

# Community Mobilisation Through Translation: A Sustainable Framework for Participatory Planning

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## Abstract

Participatory planning in neighbourhood regeneration faces challenges, including engagement difficulties, consensus-building, implementation complexities, and expectation management. This article investigates participatory planning processes aimed at addressing the aforementioned challenges in Bijiang Village, China. Using the framework of translation, it explores how this approach facilitates community mobilisation and engagement to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically focusing on fostering sustainable communities. Translation theory comprises four moments: problematisation, interessement, enrolment, and mobilisation. The empirical studies demonstrate that these moments are dynamic and iterative. Initial problem framing, focused on historical landscapes, was unclear at first but became more defined through interest assignment, recruitment, and mobilisation. The interessement phase identifies stakeholders with shared concerns and values, empowering them early in the decision-making process. Enrolment effectively expanded participation by mobilising key stakeholders, such as clan elders and parents, through context-specific social networks and social ecology. This approach ensures that planning outcomes reflect community values and priorities. Mobilisation in Bijiang expanded participation, turned consensus into action, and fostered collective ownership and unity. Workshops, exhibitions, and focus groups translated public issues into defined community planning problems, facilitating the co-construction of solutions. These participatory methods made complex planning terms accessible, fostering deeper community involvement. The cyclical nature of problem framing and consensus-building in Bijiang Village underscores the importance of local socio-cultural context in rural regeneration. Translation theory offers a robust framework for managing complexities in participatory community planning.

It demonstrates how continuous negotiation and realignment of interests through translation address immediate concerns and foster long-term engagement, contributing to sustainable development.

### Keywords

community mobilisation; cultural heritage; participatory planning; problem framing; sustainable regeneration; translation

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## 1. Introduction

Participatory planning has become an essential approach in urban regeneration, particularly in fostering sustainable community development that aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This approach emphasises the active involvement of community members in the planning and decision-making processes, aiming to create more inclusive, equitable, and culturally sensitive urban environments. Despite its potential, participatory planning encounters numerous challenges, such as difficulties in engagement, complexities in consensus-building, implementation hurdles, and managing expectations (Arnstein, 1969; Healey, 1997). In particular, in the process of community mobilisation, issues such as low enthusiasm and outdated, monotonous participation forms have emerged. Motivation to participate has long been a central focus of scholarly exploration and research. However, in practical application, there has been insufficient research on how to stimulate community mobilisation and how different participation motivations interact and evolve in practice. Additionally, scholars have observed that participatory planning often emphasises techno-centric approaches, overlooking essential social and cultural dimensions needed for sustainable development (Afzalan & Muller, 2018). A significant gap remains in understanding how participatory planning can effectively harness community resources and local ecosystems to drive community mobilisation, especially in rural or semi-rural areas experiencing rapid urbanisation.

The concept of translation, derived from actor-network theory, offers a valuable lens through which to analyse participatory planning. Translation, as developed by Callon (1986) and Latour (2005), refers to the process through which actors (human and non-human) negotiate, align, and redefine their interests to achieve collective goals. Translation involves the dynamic negotiation, alignment, and transformation of interests among actors within a network (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005). This perspective highlights the iterative and cyclical nature of aligning diverse interests, making it particularly relevant for understanding the complexities of community mobilisation in urban regeneration. While the concept of translation has been explored across various contexts (MacCallum, 2008), its application within participatory planning for urban regeneration remains insufficiently examined.

This research aims to bridge these gaps by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of participatory planning in addressing sustainable development challenges, with a specific focus on the role of translation in community mobilisation. The study is guided by the following research questions: How can participatory planning effectively mobilise community resources to enhance engagement in neighbourhood regeneration initiatives? How does the application of translation theory in participatory planning facilitate collaborative problem framing and the co-construction of strategies among diverse stakeholders? In what ways does the integration of local history and cultural heritage into participatory planning influence community mobilisation and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs?

Bijiang Village in Foshan City, South China, serves as a good exemplary case for examining the role of participatory planning within a rapidly urbanising rural context. Historically a traditional water town, Bijiang faces several notable challenges, including initially low community engagement, difficulty in consensus-building across diverse stakeholder groups, and balancing historical preservation with the demands of urbanisation. Additionally, the village contends with practical issues like traffic congestion and environmental concerns tied to the river channel's restoration. These challenges make Bijiang an ideal setting to explore how participatory planning, through the four moments of translation, can effectively engage and align stakeholders around key focus areas: historical landscape restoration, traffic management, and river channel revitalisation. Problematisation framed these issues around shared community concerns, interessement aligned stakeholder interests to foster cooperative relationships, enrolment expanded engagement via local social networks, and mobilisation solidified community commitment, creating inclusive and sustainable outcomes. Bijiang's case provides insight into how participatory planning, grounded in translation theory, can address the complex dynamics of sustainable rural-urban development.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: a research review focusing on participatory planning and community mobilisation in urban regeneration from the lens of translation; an introduction to the research framework of translation; a presentation of the empirical studies; an analysis and discussion based on these studies; and a concluding section.

