funding

This research was supported by Östersjöstiftelsen, under Grant number 46/18.

## Author list and contribution

Ralph Tafon: conception and design of the study; development of theory; analysis and interpretation of data; drafting the article and revising it; final approval of the manuscript. Aurelija Armoskaite: conception and design of the study; acquisition and analysis of data, drafting the article and revising it; final approval of the manuscript. Kira Gee: analysis and interpretation of data; drafting the article and revising it; final approval of the manuscript. Michael Gilek: analysis and interpretation of data; drafting the article and revising it; final approval of the manuscript. Anda Ikauniece: acquisition and analysis of data; drafting the article and revising it; final approval of the manuscript. Fred Saunders: conception and design of the study; development of theory; analysis and interpretation of data; drafting the article and revising it; final approval of the manuscript.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2023.106681>.

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