



Beyond Participation: Subsidiarity and Social Transformation in Community Development: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Community participation is widely promoted in community development as the pathway through which interventions become locally owned and sustainable. However, participatory practice frequently stalls at information sharing and consultation, and participation ranges from tokenistic involvement to citizen control without reliably shifting decision-making authority to communities. This persistent failure of current participation models motivated a systematic review of community participation, subsidiarity, and social transformation in community development practice and local governance. The three concepts are examined together because subsidiarity specifies where decision-making authority should reside, and may therefore explain why participation does or does not lead to durable change. Following PRISMA 2020, Google Scholar was searched for English-language records published between January 2023 and September 2026, and full texts were read on the publishers' platforms. The search was completed in September 2026. Of 19 records identified, 15 sources formed the review pool and were synthesised thematically. Foundational texts and earlier reviews served only as baselines and comparators. Five themes emerged. Participation is graded. It is authorised as an invitation or as an entitlement. Social capital yields agency through collective institutions. Subsidiarity relocates decision-making to the community, keeps wider-scale actors supportive, and creates resourced intermediary bodies. Transformation is more durable where these arrangements are embedded. The pool is small and largely qualitative or conceptual, so the findings are associations, not causal effects. Subsidiarity should be embedded as a founding principle of community development, not added as a procedural step.

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Introduction

Community participation is a central concept in community development. It is widely used in Community-Driven Development programmes, participatory budgeting, and community-based natural resource management. The underlying understanding is that involving local people in decisions that affect their lives strengthens both legitimacy and effectiveness. However, more than five decades after Arnstein's typology distinguished manipulation and therapy from genuine



citizen power (Arnstein, 1969), participatory practice still frequently settles on the lower rungs of the ladder. Communities are informed, consulted, or invited into pre-designed programmes. They rarely hold the power to define problems, allocate resources, or hold wider-scale institutions accountable. A systematic review of participation in health-systems research, for instance, found that most studies described collaboration rather than empowerment and control. It also found that participation pursued without attention to power relations can reproduce, rather than challenge, existing inequalities (George et al., 2015).

This persistent gap between the rhetoric of participation and the redistribution of power raises a question. The question is not simply whether communities participate, but what authority they hold within participatory processes. The principle of subsidiarity brings that question into focus. Subsidiarity is rooted in Catholic social teaching and was formalised in Pope Pius XI's 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*. It holds that responsibilities should remain with the communities and associations best placed to carry them out through their own initiative. Wider-scale bodies exist to support that initiative, not to absorb it (Pius XI, 1931; John Paul II, 1991). The principle was later secularised as a constitutional norm in the European Union's 1992 Maastricht Treaty, which places governance as close as possible to the people affected (Vischer, 2001; Angeloni et al., 2026). Subsidiarity is therefore read here as an allocation of responsibility rather than a ranking of importance, and the terms community-level and wider-scale are used to avoid implying a hierarchy of worth. Unlike participation, which describes an activity that communities are invited to perform within a structure decided elsewhere, subsidiarity describes where structural authority should reside in the first place. It therefore challenges the assumption that external organisations should necessarily lead development processes, and it supports communities that retain the capacity to define their own priorities (Armistead, 2026).

Recent scholarship has begun to connect subsidiarity explicitly with participatory engagement and transformation. Grillitsch et al. (2025) argue that regional development policy can combine societal direction with subsidiarity by placing local participation at the centre of transformation. Varga (2025) shows that subsidiarity reverses the ordinary burden of proof in disputes over decision-making authority. Those who wish to restrict community control must then justify intervention. Salati (2025) links horizontal subsidiarity with citizen-engagement and with the capacity of cities to respond to social pluralism. Parallel research emphasises that transformation extends beyond behavioural or economic outcomes. It includes changes in relationships, institutions, collective capability, inclusion, and control over the conditions that affect people's lives (Cornelius & Hollowell, 2026; Schiller et al., 2023).

These studies inform the present review in three ways. Participation scholarship supplies a graded view of involvement. Subsidiarity scholarship supplies a principle for locating decision-making authority. Transformation scholarship supplies the outcomes against which both can be judged. Yet the three bodies of work are rarely examined together. Participation scholarship treats power redistribution as an outcome to be pursued through better facilitation. It does not ask whether the allocation of responsibility between communities and wider-scale institutions is itself consistent with subsidiarity. Subsidiarity scholarship remains oriented mainly to constitutional law and multi-level governance, with limited engagement in small-scale community processes. Social transformation scholarship emphasises collective action and empowerment without treating subsidiarity as a way of organising decision-making. The gap is therefore a missing link. Little synthesis exists on how the location of decision-making authority shapes the route from participation to social transformation in community development practice and local governance.