## 2. Research Review: Participatory Planning and Community Mobilisation Through the Lens of Translation

Participatory planning has gained importance in urban regeneration by involving local communities in decision-making to ensure that development projects meet residents' needs and aspirations. In recent years, participatory planning in China has gained significant attention, particularly in the context of rapid urbanisation and the need for sustainable regeneration. The benefits of participatory planning include fostering social cohesion, community empowerment, and enhancing the legitimacy and sustainability of urban projects (Forester, 1999; Innes & Booher, 2004; Roberts, 2004; Tan et al., 2023). By leveraging local knowledge, participatory planning also enables more context-specific solutions (Seo, 2022; Seydel & Huning, 2022). However, recent scholarly debates emphasise the unique challenges in adapting participatory methods within China's existing governance structures (Zhou, 2018), which often require integration with local cultural and social dynamics for effectiveness (Cao et al., 2021).

One of the main challenges in participatory planning is effective community mobilisation. Mobilisation involves strengthening communal bonds and enhancing collective action, addressing local issues that resonate with daily community experiences (Moulaert et al., 2010; Putnam, 2000; Sampson, 2012). Key strategies for effective mobilisation include leveraging local history and culture, establishing inclusive decision-making frameworks, and ensuring transparency in communication. Research shows that local leaders and organisations are instrumental in bridging gaps between residents and policymakers, an essential element in mobilising communities for urban planning (Tan & Altrock, 2016). Yet, participatory planning faces challenges, particularly in mobilising diverse community actors. Engagement levels can remain low due to logistical, socio-economic, and cultural barriers between planners and local communities (Burby, 2003; Li et al., 2020; Lin, 2023). One solution lies in the framework and theory of translation, which is

rooted in actor-network theory and focuses on dynamic, iterative negotiation and interest alignment, addressing the critical issue of sustaining long-term community involvement.

The concept of translation highlights negotiation and alignment among actors within a network, underscoring the fluid and contingent nature of social interactions (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005). The framework of translation provides a practical lens for understanding and navigating the complexities of community engagement in urban regeneration, offering a method to address issues of power imbalances, particularly between top-down institutional actors and grassroots communities (Booher & Innes, 2002). In addressing power dynamics, translation emphasises interessement and enrolment, encouraging a continuous renegotiation and alignment of interests. Mungai and Van Belle (2018) highlight translation's potential in offering an inclusive approach to consensus-building, aligning well with the dynamic processes essential in participatory planning.

Implementing participatory plans also encounters challenges from bureaucratic resistance (Arnstein, 1969) and managing high community expectations for immediate improvements. Urban regeneration, typically a gradual process, requires sustained momentum, especially in rapidly urbanising areas where local social networks may not be fully integrated with formal planning systems (Healey, 2006). This gap underscores the need to bridge technical solutions with the social and cultural dynamics essential for sustainable development (Caldwell et al., 2021). Translation theory offers a framework for aligning diverse interests and fostering adaptive collaboration, enabling planners to navigate bureaucratic constraints while maintaining community engagement over time.

Another significant research gap in participatory planning is the integration of local cultural heritage and history. Urban regeneration often prioritises technical solutions, leading to community disengagement. Translation theory, through incorporating non-human actors, such as cultural artefacts and historical narratives, offers a way to preserve cultural identity within regeneration efforts, aligning with debates on culturally sensitive planning. This approach bridges modern planning strategies with traditional community values, fostering inclusivity (Rui, 2019).

Recent studies also advocate for innovative participatory tools such as digital platforms and social media to broaden engagement (Lin, 2022). While tech-based approaches are beneficial, they need to be balanced with localised mobilisation strategies that leverage social capital and cultural resources (Afzalan & Muller, 2018). This integrated approach is especially relevant for rural or semi-rural areas facing rapid urbanisation, offering valuable insights for communities seeking sustainable development through participatory planning. Translation theory, therefore, provides a flexible and valuable framework for managing the dynamic interactions essential to successful participatory planning (Rui, 2019).

