



Beyond the civic participation: Accentuating existential needs in rural development

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how rural wellbeing is shaped through civic and existential forms of participation. Although participation features prominently in rural development policy, many municipalities experience fragmentation, misunderstandings and dissatisfaction with participatory processes. Drawing on five-year Participatory Action Research (2019–2024) in five rural municipalities of the structurally weak Ústí nad Labem Region in Czechia, the study explores how residents and local representatives articulate community needs, aspirations and responsibilities, and how these relate to place-based wellbeing. We develop a conceptual framework grounded in relational and existential understandings of wellbeing, distinguishing between development *in* the community (infrastructural and managerial) and development *of* the community (care, relationships, meaning and future horizons). Interviews, community platform meetings and longitudinal observation reveal marked discrepancies between formal strategic planning—focused on technical and infrastructural goals—and residents' concerns centred on relational wellbeing, existential security, community viability, intergenerational relations and the future character of the village. Our findings show that participatory practices focused mainly on material needs overlook deeper existential and relational dimensions of wellbeing, including belonging, recognition, care and responsibility for place. Integrating dialogical, relational and existential elements into local governance can enhance communities' ability to address shared dilemmas and co-create resilient futures. The study contributes to wellbeing scholarship by highlighting existential participation as a crucial yet overlooked aspect of rural wellbeing and by proposing a communication framework that bridges civic and existential dimensions of community life.

1. Introduction

Rural development policy across Europe is commonly framed by the neo-endogenous development paradigm, which emphasises local resources, bottom-up initiatives, and the interdependence of social, economic and environmental spheres (Ray 2006; Woods 2011; Gkartzios & Lowe 2019). Within this paradigm, participation has become a central principle: it is expected to mobilise local agency and assets, strengthen community capacity and foster more democratic planning processes (Moseley 2003; Dinnie & Fischer 2020). Despite this widespread emphasis, many rural communities continue to struggle with fragmented governance, weak communication and persistent dissatisfaction with participatory practices. This is particularly evident in small municipalities where managerial capacities are limited and interpersonal relationships strongly influence how development is enacted (Chromý

et al., 2011; Bernard et al., 2011).

Recent scholarship on wellbeing provides important insights for understanding why participation often fails to meet community expectations. Wellbeing is increasingly conceptualised not merely as a psychological state or a set of material conditions, but as a *relational, situated and dynamic phenomenon* emerging from interactions among people, institutions and places (Fleuret & Atkinson 2007; Atkinson 2013; White 2017; Schwanen & Atkinson 2015; Finlay & Rowles 2021). Relational wellbeing highlights dimensions such as belonging, recognition, care, shared values, interpersonal trust and the capacity to influence one's environment (White 2017; Saadaoui et al., 2025). These dimensions are deeply embedded in place—its social fabric, historical trajectories, and everyday lived experiences.

Applying a relational–existential perspective on wellbeing allows us to see that residents' engagement in rural development is shaped not

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only by practical needs (such as infrastructure or services), but also by *existential needs* related to meaning, reciprocity, future security and responsibility for others (Finlay & Rowles 2021; Saadaoui et al., 2025). These existential dimensions are rarely acknowledged in formal planning processes, yet they strongly influence how people perceive, interpret and respond to development initiatives. As a result, participatory mechanisms that focus solely on expressing preferences or identifying practical needs tend to overlook the deeper concerns that constitute everyday wellbeing in rural settings.

This article builds on this perspective to examine the ways in which community development processes in rural Czech municipalities either support or suppress relational and existential wellbeing. Specifically, we explore how residents and local representatives articulate needs, aspirations and concerns relevant to community life, and how these expressions are shaped by the interplay between *civic participation* (formal, procedural, consultative) and *existential participation* (relational, meaning-oriented, responsibility-driven). We argue that bridging these two forms of participation is essential for enhancing rural wellbeing, strengthening local capacities and enabling more resilient and inclusive forms of community development.

To address these questions, we draw on five-year participatory action research (2019–2024) conducted in five small municipalities in the structurally weak Ústí nad Labem Region of Czechia. This methodological approach enabled long-term engagement, in-depth reflection and the co-creation of a community dialogue that captures both civic and existential dimensions of participation. The study thus contributes to broader discussions on wellbeing, rural governance and participatory methodologies by proposing a framework that re-positions community development as a relational and existential process.

2. Participation: between collective action and communion

The conceptual framework of the research is based on a multilayered understanding of community, community development and the participation of local actors in the co-creation of place. In the rural context—shaped by tight personal ties—individual imprints on shared space are highly visible and easily interpreted. Everyday social interactions are closely intertwined with civic engagement (Irvin & Stansbury 2004). At the same time, small rural municipalities operate with limited managerial resources (Ježek 2015; OECD 2023), which means that their development frequently relies on the initiatives, motivations and value frameworks of local leaders and active citizens (Chromý et al., 2011; Bernard et al., 2011).

For the purposes of this paper, we use the concept of place-based leadership as defined by Hambleton & Howard (2013), who distinguish three interrelated forms of legitimacy: political, managerial and community leadership. Political leadership refers to elected representatives; managerial leadership encompasses the professional work of municipal staff and third-sector organisations; and community leadership includes the activities of civic-minded residents—activists, volunteers, entrepreneurs, teachers or local association leaders. These actors increasingly interact within local governance processes (Sotarauta & Horlings 2012; Horlings et al., 2017). Neo-endogenous approaches stress that their active involvement is essential for co-creating public value (Torfing et al., 2021) and strengthening community resilience (Glass et al., 2022).