This systematic review addresses that gap. It synthesises evidence from community development practice and local governance in Global South and Global North settings, with attention to implications for sub-Saharan Africa. The three concepts are examined together because



participation describes how people are involved, subsidiarity describes where authority sits, and social transformation describes what changes as a result. The review does not test a predefined model. The relationship between participation and subsidiarity is identified from the reviewed data as a structural one. Three objectives structure the review: (1) to examine how community participation is conceptualised and operationalised in community development; (2) to analyse the role of subsidiarity in strengthening community participation; and (3) to synthesise the available evidence on the relationship between participation, subsidiarity, and social transformation, and to appraise how strong that evidence is.

Method

Design and reporting

The review followed a systematic design and is reported in line with the PRISMA 2020 statement, which guides transparent reporting of the rationale, identification, selection, and synthesis of evidence (Page et al., 2021). The literature spans development studies, occupational science, political science, federalism studies, sociology, and social work. It is conceptually and methodologically heterogeneous. A thematic narrative synthesis was therefore used rather than meta-analysis, consistent with reviews of similarly heterogeneous literatures on community development and transformation (Schiller et al., 2023; Sumardjo et al., 2023). The synthesis reports the direction and consistency of associations and the strength of the supporting evidence. It does not estimate effect sizes or establish causation.

Information sources and search strategy

Google Scholar was the only search engine used to locate records. Scopus, Web of Science, and the Directory of Open Access Journals were not searched. Records located in Google Scholar were opened on the publishers' platforms and websites to confirm bibliographic details and to read the full-text. The searches were run on 21 September 2026 and covered records published between January 2023 and September 2026, using the custom date range in Google Scholar. The search was completed in September 2026. Records published after the search was completed were not eligible, and only English-language outputs were eligible. Five themes were run: (1) "community participation" subsidiarity "social transformation"; (2) "participatory development" subsidiarity; (3) "subsidiarity" "community development"; (4) "citizen participation" subsidiarity empowerment; and (5) "community empowerment" subsidiarity social transformation. Google Scholar searches the full-text of records and ranks results by relevance. The results reported by Google Scholar and the number screened for each query are listed in the search log. Grey-literature was additionally sought through targeted web searches and relevant organisational websites, to identify policy commentaries, reports, institutional publications, and other non-peer-reviewed sources. For each theme, only the first three results in Google Scholar's relevance ranking were screened, as the search was purposive and targeted studies directly addressing subsidiarity in participatory community development and social transformation. The remaining results were not screened; the number of results reported by Google Scholar and the number screened per theme are listed in the search log.

Four categories of source outside the review pool were retained deliberately. None was counted in the pool. First, foundational conceptual texts anchor the key distinctions used in the synthesis: Arnstein (1969), Pretty et al. (1995), Putnam (2000), Vischer (2001), and the encyclicals of Pius XI (1931) and John Paul II (1991). Second, two earlier systematic reviews, George et al. (2015) and Waddington et al. (2019), provide review-level evidence against which the findings of the pool are compared. Third, methodological guidance was drawn from Page et al. (2021), Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), Popay et al. (2006), and Hong et al. (2018). Fourth, one primary legal text, the Constitution of Kenya (Republic of Kenya, 2010), is cited only to illustrate context.



Eligibility criteria

Sources were included where they (a) addressed community participation, citizen participation, or participatory development; (b) addressed subsidiarity, decentralisation, local decision-making, or the allocation of decision-making authority; (c) addressed social transformation, collective action, empowerment, or related outcomes; (d) were peer-reviewed journal articles, peer-reviewed book chapters, or substantive conceptual or empirical works from recognised publishers; and (e) offered evidence or theoretical contribution relevant to at least one objective. Only records published in English between January 2023 and September 2026 were eligible. Sources were excluded where participation or subsidiarity was incidental to an unrelated domain, where a source lacked sufficient conceptual or empirical content, or where it was purely descriptive.

Study selection

Records were logged in a screening workbook and duplicates were removed. The remaining records were screened by title and abstract against the criteria. The full texts of retained records were then assessed for eligibility, and reasons for exclusion were recorded. Nineteen records were identified (15 through Google Scholar and 4 through other sources). One duplicate was removed, and 18 records were screened by title and abstract. Three grey-literature results were excluded at this stage: two papal encyclicals and one national constitution. They were published outside the search window and are not studies, so they are cited only as supporting sources. The full texts of 15 reports were assessed, and all 15 met the criteria. None was excluded at full-text. Table 1 shows the flow of records. Screening and extraction were carried out by a single reviewer.

Quality appraisal

Peer review alone was not treated as sufficient evidence of quality. Two appraisal routes were used, reflecting the heterogeneity of the pool. Empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods) were appraised with the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), which applies design-specific criteria (Hong et al., 2018). The systematic review in the pool was checked for a stated search and selection method. Conceptual, policy, and grey-literature sources cannot be assessed with MMAT. They were judged against four criteria: a clearly stated purpose or argument, a transparent and traceable use of evidence, coherence between argument and conclusions, and the standing of the author or publishing body. Appraisal did not lead to exclusion. It determined how much interpretive weight a source carried. Sources with weaker appraisal, including the single grey-literature item (Armistead, 2026), were used to frame concepts and were not used as evidence of outcomes. Validity was further supported by requiring that each theme be supported by at least two sources, and by checking each claim against the source text.