In conclusion, while participatory planning holds potential for inclusive urban development, overcoming challenges such as power imbalances, cultural barriers, and logistical issues requires a robust theoretical framework. Translation, with its emphasis on negotiation, alignment, and adaptation, offers a robust framework for addressing and understanding these challenges. It supports sustainable outcomes in urban regeneration while fostering a culturally integrated approach to community engagement.

### 3. Research Framework and Case Study

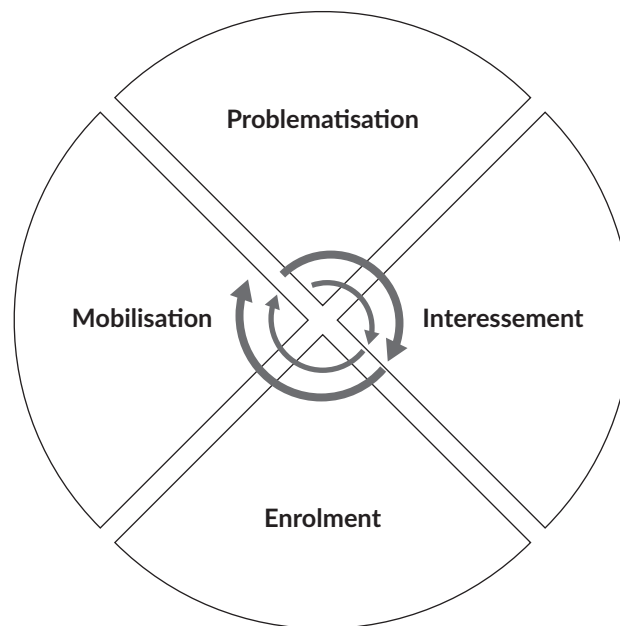
#### 3.1. Research Framework: Translation

Translation comprises four key moments and stages: problematisation, interessement, enrolment, and mobilisation (Callon, 1986). The first stage of translation, problematisation, involves defining core issues in a way that resonates with diverse actors, effectively framing the problem (Tan & Altröck, 2016). Interessement follows, employing strategies to engage actors and recruit them as network members. In the subsequent stage, enrolment, actors formally commit to specific roles, ensuring their active participation. Finally, mobilisation establishes spokespersons within the network, sustaining its stable operation and addressing any dissent that arises. Among these stages, problematisation is particularly essential as it sets the foundation for collaborative problem framing. Consensus on problem framing is essential for collective action and effective strategy framing to proceed. Mobilisation, as the core stage of translation, underscores the importance of consolidating and stabilizing the network of actors to ensure the implementation and sustainability of the planned initiatives. This focus aligns with the goals of participatory planning to empower communities and foster long-term engagement and ownership of the regeneration projects (Callon, 1986).

Translation processes are, at their core, social interactions that facilitate both problem and strategy framing. The framework of translation's moments offer insights into how actors are brought into alignment within a network, how interests are negotiated and stabilized, and how collective action is mobilised. Translation provides a framework for identifying and resolving conflicts that arise during participatory planning. By focusing on the iterative negotiation and realignment of interests, translation provides tools for identifying and resolving centres of controversy where stakeholders' frames of reference may conflict.

Furthermore, these four moments and stages of translation are not linear in their development. Bryson et al. (2013) propose that public participation is a cyclical and dynamic process. Therefore, this study combines Callon's (1986) four key moments with Bryson et al.'s perspective on the cyclical nature of public participation, proposing a research framework for "translation" based on a spiral cyclic structure (see Figure 1). The process of translation begins with problematisation, and returns to redefining the problem when encountering dissent, rather than following a linear structure where dissent leads to a halt. These moments reflect the iterative and cyclical nature of aligning diverse interests within a network, making it a suitable framework for understanding the complexities of participatory planning. The translation framework offers insights into how consensus is formed through the iterative process of aligning interests. The Bijiang case study shows that consensus is not achieved in a linear way but through continuous renegotiation, where different actors redefine their roles and goals in response to ongoing dialogue and engagement.

By viewing participatory planning through the lens of translation, we can better understand the roles and influences of various actors within the planning network. This approach highlights the importance of recognising and addressing the interests and power dynamics of different stakeholders, facilitating more effective and inclusive engagement (Latour, 2005). The empirical analysis of Bijiang Village will be conducted using the four key moments of translation, detailing the specific processes of communication, mobilisation, and translation. The four moments are crucial in understanding how community mobilisation unfolds.