Community needs are dynamic and evolve over time (Dinnie & Fischer 2020; Lyles et al., 2019). Local governments therefore operate in an institutional environment where they must continuously verify, interpret and balance various individual and collective interests (Stoker 2011; Murphy & Fox-Rogers 2015; Moroni 2017). Demands for citizen participation often expose contradictory pressures on municipalities, which are expected both to activate residents and simultaneously manage the risks associated with participation (Bischof & Decker 2023). As Lacroix et al., (2011) note, this tension stems from the dual nature of participation, which combines top-down and bottom-up elements. Such

ambivalence may lead to the instrumental use of public consultations, legitimisation of pre-determined decisions, or the privileging of narrow viewpoints (Egidi 2017; Kunštát 2008).

Understanding community and participation therefore requires recognising their inherent uncertainty, relationality and dynamism. Community is not a static entity but a continuously evolving collective agency shaped by actors' everyday actions—including those forms of passive participation that shape the social environment even in the absence of explicit engagement (Roth 2007). Residents' involvement must thus be understood broadly, not only as formal civic activity but also as behaviours and attitudes arising from their relationship to place, to others and to a shared responsibility for the future (Havlíček 2014; Saadaoui et al., 2025).

This wider perspective aligns closely with the concept of relational wellbeing, which emphasises that wellbeing arises from the quality of interpersonal relationships, mutual recognition, belonging, shared values and the capacity to influence one's environment (Fleuret & Atkinson 2007; Atkinson 2013; White 2017; Schwanen & Atkinson 2015). Similarly, Curtis et al., (2020) argue that wellbeing is fundamentally relational, emerging from entanglements between people, place and everyday practices. This perspective strongly supports our emphasis on relational and existential dimensions of community life.

In rural settings, where social ties are dense and place attachment is stronger than in larger settlements (Anton & Lawrence 2014; Lewicka 2005), these relational dimensions profoundly shape how people perceive community life, respond to local challenges and engage in public affairs. Strong social ties contribute to the creation of social capital, which is the key to the emergence of collective agency and thus also to an increased likelihood of engagement in the development of a given place (Collins et al., 2014). Moreover, individual or collective agency might be mobilised by our place attachment, as our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about our places impact our behaviours toward them and influence whether and how we participate in local development (Manzo & Perkins 2006, 336).

All of the above can be mobilized in the planning and participatory process. Participatory processes both reveal and re-shape the emotional and cognitive grounds of belonging. Verbalising and repeatedly articulating these emergent feelings, values and aspirations can foster a heightened sense of responsibility for place-making and translate into practical agency (Christmann 2017; Vercher et al., 2021). When participatory processes acknowledge and nurture these relational aspects—through open dialogue, listening and shared reflection—they strengthen not only planning outcomes but also the deeper cohesion, trust and sense of communal viability that residents associate with a good and meaningful life and place-based wellbeing (Finlay & Rowles 2021; Heaton 2023).

To illuminate how communities are shaped, we draw on the concept of agency, which aligns with relational conceptions of space (Whitehead 1978; Harvey 1994). Community responses to challenges—whether extraordinary or mundane—reflect the value frameworks and future orientations of local actors (Glass et al., 2022; Toynbee 1995; Hejdánek 1990; Jaspers 2023; Lévinas 1997). From this perspective, community can be understood both as a formal institution (self-government, organised interests) and as an informal institution (relationships, communication, customs, values) (Ostoj 2019; Sýkora et al., 2022). Tensions arise because these layers rarely align seamlessly. Community is always multifaceted (Smith 2013), and its institutionalisation—highlighted by Kumpulainen & Soini (2019)—may generate frustrations and fragmentation when relational and managerial expectations diverge.

Summers (1986) helpfully distinguished between 'development in the community' and 'development of the community' (focus on community building). While the former involves practical actions (e.g. amenities modernisation and economic development) and is currently embodied e.g. in the community-led development under the LEADER initiatives within Local Action Groups (Konečný et al., 2020), the latter

prioritizes relational aspects and fostering a strong sense of *communitas*. In essence, Summers contrasts caring for things (such as needs or possessions) with caring for people (nurturing relationships and values of reciprocity that underlie the idea of *communitas*). This distinction is fundamentally important for successful participatory approaches. Since the local community is both at the same time, each of these spheres requires a different approach and treatment. Selected examples of dichotomies illustrating this tension are presented in Table 1.

Therefore, the exploration of rural community development is, in its essence, characterised by a dichotomy between collective action and communion (Smith 2013). The concept of 'communion', originating from Buber (2005), emphasizes the inherent relationality and transcends the material concerns to encompass the spirit of community. In contrast, collective action, associated with civic engagement, focuses on achieving shared goals. This range and tension within the concept of community will serve as a conceptual starting point for a deeper exploration of participation and communication in the selected villages.