Data synthesis and coding

Synthesis followed the six phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), applied to the extracted text of the included sources. The phases were familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting. Popay et al. (2006) guided the narrative synthesis, in particular the organisation of findings and the exploration of relationships within and between sources. Codes were generated inductively, line by line, from the extracted text, and were not drawn from a predefined framework. Twenty-two codes were generated. Codes describing related ideas were collated into candidate themes. Each candidate theme was reviewed against the coded extracts and against the full dataset. Five themes were retained (Table 3).

Themes were built from the data, so no theoretical framework was imposed. The aim was to identify patterns in the evidence, not to test a predefined model. Subsidiarity served as a sensitising concept in the search strategy but not as a lens for testing hypotheses. The structural relationship between participation and subsidiarity reported below was identified from the data



during analysis. Foundational texts served only as an organisational baseline for naming the graded levels of participation (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty et al., 1995).

Results

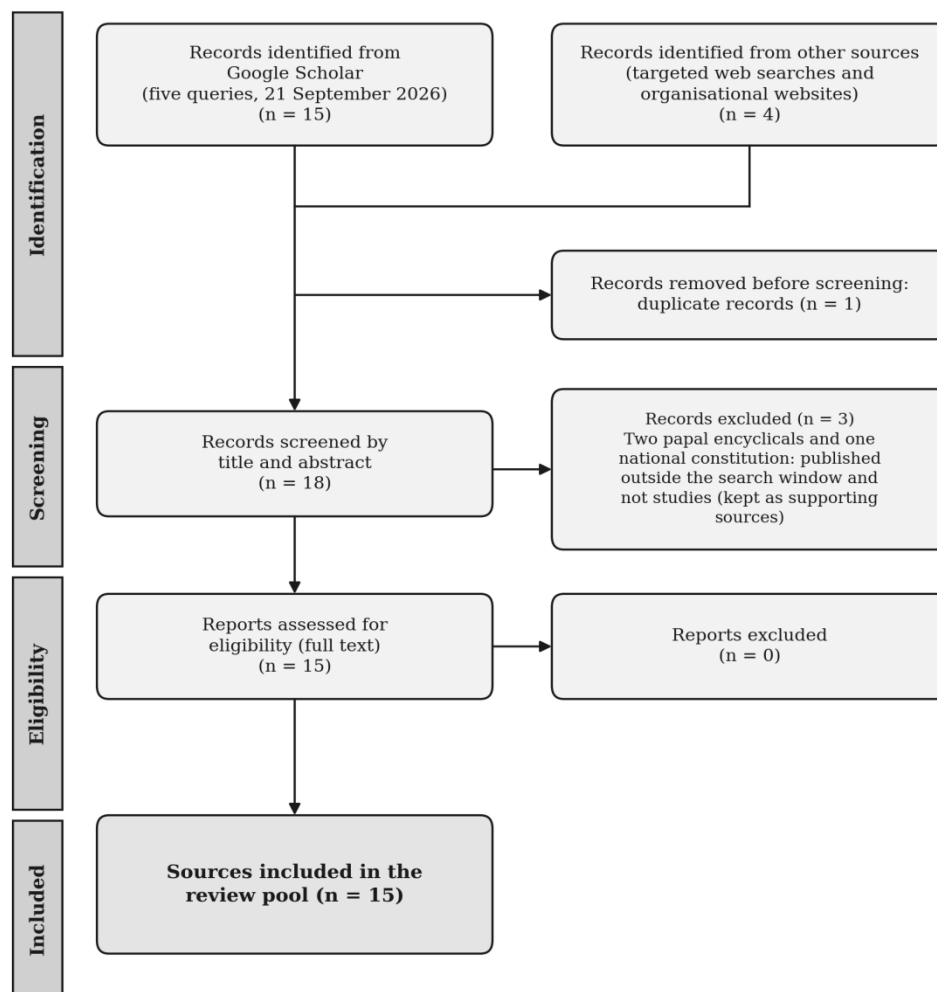
Study selection and characteristics of the review pool

Table 1 shows the flow of records. Nineteen records were identified, and 15 sources met the criteria and formed the review pool. Table 2 summarises them. Twelve were journal articles, two were book chapters, and one was a grey-literature policy commentary (Armistead, 2026). Seven were empirical studies (Angeloni et al., 2026; Cornelius & Hollowell, 2026; Imelda & Noya, 2026; Kimaro & Kilonzo, 2026; Rahma, 2025; Schiller et al., 2023; Sumardjo et al., 2023). One was a systematic review (Syengo & Jeketule, 2026). Six were conceptual, experiential, or policy-oriented works (Anderson, 2024; Armistead, 2026; Davies, 2023; Grillitsch et al., 2025; Salati, 2025; Varga, 2025). One was an interdisciplinary study of collaborative governance (Syaifullah et al., 2026). Only one source used a quantitative composite-indicator design (Angeloni et al., 2026). The evidence linking subsidiarity to community-level participation is therefore mainly qualitative and interpretive, and the themes below should be read in that light.