**Figure 1.** Processes of community translation. Source: Adapted from Bryson et al. (2013) and Callon (1986).

### 3.2. Case Study: Bijiang Village in Foshan

Bijiang Village, located in Shunde District, Foshan, Guangdong Province, was historically one of the four major market towns of Shunde during the Ming and Qing dynasties. It was known for its convenient waterway transportation, thriving commerce and industry, and abundance of talents. The village boasts a wealth of residential gardens and ancestral halls. In 2005, Bijiang Village was recognised as a Chinese Historic Cultural Village. In December 2018, with special funding from the Guangdong Desheng Community Charity Foundation’s Harmony Community Plan – Community Development Direction, the Bijiang Community Residents Committee, in collaboration with Guangzhou Xiangcheng Architecture Company, Guangzhou FAAN NGOK Community Design Centre, and Shunde Yixin Social Work, initiated the Bijiang Community Regeneration Project.

The case study of Bijiang Village provides a practical illustration of the synergies between translation and participatory planning. Historically a traditional water town, Bijiang has faced the pressures of modernisation and sustainable regeneration. Bijiang Village, officially designated as a Chinese Traditional Village in 2012, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage. However, it faces several challenges, including the need for spatial quality improvement, inadequate infrastructure, fading community memory and historical landscapes, and a lack of cohesive village aesthetics. The village has employed participatory planning methods, including workshops and public exhibitions, to engage the community in the regeneration process since 2019. By emphasising local memories and historical landscapes, participatory planning in Bijiang has reignited community involvement, strengthened communal bonds, and promoted intergenerational communication and cultural preservation.

Bijiang Village was chosen as the case study for two main reasons. Firstly, as a traditional rural village, Bijiang still retains strong clan and geographically rooted social networks. At the same time, it is currently undergoing a process of rural urbanisation, with a migrant population four times larger than that of local

residents, underscoring the critical need for fostering social cohesion. Therefore, Bijiang represents a typical example of a rural community transitioning to an urban community, where both traditional and modern social relationships coexist. This dual nature of social relationships in Bijiang—traditional clan ties and modern individualism—provides a rich context for exploring how different social motivations are activated and transformed through the process of community participation. Secondly, viewed through the lens of translation theory, Bijiang’s participatory planning process unfolds as a sequence of negotiations and alignments among diverse stakeholders, including residents, clan elders, and social organisations. The moments of problematisation, interestment, enrolment, and mobilisation are clearly reflected as the community collaboratively identified key issues, aligned interests, and consolidated their efforts towards sustainable development goals.

One of the authors, who serves both as the head of the FAAN NGOK Community Design Centre and as a community planner affiliated with Guangzhou Xiangcheng Architecture Company, has been actively leading the regeneration planning and implementation process for Bijiang Village since 2019. In her dual role as a researcher on participatory planning through the lens of translation (Rui, 2019) and as a practitioner of collaborative planning, she has gained deep insights into the participatory process through direct engagement with multiple stakeholders. This involvement has enabled her to apply the translation framework effectively in practice, enhancing collaborative outcomes. Her role in participant observation in Bijiang Village has allowed this study to gather substantial firsthand data and observational findings. From January to July 2019, she hosted monthly workshops with villagers to discuss the restoration of ancestral temples with local elders; in July, she organised a cultural history exhibition that attracted around 500 visitors and collected over 300 valuable pieces of feedback. Beginning in September 2019, she concentrated on transportation issues, conducting three workshops with parent volunteers, the neighbourhood committee, local schools, and traffic police. Through this process, she conducted interviews with 56 individuals and collected 886 completed questionnaires. In April and May 2021, the author organised and participated in four street interviews around the main village street’s restoration scope, gathering 228 responses. She subsequently held joint meetings with the neighbourhood committee and led three resident workshops discussing issues like transportation, waste management, and participatory design for the restoration. This series of in-depth participatory research activities formed a solid foundation for data collection in the community regeneration planning, ensuring that community needs were comprehensively and authentically represented.

## 4. Translation Processes in Bijiang Village’s Participatory Planning

### 4.1. *Leveraging Historical Landscapes to Mobilise Participation*

As urbanisation reshaped Bijiang Village, its once-vibrant ancestral halls and scenic water town became relics of the past, remembered only in the nostalgia of its residents. However, the strong kinship ties and remaining ancestral halls continued to serve as vital public spaces, particularly for the elderly. The initial efforts to mobilise community participation in Bijiang’s regeneration project hinged on these cultural and historical connections. The ancestral halls, as non-human actors, played a critical role in anchoring the project’s vision, providing both a symbolic and physical focal point for community efforts.



