

Guidelines for Conducting

Inclusive Multi-Stakeholder

Engagement actions

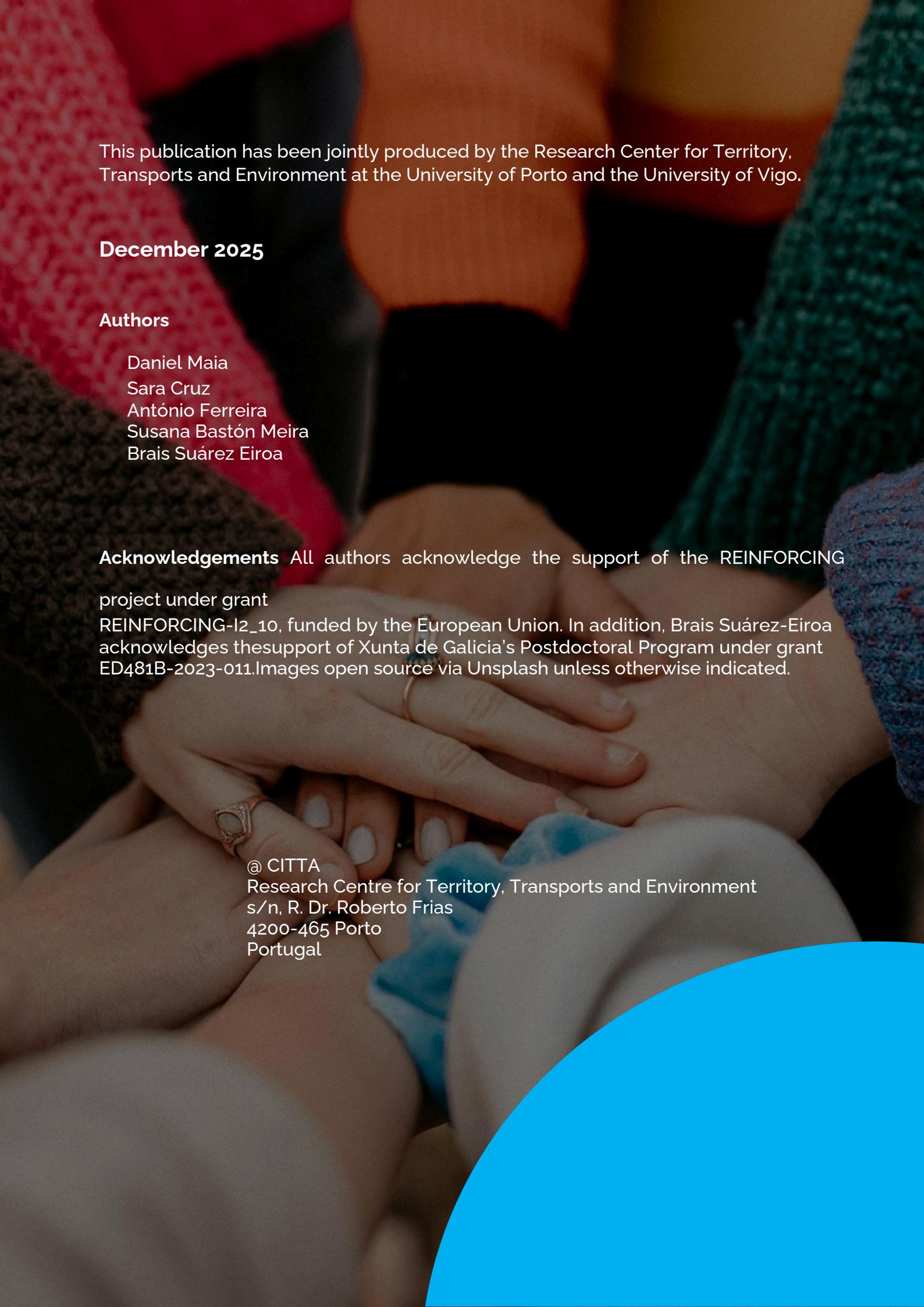
Lessons learnt from the
CoBlue project



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Executive summary

This report, produced by the University of Porto's CITTA and the University of Vigo's Post-Growth Innovation Lab, distils lessons from CoBlue's 2025 multistakeholder engagement process (MEP) in Vigo. The MEP aimed to co-produce policy recommendations on offshore wind farms in south-west Galicia, using active citizen engagement to support local communities and governance. The report emphasises that the more "complex" a challenge is (with interconnected causes and unpredictable effects), the higher the required levels of inclusiveness and diversity; more "complicated" but bounded problems may be addressed with less demanding approaches. It also notes that the feasible design of any MEP is constrained by practical conditions such as time, resources, procedural transparency, facilitation capacity, the intensity of engagement, and the procedures needed to ensure fair participation.

Drawing on the CoBlue case, the report offers concise guidance on seeking broader participation and deeper deliberation; communicating objectives, rules and expectations clearly; investing in facilitator training; and using varied participatory techniques to sustain active and equitable engagement. Overall, it highlights the achievements of CoBlue MEPs regarding inclusiveness and diversity. Longer-term institutional uptake remains uncertain, although ongoing dialogue with local and regional bodies is strengthening the prospects for acceptance and use of the MEP outcomes.

1. Context and Objectives

1. Context and Objectives

This report results from the joint research between CITTA – Research Centre for Territory, Transport and Environment of the University of Porto and the Post-Growth Innovation Lab of the University of Vigo. The collaboration examined the CoBlue project, designed and conducted by the Post-Growth Innovation Lab to promote active citizen engagement and co-produce policy recommendations for the offshore wind farms in south-west Galicia. Unfolding in 2025, the project intended to benefit local communities and governances by offering a more comprehensive approach to decision-making and policy-making processes. Thus, the CoBlue project reflects on different literatures supporting the ability of citizens in framing the problems and their consequences, discussing and proposing possible solutions and assisting in the implementation and monitoring of measures [1, 2].