Civic engagement in local development planning represents only one aspect of this broader landscape. Participation must therefore be expanded to include what we term the existential realm—drawing on philosophical traditions of responsibility, meaning and relationality (Rahner & Vorgrimler 1996; Gáliková Tolnaiová & Dojčár 2014). From this viewpoint, participation becomes not merely a tool for identifying needs, but an expression of existential involvement in the shared world.

Similarly, the quality of participatory outcomes depends on the quality of dialogue. Heaton (2023) argues that experiences of connectedness significantly influence mental wellbeing beyond material conditions. This supports our emphasis on relational wellbeing in rural places and stresses the importance of dialogues within the community as they are a necessary condition for increasing the connectedness of the inhabitants of a given place. While regional studies typically focus on strategic discussions about development priorities, dialogue also has a deeper relational dimension grounded in openness, reciprocity and mutual recognition (Assländer & Grün 2008). On the other hand, divergent assumptions and value frameworks frequently hinder understanding (Pike et al., 2007; Escandon-Barbosa et al., 2019; Cabaj & Weaver 2016). Therefore, recognising the dialogical nature of communication (Vrána 1996) is essential for addressing tensions and cultivating a sense of community.

3. Methodological framework

The research was conducted in five rural municipalities (400–1200 inhabitants) in the Ústí nad Labem Region in Czechia, a territory shaped by post-war expulsion of German-speaking population and following resettlement, deindustrialisation process and persistent demographic and socio-economic challenges. These long-term transformations have had a substantial impact on local communities, influencing social cohesion, identity, and residents' sense of stability and belonging. The

structurally weak character of the region therefore provides an important context for examining how community wellbeing, local participation and place-based relations evolve under conditions of limited institutional capacity of small rural municipalities and fragmented social fabrics. For our research, we selected municipalities with previous experience of participatory practices in community-led development. However, the local representatives felt that participation and local dialogue were insufficient. Therefore, we explored the problems, misunderstandings, and factors contributing to fragmentation within rural communities. Further details on the selection of our study localities and participants are provided in the Supplementary Data, under items 1 and 2.

To investigate these dynamics, we employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, which enables close engagement between researchers and local actors and supports iterative, reflective learning within the community. PAR was particularly suitable given our interest in relational and existential dimensions of participation, as it allows research to unfold within real, ongoing community processes rather than externalised or one-off consultation exercises. The general aim of our research was to facilitate community development and participation in rural municipalities. More specifically, our investigation aimed to enhance place-based communication and management frameworks operating between collective action and communion. The research programme involved three groups of people interacting with each other: our academic team, local people and community coordinators, who acted as a bridge between all the groups. Through the community coordinators recruited as part of the research project, we were able to support and monitor the activities of the local actors and their commitment to the community almost daily. The individual projects in each village lasted from 12 to 24 months.

Over the course of five years (2019–2024), we combined analytical, facilitative and observational methods to explore interactions among residents, local leaders and community coordinators. The research involved:

- 126 semi-structured interviews with residents,
- 9 focus groups with local actors,
- 42 in-depth reflective interviews with municipal representatives and coordinators,
- 5 meetings of local leaders across the municipalities,
- 40 facilitated meetings of a community platform,
- and continuous field observation of local events, interactions and informal practices.

Together, these activities enabled a detailed and longitudinal understanding of local perceptions, relational dynamics and evolving community narratives.

The semi-structured interviews conducted at the outset of the research were designed to explore residents' values, experiences and perceived roles within the community. The interview guide was organised along three analytical axes. The axiological axis focused on what respondents consider valuable in their village and how they imagine its desired character. The agency axis examined residents' perceived capacities, motivations and forms of engagement, paying attention to both active and more subtle or relational expressions of participation. The practical needs axis addressed expectations related to services, amenities and infrastructure. By sequencing questions in this way, we intentionally shifted emphasis from standard needs-based consultations toward deeper reflection on meaning, responsibility and relationships—dimensions that are crucial for understanding community wellbeing but are often marginalised in formal planning processes. This structure allowed us to capture not only explicit opinions but also underlying assumptions, emotional registers, value orientations and relational concerns. Interview transcripts were subsequently analysed using a combined thematic and discourse analysis approach (Hendl 2016; Beneš et al., 2019), enabling us to identify recurring narratives,

Table 1
Examples of dichotomies related to the concept of community participation.

Concept	Dichotomy		Examples of references
Community	Shared (spontaneous)	Participatory (organised)	Mannarini & Fedi 2009; Kumpulainen & Soini 2019
	Sense of community, communion	Collective action	Smith 2013; Bauman 2013; Cabaj & Weaver 2016
	Communitas	Societas	Buber 2005; Tonnies 2005
Community development	Development of community	Development in community	Summers 1986
Participation	Existential	Civic	Rahner & Vorgrimler 1996; Gáliková Tolnaiová & Dojčár 2014

tensions and unarticulated dilemmas within each municipality.

The findings were compiled into a document for each municipality, which identified a set of themes and narratives. The research team also conducted further interviews with selected leaders. The quotations in the text below are divided into two categories: quotations from mayors (M1–M5) and quotations from other local leaders (L1–L23). The latter include representatives of the local council, the municipal office, local NGOs, and other civil society representatives. This was followed by a year-long phase in which facilitated meetings between citizens and leaders took place in each village every 4–6 weeks. During these meetings, the core group of the open community platform was established to facilitate local dialogue and participation. This platform was therefore not conceived as a purpose-built arena for specific negotiations, but rather as an attempt to shape the community holistically through relationships, values, and dialogue. Through participatory observations and interviews, we examined how the platform evolved and how the participants changed. Further details on the 'community platform' are provided in the Supplementary Data, under item 3.