#### 4.1.1. Problematisation: Framing History as a Common Ground

Initially, community planners encountered challenges in engaging the elderly in discussions about Bijiang's future. Directly addressing community issues yielded limited interest. However, a common thread emerged: shared memories and pride in the village's historical culture. Recognising this, planners identified the elderly gathered in the ancestral halls as pivotal participants in the initial stage of community engagement. Their deep interest in and shared experiences of Bijiang's "old scenes" became a unifying topic to launch community rejuvenation. Consequently, the loss of historic landscapes was problematised as a shared concern, driving community engagement and defining the project's trajectory. The ancestral halls, rich with memories, served as both symbolic and practical starting points for these discussions.

#### 4.1.2. Interessement: Engaging the Elders and Expanding the Network

The next stage, interessement, involved leveraging the enthusiasm of the elderly residents who frequently gathered in the ancestral halls. These elders were emotionally invested in Bijiang's history, recalling the "old scenes" with nostalgia. Community planners strategically chose the ancestral halls and their occupants as core actors in the initial phase of community participation. The respected elders, who carried significant social influence, were enlisted as recruiters—key mediators who used their kinship networks to engage younger generations and more distant clan members. By aligning the elders' interests with the project goals, the planners secured their support, thus expanding the network from individuals to larger family and clan-based communities. This process of interessement involved negotiating roles within the actor-network: the planners, as facilitators, and the elders, as advocates and recruiters. Together, they co-constructed a shared narrative of restoration and preservation that drew in wider community participation. Participatory workshops, including group oral history sessions, were held to reconcile differing memories and rectify discrepancies (see Figure 2). This phase not only enhanced the accuracy of historical knowledge but also built a sense of collective ownership over the project, emphasising the negotiation of interests.



**Figure 2.** Oral history of the lost Su Clan Ancestral Hall.



#### 4.1.3. Enrolment: Simplifying the Technical to Broaden Participation

Enrolment, the third stage in the translation framework, focuses on formalising roles and ensuring that actors remain committed to the network. The planners knew that complex technical planning drawings would alienate the local community, so they opted for models that depicted the ancestral halls and their surroundings. These models were tangible, visually engaging, and accessible to all, allowing residents to easily understand the planning process. By lowering the threshold for participation and using visual tools, the planners ensured that more residents felt empowered to contribute to the project. The restoration of five key ancestral halls and their historical elements was a crucial outcome of this phase. The restoration not only represented physical changes in the village but also served as a visible demonstration of the community's collective effort and shared identity. The successful enrolment of these historical elements as non-human actors within the network—representing both cultural heritage and the future vision of the village—further solidified the project's foundation.

#### 4.1.4. Mobilisation: Expanding Participation and Sustaining Engagement

The final stage, mobilisation, focused on expanding participation beyond the initial actors and maintaining engagement through public exhibitions and feedback mechanisms. The “Bijiang Memories and Community Vision” exhibition served as a catalyst for broader community involvement. By placing the exhibition in highly frequented public spaces such as markets and parks, the planners ensured that it would reach diverse segments of the population, including those who had not previously participated in the workshops. The exhibition was designed with input-based interaction, such as displaying historical photos and models, and output-based interaction for collecting community stories and visions (see Figure 3). These interactive elements helped mobilise new actors—families, children, and residents who had not been involved before—further expanding the actor-network. The planners skilfully combined online and offline tools to collect feedback, allowing for continuous engagement and timely responses to residents' concerns. The exhibition became a platform where residents could envision future possibilities, providing a space for “resonance” and “dissent,” as they reflected on their current community issues and imagined their future.



**Figure 3.** Children discussing restoration models.

The feedback loop created through public exhibitions and online platforms ensured that participants remained engaged. The publication of collected stories and issues on online public platforms reinforced a sense of ownership and transparency, allowing residents to feel that their contributions were valued and acted upon. This sustained engagement highlights the successful mobilisation of a broad and inclusive network of actors, transitioning the project from initial mobilisation to ongoing community involvement.

## 4.2. Multi-Stakeholder Consultation on Traffic Issues

Through the initial phase of gathering community stories and concerns, the issue of “traffic congestion and pedestrian safety” emerged as one of the most pressing pain points for Bijiang residents, especially in front of the elementary school. The multi-stakeholder consultation on traffic issues in Bijiang Village demonstrates how translation theory can effectively mobilise and sustain community participation in resolving public issues.