Based on observations and meetings during the CoBlue project, this report aims to contribute to similar initiatives, examining the role of Inclusiveness and Diversity in Multistakeholder Engagement Processes (MEP). Here, inclusiveness refers to the degree to which a process enables meaningful participation of a broad spectrum of individuals and organisations, involving different orientations, institutional types, and social and professional backgrounds. And diversity is understood as the extent to which inclusive participation translates into a substantive plurality of perspectives, viewpoints, and interpretative frames, shaping how issues are discussed, understood, and addressed within the process. Thus, while inclusiveness concerns who is involved in the process, diversity concerns the range and plurality of perspectives that emerge from that involvement.

The following sections will briefly explain MEPs, suggest an ideal methodology for conducting them, and ultimately offer a set of recommendations for matching the level of inclusiveness and diversity with the complexity of problems addressed in different MEPs.

1.: Dentoni et al. (2018), *Harnessing Wicked Problems in Multi-stakeholder Partnership*.

2.: Hügel and Davies (2020), *Public participation, engagement, and climate change adaptation: A review of the research literature*.

Regarding MEPs, they are processes designed to enable a more direct and active participation of society in the resolution of different socioeconomic and environmental problems that might be difficult to tackle via more centralised approaches [3]. Fundamentally, these processes foster accountability, participatory equity, transparency and partnership amongst stakeholders to aid the different stages of decision-making [4]. Furthermore, the primary purpose of MEPs can vary, for instance, aiming to promote awareness on a complex issue, encourage community empowering, and stimulate policy integration and governance changes [5, 6]. Nevertheless, as there are multiple reasons and purposes for conducting a MEP, there are also multiple ways to design and implement the engagement process, such as meetings, forums, workshops, and other approaches [3]. Ultimately, understanding and evaluating the challenge being addressed becomes a fundamental starting point for any MEP, as the nature of the problems might offer some hints about how to properly attenuate or solve them (Table 1).

Table 1: Differences between 'complicated' and 'complex' problems.