4. Results

Below, we present the results in relation to the two research objectives: the differences in how the needs and aspirations of the rural community are perceived by the local government, and potential ways to reconcile these perspectives.

4.1. Divergent perceptions of development needs

Across all participating municipalities, residents consistently articulated concerns that extended beyond material needs and touched on relational and existential aspects of community life. Interviewees frequently referred to weakening social ties, intergenerational disconnection and a growing sense of uncertainty regarding the village's future. Many expressed anxiety about the loss of rural character, changing demographics and the perception that the village was becoming less "for locals" and more oriented toward newcomers or weekend residents. These concerns were accompanied by feelings of place insecurity and worries about long-term community viability.

When contrasted with the content of the Local Development Programmes (LDPs), these perspectives revealed a stark misalignment. While residents emphasised belonging, care, reciprocity and cohesion, the LDPs remained predominantly focused on infrastructure, public amenities, and tourism-related projects. The relational and value-oriented themes voiced by residents were mostly absent from the official development priorities. This discrepancy underscores how existing planning processes tend to capture only the technical dimension of development, overlooking the lived experiences and relational attachments that shape rural wellbeing. To examine these differences more clearly, we compared residents' expressions from the interviews with the priorities outlined in the LDPs (see Table 2).

The evaluation matrices created for each municipality revealed similar patterns: while the LDPs adequately addressed some practical issues—such as roads, sewage, public lighting or sports facilities—they largely failed to reflect broader concerns related to community life, communication, integration of newcomers, intergenerational relations or care for vulnerable groups. During the PAR and subsequent analysis of local development plans, we identified five main themes.

Firstly, certain common narratives emerge from the way the responses are framed. Similarly to LDPs, the community's responses focus on 'hard' projects that resonate across the village, such as plans for a community centre and, in this particular case, the revitalisation of the pond.

Secondly, a strong theme is care for the community. Respondents generally express concern about a decline in community life, including relations, communication, community life and culture. Some attribute this to the general trend of contemporary lifestyles becoming more

Table 2

Evaluation matrix – example from one rural community.

Suggested development measures by local inhabitants (based on the PAR method (2023))	Measures of the local development programme (2016–2024)
1. Public amenities and infrastructure Completion of sewerage and water supply infrastructure. Construction of the lighting at the bus stop. Provision of a convenient grocery store, mail service. Improvement of the internet connection	Completion of sewerage and water supply infrastructure. N/A N/A
2. Rural and quiet character of the municipality Reduction of the fast heavy traffic on the road passing through the village Slowing down cars on local roads between the three villages comprising the municipality.	Installation of speed camera. Repair of local roads.
Improvement of the pond surroundings and water quality. Better balancing of interests of the residents and visitors of the camping sites (summer overtourism and related problems – littering, noise, car parking).	Creation of a relaxation area by the pond
3. Community life and care Provision of services for elderly people (including healthcare and everyday assistance) and better involvement of the local community (paid and unpaid).	N/A
Community life and community initiatives support – more opportunities for social events and meetings needed. Better integration of newcomers in the community.	Construction of a multi-purpose community centre
Rising the engagement of young adults for the local council, associations and community activities.	N/A
Provision of leisure outdoor activities for children and youth. Improvement of the communication between municipal representatives and citizens.	Construction of a multi-purpose sports ground N/A
4. Better communication and balanced development vision Countering local fears of overdevelopment caused by extensive building of new houses, and disruption of rural character.	N/A
Setting a clear development vision and its transparent communication (residential and population growth must be followed by the integration of newcomers and appropriate infrastructure (capacity of the local kindergarten and primary school, roads, water supply etc.).	N/A
Development of sustainable tourism, reduction of overtourism.	N/A

individualised, while others point to the onset of the pandemic as a turning point. Within this context, communities highlighted four key issues. There is a need for a programme targeting children and young people to encourage participation in sports and outdoor activities, as well as fostering a sense of community belonging. Then, an increasing number of seniors feel isolated due to their children moving away. Attention also needs to be given to the integration of newcomers. Another issue is the generational shift in the leadership of local clubs and associations, and the crucial role of younger residents in sustaining their activities.

Thirdly, there is a consensus on preserving the rural character. This encompasses not only the physical aspects, such as the rural landscape, architecture, and the design of public spaces, but also personal connections, reciprocity, and a sense of community. However, there are differences of opinion regarding specific changes, such as attitudes towards residential growth and the modernisation of village infrastructure.