### 4.2.1. Problematization: Framing Traffic Congestion as a Shared Concern

The first stage of translation, problematisation, occurred when community planners and the residents' committee identified traffic congestion and pedestrian safety near the elementary school as a shared public issue that affected the entire community. This framing positioned the issue as a problem that all actors (parents, school staff, residents, and local authorities) had to address collectively to safeguard public and personal interests (see Figure 4). By framing the issue in this way, the planners laid the groundwork for involving a broad network of stakeholders, emphasising how the solution would benefit not only individual families but also the entire community. This initial framing fostered consensus, with the community agreeing that addressing the traffic congestion issue would directly enhance both community well-being and safety. The problematisation stage served as the entry point for community mobilisation, aligning the interests of various actors around a common goal: improving traffic conditions during peak school hours.



Figure 4. Workshop with school and parent volunteers.

#### 4.2.2. Interessement: Recruiting Core Actors and Expanding Participation

Once the issue was framed, the process moved into the interessement phase, where the community planners and the residents' committee mobilised the elementary school as a core actor in the network. The school, with its direct involvement in the traffic situation, became a key partner in addressing the issue. Together, they reached out to other interested groups, such as the traffic police department, local businesses, traffic design experts, teachers, students, and parent volunteers. These actors were recruited based on their shared stake in resolving the problem of traffic congestion and ensuring pedestrian safety. The recruitment of diverse actors demonstrated successful interessement, as the planners strategically aligned these actors' interests with the broader community goal. Each stakeholder brought their unique perspective and expertise to the table, contributing to a multidimensional understanding of the problem. The community workshops held during this phase provided a platform for these actors to voice their concerns, propose solutions, and align their interests (see Figure 5). These workshops were essential in ensuring that the issue of traffic congestion was understood from various perspectives, blending professional insights from traffic designers with local knowledge from residents and parents.



Figure 5. Workshop with police and village committee.

#### 4.2.3. Enrolment: Negotiating Solutions and Addressing Dissent

In the enrolment phase, stakeholders formally committed to specific roles in implementing traffic improvements. During the community workshops, enrolment took place as actors agreed on a set of potential solutions, including the introduction of one-way traffic and the establishment of parent waiting areas. However, disagreements emerged regarding the specifics of the one-way traffic system—whether it should be enforced only during peak hours or all day, and the exact direction of the traffic flow. These dissenting opinions necessitated further negotiation, and the planners skilfully expanded participation to include additional voices. By employing both online and on-site voting, as well as conducting interviews with residents, merchants, and students, the planners broadened the actor-network and ensured broader participation from a diverse range of community members in the decision-making process (see Figure 6). This process of addressing dissent reflects how the translation of interests is not always linear; negotiation and realignment of interests were necessary to achieve consensus on a solution that was acceptable to the majority.



**Figure 6.** Residents' discussion on traffic proposals.

Through these inclusive participatory mechanisms, the planners ensured that the final solution reflected both technical expertise and the lived experiences of community members. The 923 valid responses collected from the surveys and interviews further legitimised the chosen solutions and demonstrated the community's active involvement in the decision-making process.

#### 4.2.4. Mobilisation: Implementing and Sustaining Collaborative Action

The final stage, mobilisation, focused on implementing the agreed-upon traffic solutions and ensuring that the network of actors remained aligned and engaged throughout the process. After the survey results were analysed, the residents' committee, school, and parent volunteer teams collaborated with local authorities to trial the proposed traffic adjustments for one month. This trial period represented a critical step in testing the solutions in real-world conditions and ensuring that they were both practical and effective. The trial period involved coordinated actions between multiple actors: The residents' committee installed traffic signs, the traffic police department enforced the new regulations, and parent volunteers assisted with traffic management during peak hours. The collaborative efforts of these actors resulted in significant improvements to traffic flow and pedestrian safety during the trial, further reinforcing the shared commitment to resolving the issue.

Following the trial's success, the traffic adjustment plan received formal approval from the traffic police department and was permanently implemented. The formal adoption of the plan not only resolved the traffic issue but also enhanced the sense of accomplishment and satisfaction among the participants. This stage illustrates the successful mobilisation of the actor-network, where previously recruited actors continued to support and sustain the traffic management solutions. As a result of this collective action, the student-parent community took on a more active role in maintaining traffic safety, with more parents volunteering for traffic management services. The successful implementation of the traffic plan also strengthened the community's sense of identity and collective responsibility, as residents came to see that safeguarding public interests was synonymous with protecting their personal interests. This shared understanding became a core value of the community, ensuring the sustainability of future participatory actions. The success of the traffic improvement initiative not only resolved the immediate issue but also laid



the groundwork for future participatory efforts, with the community's shared commitment to public safety and collective responsibility serving as a foundation for long-term involvement. By using translation theory as a lens, the traffic issue in Bijiang Village is revealed as more than just a technical problem; it is a socially negotiated and collectively owned process, where various actors—human and non-human—collaborate to achieve a shared goal.