Table 1: Flow of records through the review (PRISMA 2020)

Stage / item	Records
Identification	
Records identified (total)	19
Google Scholar (results screened across five queries)	15
Other sources (targeted web searches and organisational websites)	4
Duplicate records removed	1
Screening	
Records screened by title and abstract	18
Records excluded at title and abstract stage	3
Eligibility	
Full-text reports assessed for eligibility	15
Full-text reports excluded	0
Included	
Sources included in the review pool	15

Source: Screening log of this review (searches run on 21 September 2026). Table structure follows Page et al. (2021).



Adapted from the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021).

Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of sources

Source: Screening log of this review (September 2026); diagram adapted from Page et al. (2021).



Table 2: Characteristics of the 15 sources in the review pool

Source	Context	Evidence type	Appraisal route	Themes
Anderson (2024)	Local government decentralisation, Ghana	Conceptual policy analysis (secondary-material analysis)	Credibility criteria	1, 4, 5
Angeloni et al. (2026)	Italian regions	Quantitative composite-indicator study	MMAT	3, 4, 5
Armistead (2026)	U.S. humanitarian aid	Grey-literature (policy commentary)	Credibility criteria	4
Cornelius & Hollowell (2026)	Low-income communities in several countries	Empirical study (practice-based lessons)	MMAT	5
Davies (2023)	University-community partnerships, UK and Canada	Book chapter (experiential)	Credibility criteria	4
Grillitsch et al. (2025)	Regional development policy	Conceptual policy analysis	Credibility criteria	4, 5
Imelda & Noya (2026)	East Sumba, Indonesia	Empirical study	MMAT	3
Kimaro & Kilonzo (2026)	Dairy cooperative, Tanzania	Empirical case study	MMAT	2, 4, 5
Rahma (2025)	Urban communities in the digital era	Empirical study	MMAT	3
Salati (2025)	Cities in federal systems (comparative)	Conceptual comparative analysis	Credibility criteria	4, 5
Schiller et al. (2023)	Five initiatives in Canada, Germany, South Africa, and the UK	Qualitative multiple-case study	MMAT	1, 5
Sumardjo et al. (2023)	Peri-urban food communities, Indonesia	Empirical case study	MMAT	1, 2, 4, 5
Syaifullah et al. (2026)	Public Policy Participation	Interdisciplinary study of collaborative governance through a collaborative governance approach	Credibility criteria	1,2,4
Syengo & Jeketule (2026)	Community Action Cycle in development practice	Systematic review	Review method check	5
Varga (2025)	Local self-government systems	Conceptual legal-institutional analysis	Credibility criteria	4

Source: Data extracted from the 15 included sources (see References). MMAT = Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (Hong et al., 2018). Themes refer to Themes 1 to 5 in Table 3.

Coding and themes

Table 3 shows how the 22 codes were collated into the five themes. Each theme is presented below, starting from the finding in the review pool. Foundational theory appears only as a baseline for naming levels or concepts.



Table 3: Codes, themes, and contributing sources

Theme	Codes	Contributing sources
1. Participation is graded rather than binary	C1 passive receipt of information; C2 consultation and invited involvement; C3 collaboration and co-management; C4 shared decision-making and co-design ("shared doing"); C5 depth measured by stage of involvement	Sumardjo et al. (2023); Schiller et al. (2023); Anderson (2024)
2. Participation is authorised as an invitation or as an entitlement	C6 participation as an external invitation; C7 participation as one input among several (hexahelix); C8 participation as a membership right; C9 durable change in confidence, voice, and bargaining power	Sumardjo et al. (2023); Kimaro & Kilonzo (2026) Syaifullah et al. (2026)
3. Social capital yields agency through collective institutions	C10 digitalisation widening reach but thinning relationships; C11 volume of participation rising while quality declines; C12 trust necessary but not sufficient; C13 third-sector and intermediary bodies channelling trust; C14 interaction of social capital, participation, and institutional connection	Rahma (2025); Angeloni et al. (2026); Imelda & Noya (2026)
4. Subsidiarity operates through relocated authority, supportive posture, and institutional arrangements	C15 default site of decision-making relocated (burden of proof); C16 supportive versus substitutive posture of wider-scale actors; C17 measurable institutional arrangements (four pillars); C18 conditions eroding subsidiarity (crisis suspension, efficiency-driven reform, declining third-sector resources)	Varga (2025); Salati (2025); Grillitsch et al. (2025); Davies (2023); Armistead (2026); Anderson (2024); Sumardjo et al. (2023); Angeloni et al. (2026); Kimaro & Kilonzo (2026)
5. Transformation is durable where authority is embedded	C19 gains dependent on external funding and facilitation; C20 change in values, relationships, and institutions; C21 indicators of transformation (influence, collective action, responsiveness, inclusion, accountability); C22 barriers: power imbalances and weak institutional support	Sumardjo et al. (2023); Cornelius & Hollowell (2026); Angeloni et al. (2026); Kimaro & Kilonzo (2026); Grillitsch et al. (2025); Salati (2025); Syengo & Jeketule (2026); Schiller et al. (2023); Anderson (2024); Syaifullah et al. (2026)