My problem is simple since it...	My problem is complex since it...
has isolated and easy-to-identify causes.	has multiple and interconnected causes.
falls within distinct administrative sectors.	overlaps within many administrative sectors.
can be addressed and solved in parts.	OR
has a clear and proportional relationship between its causes and consequences.	can only be solved if understood and tackled holistically
has simpler and long-term solutions.	has an unpredictable relationship between causes and consequences
could rely on lower levels of Inclusiveness and Diversity	has momentary solutions as new problems might unravel.
	should rely on higher levels of Inclusiveness and Diversity

3.: UNDP (2006), Multi-stakeholder Engagement Processes - A UNDP Capacity Development Resource.

4.: Nonet et al (2022), Multi-stakeholder Engagement for the Sustainable Development Goals: Introduction to the Special Issue.

5.: Uittenbroek et al. (2019), The design of public participation: who participates, when and how? Insights in climate adaptation planning from the Netherlands.

6.: Zellner (2024), Participatory modeling for collaborative landscape and environmental planning: From potential to realization.

Therefore, the size and difficulty of the challenges can help determine the more appropriate degrees of inclusiveness and diversity. On the other hand, involving multiple societal groups and examining manifold insights (and how they might change during MEPs) can assist in defining the problems whose causes and consequences are harder to describe and, thus, work on.

Ideally, all MEPs could improve their efficiency and integrative capacities if levels of Inclusiveness and Diversity were to increase. However, MEPs are intrinsically tied to the amount of resources, time, professional capacities and other procedural dimensions limiting or enabling the ideal MEP approaches (Table 2). Therefore, while the problems' complexity indicates how MEPs should be, the MEP procedural dimensions determine how they could be designed, conducted, examined and disseminated.

Table 2: Procedural dimensions relevant to the MEP. Such dimensions can be either dependent or independent of the degree of Inclusiveness and Diversity feasible/desired in the procedure.

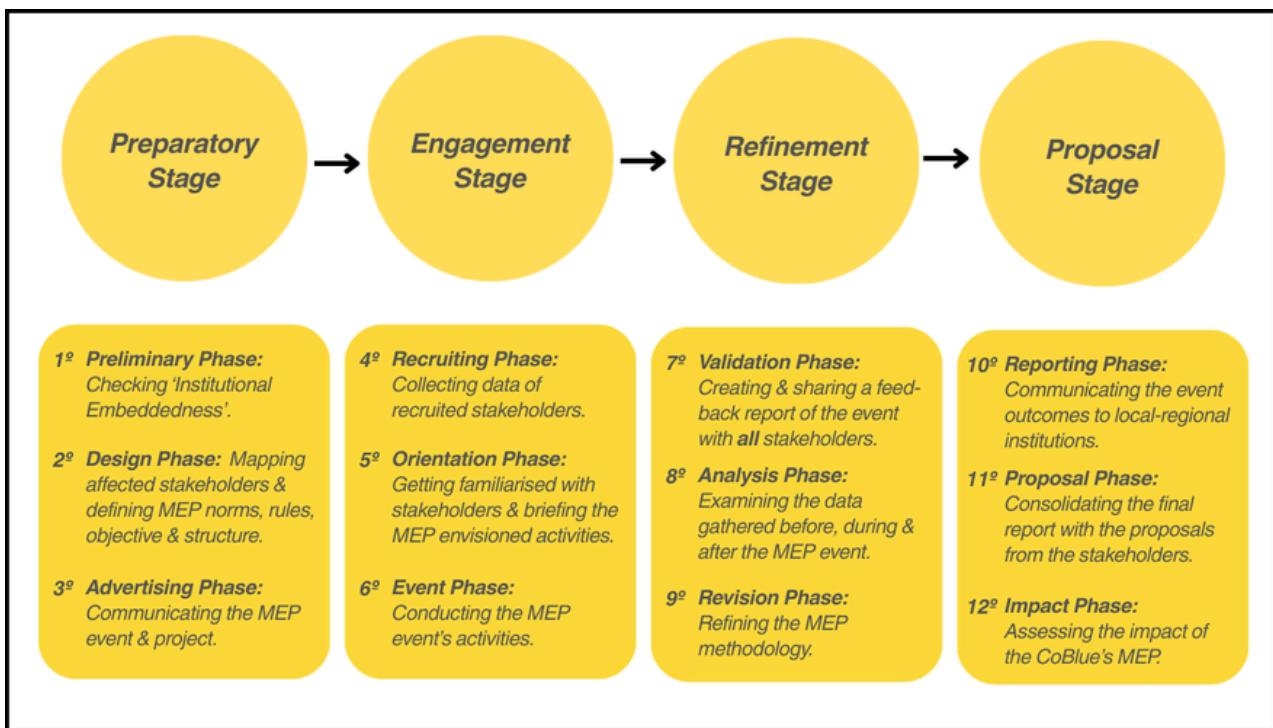
Category	Procedural Dimension	Description
Dependent of the MEP Inclusiveness and Diversity	1. Duration	Time available/needed for conducting all stages of the MEP
	2. Resources	Funding, infrastructure and human capital available for the MEP
	3. Procedural Transparency	Clarity in the communication with stakeholders on the MEP procedures, norms, objectives and expectations
	4. Facilitation Skills	Practitioners' ability to design, understand, execute, coordinate, assess, and synthesise the MEP
	5. Reach of Engagement	Intensity and frequency of the stakeholders' engagement
	6. Procedural Inclusiveness	Conditions for a more horizontal and equal participation in the MEP between different types of stakeholders
Independent of the MEP Inclusiveness and Diversity	7. Institutional Embeddedness	Readiness and willingness of private and public organisations and other decision-makers to accept/use the MEP outcomes
	8. Impact	Practitioners' exploitation of the MEP results
	9. Objective Alignment	Practitioners definition of the MEP objective/intentions