Fourthly, the results of the interviews revealed different expectations, as well as disappointments and frustrations resulting from poor

communication. Three examples could be given, in some cases some community leaders may act as agents of lock-in: *'We have been running the traditional event for years and we don't have followers to carry it on.'* (L12). However, other participants stated that these leaders stick to their ideas and, in effect, block the changes and ideas that the younger generation would like to introduce. Another type of misunderstanding occurs when the municipality takes over the management of community initiatives, thereby stifling the spontaneity and enthusiasm of the community members. We observed the local government taking over the organisation of a neighbourhood festival and commercialising it. Consequently, the event became overrun with tourists, losing its community charm in the eyes of the locals. In another case, a local community wanted to build an outdoor meeting place. The mayor did not fully understand the idea and hired a professional company to build it, despite the community wanting to spend time together and utilise the creativity and enthusiasm of its members when constructing the meeting place. Surprisingly, both parties lived with this mutual misunderstanding, slander and disappointment for more than a year without seeking clarification. It was only through the conversations within our project that the nature of the misunderstanding and the space for reconciling this conflict began to emerge.

Finally, research enabled us to take an in-depth look at community issues. Responses are often expressed as questions, concerns and ambiguities where plans and current priorities are not widely known. The following is a paraphrase of the most frequent themes identified in the study across all five communities:

- We wish to keep the place as it is now, but we suspect that will be impossible.
- We are worried about our future. It feels like the village is no longer for us, but for someone else - younger, more successful, richer.
- We're worried that in the future, young people will move away to the cities, and the village will be dominated by weekenders.
- As the development goes ahead, will the village keep its same vibe and rural charm?
- We don't want the village to grow too much with new people and houses, but we do need 'a bit of a boost from new blood'. New people moving in will bring new perspectives, energy for business, and more people getting involved in the community and local life.
- These days, young people can't really get involved in local life. All the commuting to work and school means they don't have any free time to get involved in the local community.
- Everyone here knows each other, so we'll help each other out. I'd like that. But we used to get together a lot more. We're afraid it'll just turn into a sleepover, then everyone'll go home after work and shut themselves in.
- We regret that the community is divided into old- and new-settlers with different lifestyles.
- So, what is a community anyway? Is it openness to others, or closure within one's own group? It's odd, but the local associations actually compete with each other and divide the community.
- Growing from a village to a small town is probably the future to keep it alive and vibrant for generations to come.
- It used to be a better place to live. Nowadays there's no proper shop or pub. There's not much to do.
- A lot of people fear growth, but a hundred years ago there were three times as many inhabitants, a thriving industry, agriculture, culture and social life.

4.2. Perception of the participatory processes

The focus of this research project was on municipalities that already had some experience with participatory activities and were seeking to improve them with the aim of facilitating better community development. In the beginning of the PAR, the mayors expressed the wish *'to get people involved here'* (M1), *'to care for the people'* (M2), *'to live together'*

(M4). They expressed their disappointment that *'it still doesn't work'*, despite the efforts made to create conditions for civic participation (financial and material support for associations, participatory budgets, voluntary work in public spaces, subsidies for sports and cultural events, questionnaires on needs, public hearings). The local leaders themselves acknowledged certain reserves in the participatory process.

4.2.1. Residents' perception

From the initial weeks, the interviews were perceived to have considerable potential for facilitating reflection and unveiling themes that respondents believed were previously under-represented in the village. The first insight is the appreciation of the space for self-reflection created by the interview. Respondents frequently appreciated the opportunity to engage in this discussion. They valued its novel approach, the unique manner in which it was conducted, and the thoughtful questions that addressed issues typically overlooked. Participants stated:

'It was different.' - *'No one had ever talked to us like this before.'* - *'There were questions for which there is usually no time.'* - *'They made me think.'*

In addition, self-critical responses were frequent:

'I admit I neglected it.' - *'Now when I think about it, I should have paid more attention to it.'* - *'I didn't care about it, and that's not good.'*

The second finding was the appreciation of the space for shared reflection in the community. The discussion aroused the residents' curiosity and desire to hear other's opinions:

'Will I get to hear what others are saying somewhere?' - *'I don't know if I'm out of touch, if anyone else thinks so.'* - *'Will someone from the local government work with that what we say?'* - *'What will happen next?'*

Most of the interviews revealed that citizens found the conversation important and beneficial and saw this PAR as an opportunity to meet again with others on issues, such as: *'questions that have not been given space'*, or in the words of one local leader: *'questions that we have not been able to admit to ourselves'* (L5).

4.2.2. Local leaders' perception

In the in-depth reflective interviews that followed, local leaders identified four main weaknesses in the implementation of the LDP and the local dialogue on community development. First, the limited participation of local actors in the LDP process was a problem.

'I feel that only a certain group of people were involved in the planning. It was quite closed.' (L3)

'I'm not sure we've done a good enough job of communicating within the community. The most difficult challenge in the future will be to explain things to people and get them involved.' (M1)

'It lacks a common narrative, a story.' (L6)

The second problem was the temporary nature of the activities around the LDP - as if the local energy and interest ended with the approval of the document:

'We reached out to a lot of people in the survey and that's how we considered them to be involved. The external consultant (of the LDP - authors' note) told us that the return rate was very good. That's why I was surprised afterwards how quickly it fizzled out, how quickly people stopped being interested.' (L4)

'We have failed to set up an arena for effective feedback in the community to evaluate the implementation of the LDP.' (L13)

Thirdly, the issue of holistic development has not been addressed. Only certain projects, especially infrastructural ones, have been implemented, and community issues have not been addressed at all:

'Finally, it is mainly about the pavements and the sewage plant, or practical things that have less to do with the actual development of the village.' (L1)