Source: Thematic coding of the 15 included sources, following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) and Popay et al. (2006).

Theme 1: Participation is graded rather than binary

Across the pool, participation was described and measured in degrees, not as present or absent. Sources located involvement along a range from passive receipt of information, through consultation and collaboration, to shared decision-making and community-led action. Recent studies operationalised depth by the stage at which communities were involved: problem definition, resource allocation, implementation, and evaluation. Sumardjo et al. (2023), studying peri-urban food communities in Indonesia, found that participation deepened as households moved from passive recipients of externally designed programmes toward active co-managers of farming. Schiller et al. (2023) found across five international case studies that transformation depended on communities moving from objects of intervention to co-designers of change, a shift they term "shared doing." In a desk-based analysis of Ghanaian local government policy, Anderson (2024) lists forms of participation in local decision-making that range from information sharing and programme input to voting, representation, association, and cooperation. The pool therefore describes participation as a matter of degree, and the degree is set by where communities stand in decisions rather than by whether they attend. This graded pattern corresponds to the typologies of Arnstein (1969) and Pretty et al. (1995), which are used here only to name the levels.

*Theme 2: Participation is authorised as an invitation or as an entitlement*

A second theme concerns who authorises participation. Much of the pool describes participation as an invitation extended by an external actor into a process it has already designed. Sumardjo et al. (2023), for instance, describe a “hexahelix” collaboration in which community participation is one input among several rather than the organising principle. By contrast, cooperative and collective action sources frame participation as a structural entitlement. In a Tanzanian dairy cooperative, Kimaro and Kilonzo (2026) show that women’s membership in a producer-owned institution generated durable changes in confidence, voice, and household bargaining power. They attribute this to participation being a right attached to membership rather than something granted by an outside authority. The distinction between invited and entitled participation is central to the synthesis, because it is the location of decision-making authority that subsidiarity addresses.

Theme 3: Social capital yields agency through collective institutions

A third theme treats participation as inseparable from social capital and collective institutions. Rahma (2025) found that digitalisation expands the reach of participation while weakening the interpersonal relationships that historically underpinned local solidarity. The volume of participation can therefore rise even as its transformative quality declines. Angeloni et al. (2026) argue that social capital is necessary but not sufficient for sustained community agency. Trust must be channelled through active third-sector organisations and decentralised decision-making before it yields durable collective capacity (see also Putnam, 2000). Imelda and Noya (2026), examining gender equity in East Sumba, found that social capital, participation, and institutional connection interacted to produce transformation. Participation is thus embedded in wider relations of power.

Theme 4: Subsidiarity operates through relocated authority, supportive posture, and institutional arrangements

Across the pool, participation and subsidiarity were linked by a structural relationship. Where sources examined the allocation of decision-making authority, the depth of participation followed the location of that authority. Subsidiarity therefore addresses the central weakness identified in Themes 1 and 2, which is the separation between participation and decision-making authority. Papal teaching emphasises support rather than substitution. Wider-scale institutions should not take over responsibilities that communities and local groups can carry out themselves, and should assist them when support is genuinely needed (Pius XI, 1931; John Paul II, 1991). Applied to community development, this distinguishes participatory implementation, in which communities assist with externally designed activities, from participatory governance, in which communities define priorities, determine responses, and hold institutions accountable.

Three interlocking mechanisms emerged from the coded data. The first relocates the default site of decision-making. Rather than asking how far a community can be involved in a decision that a wider-scale actor will ultimately make, subsidiarity asks why the decision is not already made locally. According to Varga (2025), this reverses the ordinary burden of proof, so that authority is assumed to belong to communities unless a case for intervention is made. Salati (2025) shows that cities gain governance standing not merely by being consulted but by having horizontal subsidiarity recognised as a source of authority in its own right. Grillitsch et al. (2025) similarly place local participation at the centre of subsidiarity-consistent regional policy. Anderson (2024) describes Ghana’s decentralisation framework in comparable terms. Local structures are assigned planning, local spending, and regulatory responsibilities unless a compelling case is made for allocating them to a wider-scale level, and sub-district councils are mandated to mobilise community members into local decision-making.