2. Methodology

2. Methodology

Although there is no single approach for nourishing active engagement processes, this section examines the fundamental structure for designing and conducting a MEP. Here, we conceptualise a standard MEP methodology, comprising four stages and twelve phases (Figure 1), that can be adjusted and adapted according to the procedural dimensions restricting or facilitating the implementation of the process.

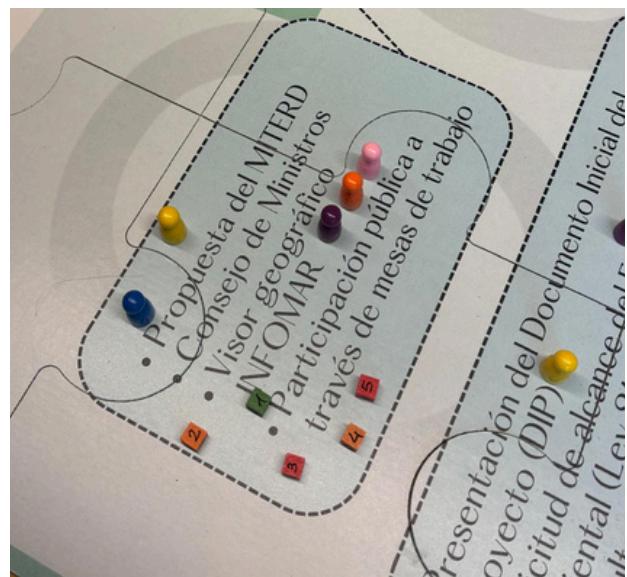
Figure 2: Framework containing the sequence of stages and phases of a standard MEP methodology.



The **Preparatory Stage** contains the initial phases to prepare and assemble the necessary conditions for the MEP. Ideally, the stage begins with the *Preliminary Phase*, in which MEP facilitators must make the first contact with local or regional decision-makers in charge of addressing the targeted problem. Therefore, this crucial phase allows facilitators to assess the degree of commitment and capacity of such authorities to assimilate and integrate the MEP and its outcomes. Thus, it can guide facilitators in determining the more appropriate scope of objectives, norms, rules and structure in the *Design Phase*. In the last part of this stage, the *Advertising Phase* starts communicating about the MEP to the local communities, briefly explaining its purpose and the different ways stakeholders could be contributing to the co-creation of solutions and proposals.