### **4.3. Further Community Collective Action: Revival of the River Channel**

The successful resolution of the traffic congestion issue in 2021 sparked a renewed collective consciousness in Bijiang Village. Residents who had previously disengaged from public matters began to actively participate in addressing community issues. This momentum led to significant community-driven initiatives, such as the revival of the central street river channel.

#### **4.3.1. Problematism: Defining the River Revival as a Public Priority**

The revival of Bijiang's central street river channel had long been a topic of community discussion. Historically, the river was a significant feature of the village's landscape, but it was covered and converted into a road due to environmental and sanitation concerns in the late 1990s. With Bijiang's designation as a Historic Cultural Village in 2005 and Traditional Chinese Village in 2012, interest in reviving the river resurfaced. The river's restoration became a public issue, and in 2022, the community embarked on participatory consultations to frame this issue. In this phase of problematization, the community planners and residents collectively identified the revival of the river as a shared goal. However, it was not without challenges—concerns over parking, traffic safety, sanitation, and structural safety became significant barriers to achieving consensus. By framing these concerns as essential elements that needed to be addressed, the planners effectively positioned the revival of the river as a project that required collaborative solutions to succeed.

#### **4.3.2. Interessement: Mobilising Stakeholders and Addressing Concerns**

Following the initial problematization, the planners moved into the interessement phase, where they worked to engage a broad range of stakeholders. The consultations focused on both supporters and dissenters, with the goal of aligning diverse interests. Public activities, including four rounds of surveys, were held to gather community input. A total of 267 people participated in these surveys, with varying opinions: 33% supported the revival, 23.4% opposed it, and 43.6% believed in conditional revival (see Figure 7). The objections primarily centred on practical issues such as parking, environmental sanitation, and post-revival safety. Through this process of interessement, the planners mobilised key actors—local residents, business owners, and technical experts—by addressing their concerns. For example, conditional supporters and dissenters voiced apprehensions about traffic safety and sanitation post-revival. By engaging these stakeholders in discussions and offering solutions, such as expanding parking facilities and ensuring sewage interception, the planners succeeded in aligning interests (see Figure 8). These practical solutions made the project more appealing to those who were initially hesitant, effectively bringing them into the network of participants.



**Figure 7.** River channel revitalisation proposal voting.



**Figure 8.** River channel model and issues collection.

#### 4.3.3. Enrolment: Negotiating and Formalising Solutions

The enrolment phase involved formalising the roles of different stakeholders and solidifying their commitment to the river revival project (see Figure 9). Through multiple rounds of communication, the community collectively agreed on several key conditions for the project's success: Parking facilities needed to be built before the revival to prevent further congestion; the river channel had to be widened, with the retention of a fire safety passage ensured; and sewage interception and water management were essential to maintaining the river's cleanliness after the revival. By addressing these concerns, the planners were able to secure the commitment of various actors. The residents and technical experts formally accepted their roles in overseeing specific aspects of the project, such as designing the parking facilities and ensuring water sanitation. This formalisation of roles represents successful enrolment, as the actors became fully engaged in the project and aligned their interests with the broader goals of community revitalisation.