The second mechanism concerns the posture of wider-scale actors once decision-making is relocated. Subsidiarity requires that the state, market, or development partners act supportively



rather than directly (Varga, 2025). The hexahelix case of Sumardjo et al. (2023) shows how easily this can drift toward substitution when intermediary actors retain the coordinating role that subsidiarity assigns to the community. Davies (2023), examining university–community partnerships, reaches a comparable conclusion: effective engagement depends on institutions placing resources genuinely at communities’ disposal rather than incorporating communities into an externally set agenda. Anderson (2024) similarly notes that, under subsidiarity, the central authority is expected to provide the resources that local units cannot mobilise alone.

The third, and most directly evidenced, mechanism is that subsidiarity operates as a measurable set of institutional arrangements rather than only a normative principle. Angeloni et al. (2026), in a composite-indicator study of Italian regions, decompose horizontal subsidiarity into four pillars: interpersonal trust, social trust, third-sector activity, and decentralised decision-making. They found that the latter two, not trust alone, carry the strongest statistical association with social development outcomes. The cooperative case of Kimaro and Kilonzo (2026) illustrates the same point at community-level. A member-owned institution situated between households and wider markets and government translated participation into leadership roles and renegotiated household authority. At policy level, Anderson (2024) describes Ghana’s local government act as building sub-district structures and assigning them functions on the basis of subsidiarity. It also assigns districts a statutory share of government revenue and powers to levy rates and fees.

Subsidiarity was also fragile in the pool. Varga (2025) shows that subsidiarity-consistent local autonomy can be suspended during crises. Angeloni et al. (2026) report that horizontal subsidiarity in Italy declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, as crises strained third-sector resources and successive governments did not actively promote intermediary bodies. Salati’s (2025) comparative analysis shows that formal constitutional recognition of subsidiarity at city level remains uneven internationally. It also shows that territorial reforms driven by efficiency logic reduced local government units in several countries, in ways associated with lower participation. Anderson (2024) reports a comparable pattern in Ghana, a unitary state. The upward accountability of district assemblies to central government restrains their autonomy, so that policy signals local control while central government retains greater control in practice.

Theme 5: Transformation is durable where authority is embedded

Across the pool, social transformation was treated not as a synonym for project success but as durable change in values, social relations, and institutional practice (Schiller et al., 2023; Sumardjo et al., 2023). Cornelius and Hollowell (2026) argue that social transformation occurs when communities identify their own strengths, define the challenges they face, and build collective power to address them. They further emphasise that participation becomes more meaningful when it is supported by access to information and accountability. The exercise of collective power requires communities to hold real authority to influence and make decisions that affect their lives, which links this theme directly to subsidiarity.

When participation was invited rather than recognised as a right, its contribution to social transformation tended to be limited. Greater emphasis was placed on immediate and measurable outcomes than on lasting changes in community values, power relations, and institutions. Sumardjo et al. (2023) document real gains in income, employment, and production. Because participation was coordinated as one input among external stakeholders, however, the durability of these gains depended on continued external funding and facilitation. A subsidiarity lens flags this vulnerability directly, since authority had not been relocated to the community on a lasting basis.

Where participation was supported by structures that reflect subsidiarity, transformation was more consistently reported. Such structures included decentralised decision-making, community-owned intermediary organisations, and supportive roles for wider-scale institutions. The reported



transformation included changes in relationships and institutions, and not only improvements in material conditions. The regional evidence of Angeloni et al. (2026) and the cooperative case of Kimaro and Kilonzo (2026) support this pattern at macro and lived-experience levels, respectively. Grillitsch et al. (2025) and Salati (2025) show comparable patterns in regional development and urban governance. The systematic review of Syengo and Jeketule (2026) associates participatory community action with empowerment and social cohesion. It also identifies power imbalances and weak institutional support as persistent barriers. Syaifullah et al. (2026) argues that combining participation with collaboration enables deliberative policymaking, but is constrained by power imbalances, limited community capacity, and bureaucratic resistance. Anderson (2024) bears on durability rather than on transformation outcomes. He describes the statutory devolution of certain functions to local structures as irreversible, while noting that central control limits what local authorities can do in practice. On this basis, transformation is more usefully assessed through indicators such as community influence over decisions, collective action, institutional responsiveness, inclusion of marginalised groups, accountability, and sustained changes in institutional arrangements.

Taken together, the pool indicates that community participation is necessary but not sufficient for social transformation. In the reviewed evidence, subsidiarity is the structural condition associated with the difference between contingent, reversible participation and durable, self-sustaining participation. This is an association observed across mostly qualitative, cross-sectional, and conceptual sources (Table 2). It is not evidence of a causal effect.