'We have divided the plan into three sections: 1. Economy and tourism; 2. Infrastructure; 3. Population and social cohesion. Nothing was being done in the third section. We had no idea how to tackle it. The external expert just gave us a strategic plan document with goals, nothing more, no guidelines to solve it.' (M1)

'Relationships, and that intangible in development – that's the main issue.' (L2) *'I agree, but how to say it to anyone in the village? We will have to learn to talk about it.'* (L6)

In light of the aforementioned points, local leaders are confronted with the challenge of adapting the approach. What changes are required in the communication and management framework to successfully address the three shortcomings outlined above? In their opinion, there is a demand for procedural simplicity, which means that change will be acceptable to local actors, especially leaders, if it does not over-occupy them with new processes. The existing framework of the LDP they consider as appropriate and effective to use because it is a relatively established management process, known and understood by all local actors (institutions and citizens). Although they see deficiencies in it, they also see an opportunity to enhance it, rather than starting from scratch.

'It's hard to imagine that something new (in sense of managerial process - authors' note) could start in the village now. It must be a continuation.' (M1)

'I don't think that's necessary (to use other tool than LDP – authors' note). What we need is to decide where to take it and how to build on what's there.' (L4)

'Otherwise nobody will support it, that's for sure. It has to be a something more, some kind of a shift, an extension or addition.' (L2)

'It's not about the plan, it can remain the same; the problem is its implementation.' (L18)

They suggested that it was a mistake to hold on to the LDP as a document. What is important to them is what is built around it - a planning process with engagement and wide communication.

'Things change because certain people are involved, not because of some document.' (L11)

'The local dialogue – that's what we are missing.' (L17).

'If we want people to get behind it, we need to do something different. We need to improve; it's got to be more than now.' (L14)

'I am looking forward to meetings that would allow the citizens of the community to take part in the process of community development.' (L16)

4.2.3. Bridging both perspectives

The above-mentioned development dilemmas (see the list in chapter 4.1.) became the primary focus of the emerging dialogue within the community platform formed within the PAR. In the final evaluation, local leaders expressed appreciation for the platform as a participatory medium and an opportunity for local actors to discuss the community's future. It was also perceived as an informal means to explore diverse perspectives, values and visions. Some themes remained during our PAR unfinished, whilst others evolved. The actors themselves articulated it, for example, as follows:

'As mayor, I very much welcome the platform. It has brought a new dimension to the community. The opportunity to discuss it among us here within the community and on the mayors' platform - that has been very empowering for me.' (M4)

'My conclusion is that we want to focus more on the care of the community, the care of relationships and dialogue between active citizens.' (L9)

'And I am happy that today, citizens who have not participated before have come to this table.' (L17)

'Today we have a much better plan (LDP – authors' note) that takes care of the community. We're proud that we challenged the external consultant during the planning process when this issue was missing. We feel empowered.' (M1)

'We abandoned the plan to build a home for the elderly and will instead support them to live with dignity in a home environment. We will provide the necessary services and involve the community.' (M2)

The transformation from the initial uncertainty of 'how to grasp it' to the surprising conclusion of one of the leaders is considered to be a promising result: *'It is clear that the topic of development is technical and does not resonate between citizens; but the "human topics" of coexistence and of future do.'* (L6). This shift in leadership style indicates a personal transformation, as well as a new sense of empowerment.

The following two quotes from one municipality illustrate a collective process that identified both material and social needs and led to the initiation of a subsequent managerial process to take it forward. The discussion enabled the expansion of the originally narrow, contract-based technical solution proposed by the town hall and involved citizens in perceiving, experiencing and verbalising the broader context of community life, as represented by the pond case.

'On the community platform, we examined the situation of the community and its future. We prepared a development programme, argued about whether it is a list of actions or a list of problems that we will address more comprehensively in the coming period. For example, whether it concerns repairing the pier and the beach at the pond, or adopting a holistic approach to solving the pond's locality and balancing—among local interests, nature, tourists, and business development.' (L17)

'We started from the initial snapshot and the evaluation matrix. Five public meetings took place, gradually progressing the process. Anyone could come; the core group was about fifteen people and the local leadership. Some people came with whom we hadn't managed to conduct the initial interview, and they added more opinions and suggestions. There were many debates and exchanges of opinions. A sort of compromise emerged from this. Some details, which simply couldn't be decided quickly, were recorded as open issues that need to be discussed and addressed iteratively during implementation on the community platform. The platform will continue to live and will have its actual programme. We will try to hold it quarterly or semi-annually.' (community coordinator)

A further example of the platform's outcome is described in the Supplementary Data (item 4). It illustrates how local tensions over infrastructure and community values can be reframed and mediated through participatory processes that surface underlying values and enable collective deliberation.