The **Engagement Stage** summarises the phases of direct contact with stakeholders who might take part in the MEP. The *Recruiting Phase* is the moment when facilitators should begin collecting data of the recruited stakeholders, and filtering out any stakeholder who might be detrimental to the development of the MEP. It is a phase dedicated to establishing an ideal group of stakeholders in which all of them can actively and equally contribute to the MEP phases without overpowering the perspective and contribution of others. Later on, the *Orientation Phase* involves getting closer and familiarising with the participants through online meetings, while detailing the next activities planned for the MEP. It might be determinant for increasing the intensity of the stakeholders' engagement in the *Event Phase*. As previously mentioned, the *Event Phase* can take different modalities (e.g., forums, assemblies, workshops) and frequencies (e.g., a single time, monthly, once a year) to be determined by the MEP facilitators, ideally bearing in mind the feasibility of the selected approach. The approach for the engagement activities could benefit significantly from creative and interactive dynamics that facilitate a fair and cooperative debate of the addressed problem. For instance, the use of cards, board games, drawings, poetry and other techniques could facilitate the interaction between stakeholders, maintain the interest of participants and guarantee an even opportunity for communicating and expressing their thoughts and perspectives (Figures 2 and 3).

Figures 2 and 3: Use of cards and post-its (left) and board game (right) to illustrate the stakeholders' perspectives, concerns and proposed ideals regarding the planning and implementation of offshore wind farms, the main issue addressed in the CoBlue MEP.



The CoBlue Event Phase consisted of a workshop with 3 different encounters: two in-person meetings in which the problems were presented and debated in different dynamics, and one online meeting to present and discuss the outcomes after the Engagement Stage concludes. Throughout the encounters, facilitators made use of different ice-breaking activities to ensure that the stakeholders were comfortable participating.

The **Refinement Stage** consists of phases for improving the MEP methodology and assessing and validating the outcomes of the previous stages with other key actors that might not have directly participated in the MEP yet. The *Validation Phase* involves creating a feedback report to be shared with relevant stakeholders who were absent in the **Engagement Stage**. It allows facilitators to showcase the MEP progress to the decision-makers contacted in the *Preliminary Phase* and offers a new opportunity to include more perspectives from other societal groups who, for instance, were reluctant to engage in the MEP. The *Analysis Phase* refers to the assessment of all data collected previous, during and after the *Event Phase*, being transversal to all stages, and crucial for improving the exploitation of the outcomes co-produced in the MEP. It is also valuable for informing where the MEP methodology could be enhanced in the *Revision Phase*.

The **Proposal Stage** contains the last phases of the MEP, but does not necessarily represent the end of the process, as the methodology could be continuously replicated, either addressing the same problem, a related issue or a completely new one. It consists of phases for improving the MEP methodology and validating the preliminary outcomes of the previous stages with other key actors that might not have directly participated in the MEP yet. The *Reporting Phase* represents the communication of the MEP outcomes to the local and regional authorities. The *Proposal Phase* consists of the final activities to consolidate the final proposals, which could be presented in different formats (e.g., meetings, reports, guidelines, workshops). And the *Impact Phase* is the activities to evaluate the overall contribution of the MEP to the local community (including the participants) and decision-makers. It comprises analysing how the MEP objectives were met.

3. Recommendations



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This section further details the nine Procedural Dimensions previously mentioned, highlighting how they can be influential for the development of MEPs. Later, we offer recommendations for how practitioners should consider such dimensions according to the level of Inclusiveness and Diversity adequate for either simpler or more complex MEPs. For instance, engaging in a complex problem with a small amount of resources can lead to detrimental effects, and it is therefore important to take measures to prevent such effects. The following recommendations should therefore be considered with great care in such cases.

Duration

In general, having a more generous timeframe can help practitioners to work further on all stages of the MEP. For instance, it might allow practitioners to invite and engage more stakeholders or deepen the dialogue with the local authorities and the overall community in the recruitment and validation phases. Moreover, a prolonged MEP could provide sufficient time for a more detailed assessment of the stakeholders' perspectives, a continuous refinement of the methodology (as unexpected procedural challenges can emerge), and an extended monitoring of the MEP impacts.