Discussion

Contribution to knowledge

This review builds on three existing bodies of knowledge and connects them. The participation literature established that involvement varies in depth (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty et al., 1995) and that shallow participation can reproduce inequality (George et al., 2015; Waddington et al., 2019). The subsidiarity literature established that authority should rest with the level best placed to exercise it, mainly in constitutional and multi-level governance settings (Vischer, 2001; Varga, 2025; Salati, 2025). The transformation literature established that lasting change involves relationships, institutions, and collective capability (Schiller et al., 2023; Cornelius & Hollowell, 2026).

The reviewed evidence adds four things that these literatures do not provide separately. First, the depth of participation followed the location of decision-making authority, so subsidiarity operates as an explanatory condition and not only as a normative principle. Second, invited and entitled participation differ in durability, as the contrast between the hexahelix case of Sumardjo et al. (2023) and the cooperative case of Kimaro and Kilonzo (2026) shows. Third, subsidiarity strengthens participation through three identifiable mechanisms: relocated default authority, a supportive posture by wider-scale actors, and resourced intermediary institutions. Fourth, these mechanisms can be observed in measurable form, as in the four-pillar indicator of Angeloni et al. (2026). This carries the principle from constitutional settings into community-level analysis. In this way, existing knowledge was examined against the reviewed evidence and refined into a conditional account of the route from participation to transformation.

The participation-authority gap and the fragility of subsidiarity

A recurring finding is that participation and subsidiarity can be separated in practice, producing a participation-authority gap. Communities may be invited to participate while decision-making remains externally controlled. Alternatively, responsibility may be transferred to communities without corresponding resources or institutional authority. Earlier review-level evidence points the same way. Waddington et al. (2019), reviewing citizen-engagement interventions in low- and middle-income countries, found that shifting responsibility to communities without transferring authority and resources produces incomplete participation. They also found that interventions



requiring significant shifts in control can meet resistance from local officials, and that participation can reproduce inequality where local elites dominate participatory institutions. These earlier findings lie outside the search window (see Method). They are used as a comparator and are consistent with the patterns in the review pool.

Kenya's constitutional framework offers a contextual illustration. The Constitution of Kenya lists among the objects of devolution the enhancement of people's participation in decisions affecting them and the recognition of the right of communities to manage their own affairs (Republic of Kenya, 2010, Art. 174). This provision illustrates how subsidiarity can function as an institutional criterion for judging the quality of participation, provided that inclusion, capacity, and accountability are also present. Subsidiarity is also not self-executing. The crisis-related suspension of local autonomy (Varga, 2025), the decline of horizontal subsidiarity in Italy during the pandemic (Angeloni et al., 2026), and efficiency-driven territorial reform (Salati, 2025) show that formal recognition can erode without active support. Ghana offers a comparable case from the pool. Statutory sub-district structures and a revenue-sharing fund give subsidiarity a legal footing, while upward accountability to central government limits local autonomy (Anderson, 2024).

An integrative model

Drawing on these findings, the synthesis supports a four-stage conditional model. Community participation, ranging from information sharing to collaboration, is the entry point. Subsidiarity, expressed through local priority-setting, shared decision-making, and supportive wider-scale institutions, is the organising principle. Collective action and accountability, expressed through resource mobilisation, implementation, and feedback, is the operational layer. Social transformation, expressed through agency, inclusion, institutional responsiveness, and sustained change, is the outcome. The relationship between these stages is conditional rather than automatic. In the reviewed sources, participation was associated with transformation in values and institutions where subsidiarity-consistent structures were present, and with short-term, reversible material gains where they were absent. The model also cautions against an overly simplistic reading of "local control," since local decision-making can itself reproduce exclusion unless accompanied by inclusive representation and accountability. The model is a product of synthesis and remains to be tested empirically.

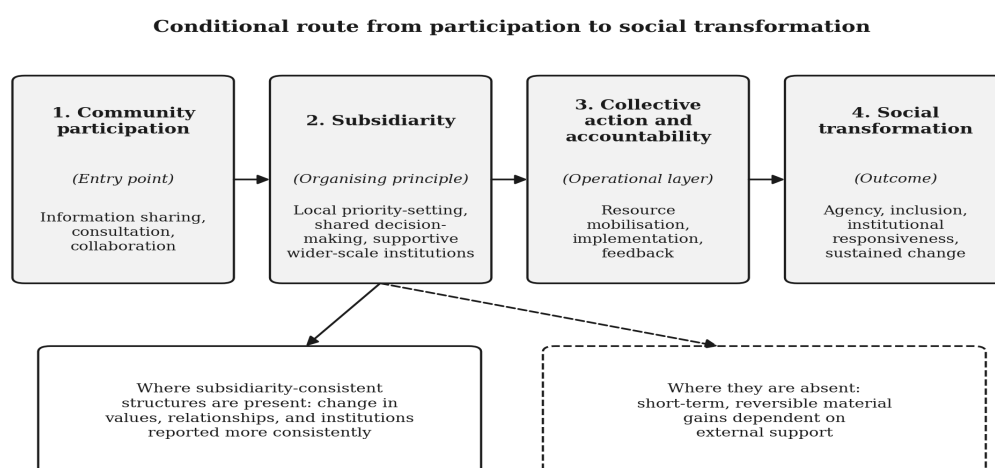


Figure 2: Conditional model of the route from participation to social transformation, synthesised from the review pool

Source: Synthesis of Themes 1 to 5 (Table 3) and the reviewed sources. The model is conceptual and has not been tested empirically.