These processes revealed change potential in two areas: the discursivity of the communication framework and the intentionality of the managerial framework. The study highlighted the need to address pre-conceptions and cultivate shared conceptual understanding, and it confirmed the value of deliberately created spaces for authentic dialogue distinct from mere discussion. Unlike rational, persuasive exchanges, authentic dialogue fosters an existential encounter with the other, enabling reflection on values, interpersonal relations and deeply held assumptions. Consequently, rural development requires not only planning but sustained reflection on lifestyle, social change and communal narratives, integrated with managerial action. Participatory frameworks should therefore combine managerial, relational and existential dimensions, providing ongoing spaces for dialogue, value reflection and the nurturing of participants' agency. The community

platform proved effective in this regard, balancing strategic planning and negotiation with the cultivation of relational wellbeing through sustained, dialogical practice.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Our findings support the view that public participation should not be understood solely as an administrative requirement or a governance tool, but as a practice that directly shapes relational wellbeing in rural communities. Residents' accounts reveal that what matters to them most are not only tangible outcomes—such as new services or infrastructure—but also the relational qualities of local life: recognition, belonging, shared concerns for the future, and opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the community. These aspects correspond closely with relational wellbeing scholarship, which emphasises that wellbeing is produced through social relations, mutual recognition and the capacity to influence one's environment (Atkinson 2013). When participation does not address these relational dimensions, it risks becoming performative or producing frustration and disengagement.

In this study, we examined, first, how community development needs are articulated by residents when invited to do so independently of the purpose of preparing a LDP. Our observations revealed two key aspects. The first is the content level (what are the needs and aspirations), and the second is the process level (how is this content arrived at). With regard to the content level, the differences between the perspectives of local government representatives and residents were significant. There was a persistent tension between managerial logics embedded in formal planning and the relational logics shaping residents' lived experiences. While the LDPs emphasise infrastructure-related goals and those that are *technically feasible and politically acceptable* (Torfing et al., 2021: 198), a more diverse and problematised array of ideas, visions and, above all, fears and uncertainties is revealed through in-depth interviews with citizens. In all the villages that were studied, the residents' greatest concerns centred on the community viability, the maintenance of its rural character, the dilemma of population growth and the future perspectives of all generations. By contrast, LDPs manifested as a series of specific projects rather than a comprehensive framework to deal with issues concerning an open future (Sharpe et al., 2016; Uruena 2023). The discrepancy between these two rationalities contributes to misunderstandings, eroded trust and a sense that participation processes do not fully address what residents consider essential for a good life in their villages.

It was therefore important to explore the second level, which would reveal the processes that led to the different results and expectations. Regardless of whether the LDP was prepared in-house or by an external contractor, it was more or less informed by the perspectives of local government as well as residents. Participatory planning procedures, which were typically implemented in the form of a questionnaire survey examining residents' needs, public consultation on the LDP draft, or ad hoc thematic working groups, generally yield limited results. Such process could be regarded as a one-off, expedient, terminated process (Hofer and Kaufmann 2023) and generates a list of citizens' desires without involving them deeply in implementation (Lacroix et al., 2011).

Research has shown that the local leaders of the five selected villages had mixed feelings about the LDP. It is generally perceived as an unwelcome obligation that is necessary in order to apply for public subsidies. As Vázquez-Barquero and Rodríguez-Cohard (2016) pointed out, such attitudes reduce strategic thinking to a 'catch the subvention' approach resulting in a failure to think holistically about the future of a place (Ježek 2015). Conversely, rural mayors recognised the potential of LDPs to initiate, reflect on and improve local dialogue. Consequently, they prioritise the planning process over the document itself.

It is also interesting to note that in the initial semi-structured interviews, some representatives tended to respond from a citizen rather than a local leadership position and tended to be critical of their own official strategy. Their perception was that there was a lack of reflection

on some aspects of community life, particularly a concern for interpersonal relations and communication. Similarly, they missed a critical, wider dialogue about the future, underpinned by a reflection on shared values. This leaders' self-reflection and open self-criticism shows that the previous lack of communication in the village and unresolved misunderstandings do not always mean an unwillingness to dialogue. It rather indicates limited experience and skills (and methodological incompetence) in how to conduct such dialogue.

Clearly, focusing on human beings rather than objects gives rise to a different set of problems, requiring a different theory and methodology. In community development, it is no longer just a matter of recognizing the soft factors of development within an object-oriented paradigm (Bláček and Uhlíř 2020; Stoker 2011). Rather, the focus is on human development in an existential-dialogical paradigm (Buber 2005; Lévinas 1997; Marcel 1971). From this perspective, the methodologies used so far for the strategic planning of municipalities are inadequate. Instead, they are based on an urban and regional perspective, using citizen participation to identify residents' needs. Consequently, they do not sufficiently address the community or the existential aspect of participation, which is much stronger in rural contexts. Such methodologies tend to focus on *development in the community* instead of *development of the community* (Summers 1986). However, residents consider the latter to be essential to the quality of life in a rural community.

There is documentation of cases where both spheres have been integrated successfully. One such case was a story that began with residents requesting a facility for outdoor gatherings. From the perspective of the municipal office, the task was considered to be the hiring of a contractor to build a shelter. Conversely, the residents framed the project as a collective endeavour centred on constructing the shelter. In comparison with the commissioning of a contractor to deliver the structure, leaving residents as passive users, the integrated approach supported co-production and collective planning, leading to the creation of a tangible asset, whilst concomitantly strengthening relational ties and mutual responsibility. This evidence suggests that emphasising existentially grounded participation is not merely idealistic, but can be readily achieved – particularly through small community-led self-build projects that embody participation and reinforce social cohesion and community resilience.