- The dimension has a transversal influence on all phases.
- **Recommendation:** Shorter durations can be sufficient for conducting simpler MEPs, as they comprise lower levels of inclusivity and diversity, while a longer timeframe could benefit MEPs addressing harder and more complex challenges and involving a broader range of societal groups and activities.

Resource(s)

The financial and non-monetary support can be equally relevant to the development of a MEP suitable for the difficulty of the addressed problem. Allocating the right amount of assistance for advertising the initiative, hiring and preparing practitioners, and finding space for the activities becomes a fundamental concern for the MEP feasibility, especially considering that public funding is often limited.

- The dimension has a transversal influence on all phases.
- **Recommendation:** Simpler and more straightforward MEPs could be sustained with reduced resources. On the other hand, having extra funding, infrastructure, or human capital could aid in the development and execution of more detailed and elaborate MEPs, especially considering they would potentially demand more time to be concluded.

Procedural transparency

A clear stakeholders' understanding of the MEP design, objectives, norms, and expectations is fundamental for the overall development and conduction of the proposed activities.

- The dimension is more relevant for the Preliminary, Advertising, Orientation, and Validation phases.
- **Recommendation:** In a simple and more straightforward MEP, it would be easier to guarantee a clear stakeholders' understanding of the norms, rules, objectives and expectations for each part of the designed approach. For MEPs comprising more citizens and activities, the methodology would become more complex. Thus, additional caution and efforts would be needed to properly explain the MEP in a way that all participants, regardless of their cognitive capacities, can comprehend the purpose of the activities and their role in them.

Facilitation skills

The level of training of practitioners is determinant for designing, analysing and ensuring a MEP method that enables a more ample, horizontal and equal participation in the different phases/stages.

- The dimension has a transversal influence on all stages.
- **Recommendation:** Increasing the inclusiveness and diversity in MEPs will likely demand more capacity building for practitioners as they will need to deal with a broader set of activities and stakeholders. On the other hand, simpler MEPs addressing more straightforward issues might be conducted without a substantial use of time and resources to train and prepare MEP facilitators, as the overall methodology could be less elaborate and detailed.

Reach of engagement

The intensity and frequency of engagement among the different stakeholders and between them and the facilitators can play a determinant factor in promoting a more inclusive and diverse MEP. Thus, developing creative and dynamic approaches for the different activities can help promote a more active and consistent participation, support a better cognition of the shared knowledge and perspective and create a long-lasting impact on the participants.

- This dimension exercises greater influence in Advertising, Orientation, Event and Validation phases.
- **Recommendation:** MEPs aiming at a more inclusive and diverse approach must strive for more continuous, exciting and dynamic activities during the phases in which the stakeholders are more directly involved. Using different creative and interactive techniques (for instance, the ones used in the CoBlue MEP) can improve the quality and frequency of such engagements by keeping the participants interested through the activities, encouraging them to interact with other participants and providing them with more inclusive and equitable means of communication in the debates.

Procedural inclusiveness

Creating an inclusive environment during the MEP is fundamental to guarantee that all stakeholders are offered an equal and fair opportunity to express their perspectives and proposals for resolving the targeted issue. Therefore, a more inclusive and inviting MEP has to provide a set of procedures capable of considering the different communication and cognitive skills of invited participants.

- This dimension has a greater influence on the Design, Orientation, Event, and Validation phases.
- **Recommendation:** MEPs striving for a more inclusive and diverse methodology must provide a set of procedures and tools for accommodating a wider number of participants with a varying range of communication and cognitive skills. In simpler MEPs, such a procedural consideration might not be as urgent as the number and variety of societal groups involved are considerably lower.

Institutional embeddedness

Independent of the inclusiveness and diversity envisioned for the method, Institutional Embeddedness describes the likelihood of governments and key decision-makers comprehending, validating and integrating the outcomes of the MEPs.