***Implications for practice, policy and research***

Practitioners and funders should treat participation and subsidiarity as distinct design variables. High levels of community involvement can coexist with externally held authority over objectives and budgets, producing transformation that is real but bounded. Programmes that vest genuine decision-making in community-owned institutions, as in the cooperative case of Kimaro and Kilonzo (2026), are more likely to generate durable change because authority, and not merely activity, has shifted. Universities, government agencies, and multi-stakeholder collaborations remain indispensable sources of resources and legitimacy (Davies, 2023; Sumardjo et al., 2023). Their contribution is transformative only where it remains genuinely supportive. Explicit mechanisms such as community veto rights and sunset clauses on external coordination roles could guard against the documented tendency for supportive roles to drift into substitutive ones. Building and resourcing durable, community-controlled intermediary organisations should take priority over one-off consultative events, without displacing the continued supportive-role of government and other wider-scale actors (Armistead, 2026).

Policymakers should treat subsidiarity as a criterion to be actively assessed in administrative reform, given its association with participatory depth, and should resource third-sector and intermediary organisations directly. Researchers should develop consistent, cross-context measures of subsidiarity at the community-level, extending the composite-indicator approach developed for regional analysis (Angeloni et al., 2026). The absence of long-term tracking is itself a finding of this review. Because the included sources were mostly qualitative, cross-sectional, or conceptual, the review cannot establish under what conditions transformation becomes durable rather than reversible. Comparative and longitudinal studies, including in African community development contexts, are needed to test whether participation embedded in subsidiarity-consistent structures produces more durable transformation than participation that is not.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. The pool is small and heterogeneous, and only one source used a quantitative design, so the synthesis identifies associations and not causal effects. The literature spans diverse sectors, geographical contexts, and methodological traditions, which limits direct comparison of outcomes. Subsidiarity is not consistently defined or measured across studies, which makes the synthesis more conceptual than statistical. Few sources explicitly connect subsidiarity to community-level participatory processes, so several connections in the synthesis are inferential. They were built by juxtaposing findings from adjacent but not always directly connected bodies of work. Only Google Scholar was searched, and subscription databases such as Scopus and Web of Science were not. Google Scholar ranks results by relevance and does not disclose its coverage, so the search may not be exactly reproducible and some eligible records may have been missed. The search was restricted to English-language sources, which may have excluded scholarship in other languages, particularly given the roots of subsidiarity in continental European traditions. Screening, extraction, and coding were carried out by a single reviewer, which increases the risk of selection and interpretation bias. Appraisal informed interpretive weight and did not exclude sources, and one grey-literature source was included. Records published after the search was completed in September 2026 were not captured.

Conclusion

This systematic review examined community participation, subsidiarity, and social transformation as interconnected dimensions of community development, drawing on 15 sources published between January 2023 and September 2026. Participation encompasses substantially different levels of involvement and is variably authorised as an external invitation or a structural entitlement. It should not be treated as inherently transformative. In the reviewed evidence, subsidiarity links participation to transformation through three mechanisms. It relocates the default site of decision-making to the community, it keeps wider-scale institutions in a supportive



rather than substitutive posture, and it creates measurable, resourced channels through which participation becomes durable. Social transformation extends beyond immediate project outputs to changes in relationships, institutional arrangements, and the ability of communities to influence the conditions affecting them. In the reviewed sources, it was reported more consistently where communities held meaningful decision-making authority and external institutions supported without substituting for community initiative.

Moving “beyond participation” is therefore not a call to abandon participatory methods. It is a call to attend to a structural question that participation alone cannot answer: whether the authority communities are invited to exercise was ever theirs to hold. Participation provides the space for community voice. Subsidiarity supplies the institutional logic for community authority. Social transformation is the change associated with translating voice and authority into sustained collective action. Community development practitioners, funders, and policymakers should accordingly design programmes so that community-owned institutions hold decision-making authority from the outset, adopt explicit supportive-role commitments to guard against substitution, and resource intermediary organisations directly. These recommendations rest on consistent but largely qualitative evidence. Whether transformation remains durable under such arrangements cannot be settled by the present pool. It is identified as the priority for comparative, longitudinal research, together with consistent measures of subsidiarity.

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