This example also demonstrates that implementing projects which comprehensively promote care for things and care for the community is relatively straightforward, but this is not a matter of course. The implementation of this initiative was contingent upon the creation of specific conditions within the municipal context, encompassing aspects such as value discursivity and managerial intentionality. In the absence of such conditions, the initiative would have remained a narrowly technical task from the perspective of municipal office. However, it is through dialogue on the community platform that collective co-production has been shown to deliver broader community strengthening outcomes.

New approaches to the existential participation—engagement rooted in meaning, responsibility, care and future orientation—should play a crucial role in shaping community wellbeing or community development. Similarly, Gálíková et al., (2014) confirm that the existential participation is an essential component of civic participation, and vice versa. While relational wellbeing literature recognises the importance of belonging, reciprocity and mutual recognition, the existential dimension adds an additional depth: the sense that participation is not only beneficial but morally or personally necessary. Such findings suggest that existential participation is an important yet underexplored concept in both wellbeing and participatory governance research. It helps explain why certain participatory processes resonate with residents and why others feel hollow or insufficient.

Our research confirmed the importance of the event of the in-depth personal interviews. A key feature of these interviews that participants appreciated was that they were not conducted solely for planning purposes but, focused more generally on exploring their individual needs

and concerns. The interviews were conducted informally and empathetically by an external person who worked apolitically with the local leadership. The questions asked were also atypical of previous planning practice. The combination of questions posed to respondents - 'What does your municipality and community do for you; and what do you do for your municipality?' - evoked two distinct tensions. Firstly, they prompted self-reflection on regarding the extent of active or passive engagement in public spaces. Secondly, it encouraged self-reflection on how the challenge is perceived. The willingness to participate based on perceived assets ('what I can, or I want to do') (Kretzmann & McKnight 1996) is confronted with the existential challenge ('what I ought to do') (Němec 2014: 41). As Němec (2014) stated, this modality opens up an overlap beyond familiar horizons, prompting the search for a new, unknown and potentially risky and uncomfortable answer. However, a change in thinking can occur at the individual level. People with such authentic or congruent personalities are then able to contribute to the development of communities characterised by a sense of communion (Rogers 2015; Frankl 1997).

In the second part of our research, we identified the need to create an open communication framework for local dialogue, engaging all aspects of community development and participation. This communication platform was previously identified as being crucial for local actors in earlier phases of the research. In this regard, we focused on fostering greater civic participation through the integration of existential participation and the axiological level in the development of the community, as well as in the dialogical sphere. We observed that issues concerning 'the common', such as shared spaces, the future, and local concerns, tend to appeal more to citizens than issues relating to 'development'. This is supported by the finding that 'development' is not a common concept in the citizen's vocabulary (Bernard et al., 2011).

As was apparent from the discussions held by the participants on the community platform, they were willing and able to collectively reflect on village life and its future, as well as consider the local situation and problems, when the necessary conditions were met. In this PAR, a conceptual framework based on the sense of community concept (Smith 2013) was tested. This framework should have emphasised the connection between civic and existential participation. While individuals aspire to a sense of community as a 'warm and comfortable place' (Bauman 2013) and criticise the individualisation of interests and the atomisation of society, research indicates that local development discussions are predominantly concern quantifiable, technical, and more readily attainable goals (e.g. establishing a service or reconstruction). Facilitating axiology-driven discourse can overcome these limitations.

Furthermore, the question: 'Who are we? Where are we going? What should we do to get there?' has been shown to have great potential in this sense. It is understandable to the general public (Torfing et al., 2021) and, in contrast to questions on specific needs (cf. Kretzmann & McKnight 1996), has the potential to bring community members together (Christmann 2017). Despite conflicting narrative frames emerging in local discourse (Pierce et al., 2011), it has been demonstrated that the fundamental purpose of local dialogue is to address concerns, uncertainties, and dilemmas concerning the community life and its future. As Glass et al. (2022) posit, discussion among local actors regarding these tensions is an integral part of establishing trust and community resilience. Moreover, during periods of diminished community engagement, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, local agents recognise the potential of such dialogue to reinvigorate flagging communication and revive diminishing interactions.

The research highlights the need for participatory frameworks that integrate managerial, relational and existential dimensions of community life. Municipalities require spaces and processes that facilitate ongoing dialogue, encourage reflection on shared values and expectations, and support relational wellbeing as an integral part of development. The community platform proved to be an effective environment for this purpose, enabling residents and leaders to explore uncertainties,

negotiate tensions and collectively shape future priorities. Governance that fosters such dialogical and relational processes may better align development objectives with residents' lived experiences, thereby strengthening local resilience and shared agency.

Ethics statement

The authors declare, that:

- the work described has not been published previously except in the form of a preprint, an abstract, a published lecture, academic thesis or registered report,
- the article is not under consideration for publication elsewhere,
- the article's publication is approved by all authors and tacitly or explicitly by the responsible authorities where the work was carried out,
- if accepted, the article will not be published elsewhere in the same form, in English or in any other language, including electronically, without the written consent of the copyright-holder.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors have nothing to declare regarding conflicts of interest.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kateřina Vyhnánková: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Vladan Hruška:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

This provisional declaration is submitted due to the temporary unavailability of the online declarations tool. The authors declare that they have no competing interests relevant to this work.

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Supplementary materials

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