- This dimension expresses a greater influence on the Preliminary, Design, Validation and Reporting phases.
- **General Recommendation:** Practitioners must constantly dialogue with key institutions & organisations to examine and work on their willingness and readiness for acceptance and integration of the potential MEP outcomes. Thus, the more ambitious the MEP objectives are, the greater are the practitioners' efforts to guarantee that the process generates the desired impacts in the institutional governance. Furthermore, in some cases, it might be better to reduce the scope and ambition of the objectives, as there is not sufficient institutional embeddedness to make such aspirations minimally acceptable. However, the MEP can be used precisely to ignite some changes at the institutional level, showing decision-makers that more can be done with more participatory approaches.

Impact

The MEP impact can be perceived as the extent of outcomes and contributions to the objectives determined at the beginning of the process. There is a wide range of impacts that can be produced during and after MEP. They can generate valuable documentation (e.g., reports, guidelines, or recommendations) on the problem being addressed or even produce outcomes that go beyond the problematic issue and promote changes in the policy-making process, reflecting on the practices, institutional shift, community empowerment, awareness raising, and knowledge exchange. All these outputs are relevant to consolidate the potential of MEPs in improving or transforming the current decision-making approaches.

- This dimension has a greater influence on the Preliminary, Design, Analysis, Proposal and Impact phases.
- **Recommendation:** The impact measurement is directly dependent on the quality and quantity of data collection, assessment and synthesis throughout all MEP phases. By creating a continuous evaluation, it is possible to interpret and explain the MEP impacts on stakeholders' perspective on the problem (or the MEP itself), previous, during and after their participation. Furthermore, although such impact evaluations can be difficult to grasp, they can be examined and correlated with the accomplishment of the objectives defined in the preparatory and design phases.

Objective alignment

Any MEP must align their intended objectives with the social, economic and political conditions that can either leverage or limit the impacts of the MEP outcomes.

- This dimension has a greater influence on the Design, Validation and Impact phases.
- **Recommendation:** Practitioners must consider the degree of Institutional Embeddedness and active civic culture in the social and political context in which they are developing a MEP. Ambitious targets in contexts where there is a limited institutional and community support or interest in the problem or the MEPs are likely to result in unfulfilled expectations for both practitioners and participants. Therefore, properly aligning the MEP objectives and the feasibility of proposals might support a positive perception of citizen engagement processes.

4. Final remarks

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Using the CoBlue project as a laboratory for the identification and analysis of procedures, it was possible to articulate a set of recommendations that were presented above in a systematic form. Moreover, CoBlue's MEP design offered a solid basis for defining a standard MEP methodology that could offer opportunities throughout its stages for adjustment, either promoting or restricting the inclusiveness and diversity of participants and their stances on the problem. This procedural flexibility allows other facilitators and practitioners to adjust their envisioned MEP to potential foreseen or unexpected barriers emerging prior, during and after the activities.

Furthermore, by considering the procedural dimensions aforementioned, it is possible to establish a more grounded approach for designing the MEP methodology. While creating new projects to address societal and environmental problems, the differences between the ideal and feasible MEP are likely to be noticeable as time, resources, institutional embeddedness and other conditions for such processes are often at insufficient levels. However, working on a complex problem and aiding affected communities might first comprise setting more reasonable initial targets in order to achieve greater social and institutional support in the long term. Thus, gradual accomplishments might not immediately and significantly solve or mitigate the consequences of a complex problem, but they can still produce a visible impact on the local context.

Therefore, even if the available conditions are not enough for developing the methodology that most efficiently addresses the problem, MEPs should still be encouraged. They can still draw attention to the concerning issue, raise awareness on the potential of citizen engagement and even stir institutionalisation of alternative decision-making approaches.

Currently, the CoBlue team continues to approach the local and regional institutions planning the offshore wind farm projects in Galicia, Spain, to promote the outcomes growing from the MEP. It is still unclear if the MEP will achieve a certain degree of institutionalisation in the long run. However, initial and posterior dialogues have helped push forward the Institutional Embeddedness in the sociopolitical context. Moreover, their MEP succeeded in creating an active and holistic deliberation that, for most participants, represented a more democratic decision-making practice.