**Figure 9.** Workshop on river channel revitalisation.

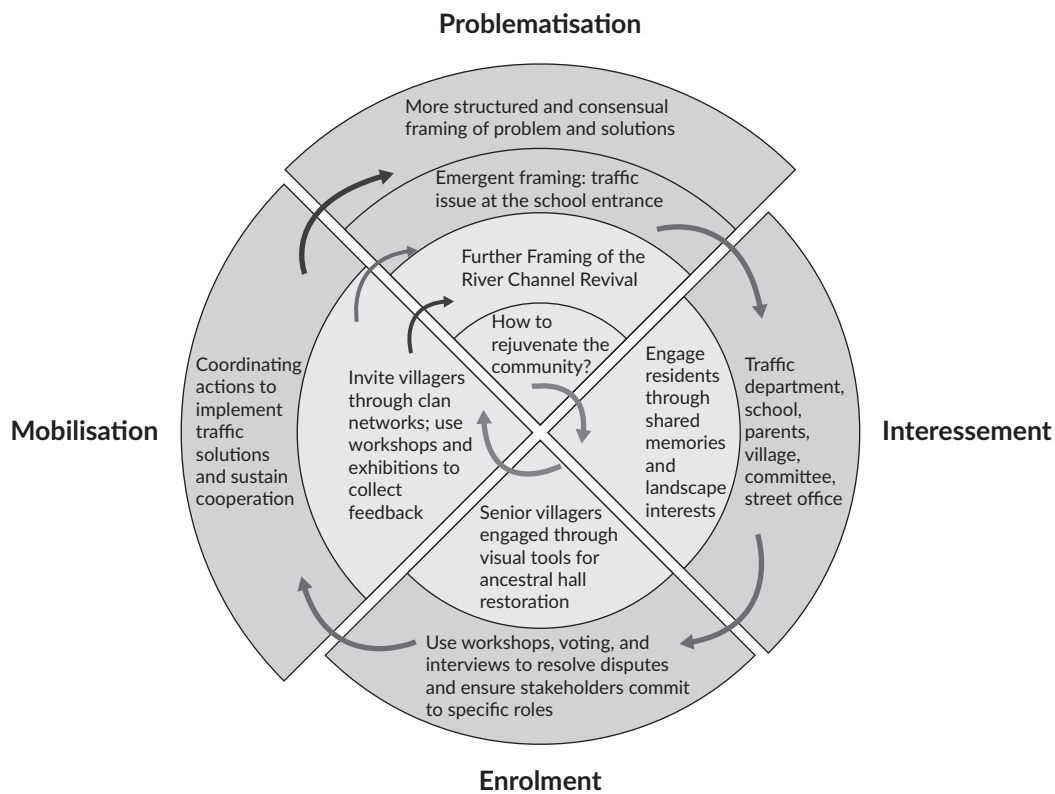
#### 4.3.4. Mobilisation: Moving From Consensus to Collective Action

The final phase, mobilisation, involved the actual implementation of the agreed-upon solutions. Following the approval of the community's revival plan in 2023, construction on the parking facilities began, with the river channel revival project launching in January 2024. The construction process was a collective effort, with community members, local businesses, and technical experts working together to ensure the project's success. This phase of mobilisation also strengthened the community's sense of collective identity. The river revival, once a contested issue, became a symbol of the community's ability to unite and take action. Residents who had initially opposed the project, or were indifferent, began to see the benefits of collective action, further reinforcing the shared understanding that "safeguarding public interests is also safeguarding personal interests." This shared commitment ensured the long-term sustainability of the project and laid the groundwork for future participatory efforts in the village. The successful mobilisation of residents in the river revival project suggests that Bijiang Village's approach to participatory planning can serve as a model for other communities seeking to harness local knowledge and collective action for urban regeneration.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. *Problematism: Initial Problematism as a Crucial Starting Point and Catalyst*

The case of Bijiang Village demonstrates the pivotal role of problematisation as the starting point in the translation process. As a crucial step, problematisation sets the stage for engaging the community by identifying and framing the issues that will be addressed. However, in the Bijiang case, as in many participatory planning contexts, the initial framing of the problem was unclear and ambiguous. The initial problematisation phase serves as both a starting point and a catalyst in translation. By engaging stakeholders, refining problem definitions, and aligning interests, this phase is crucial for transforming vague concerns into clear, shared objectives that the community can collectively address (see Figure 10).



**Figure 10.** Translation process of community participation at Bijiang.

### 5.1.1. From Abstract to Concrete: Historical Culture as an Entry Point

In the early stages, community planners struggled to engage villagers in discussions about the community's future vision, as abstract planning terms failed to resonate with them. This highlights the importance of context-specific problem framing in participatory planning. The planners soon discovered that historical culture was a theme that deeply resonated with the villagers, particularly the elderly. However, the initial framing of this issue—restoring the village's historical landscapes—remained vague and undefined. This represents the first phase of problematisation, where the issue is broadly recognised but lacks specificity. To shift from this vague framing to a clearer understanding, the planners enlisted key actors, such as local elders, and mobilised the wider community through clan networks. This recruitment process helped focus the issue on the destruction of historical landscapes due to urbanisation. The involvement of local stakeholders, particularly those with emotional and cultural ties to the village's history, helped refine the problem framing, making it more concrete and relevant to the community. This stage illustrates how problematisation is not a one-time event but a dynamic and iterative process, requiring ongoing dialogue and engagement to clarify and refine the issues at hand.

### 5.1.2. Problem Framing as a Catalyst for Community Engagement and Consensus-Building

The translation process became even more refined during the next phase of community engagement, specifically with the traffic congestion issue at the elementary school gate. While the initial problematisation of traffic congestion was evident to all, it lacked the detailed understanding necessary for formulating effective strategies. The planners organised public exhibitions and focus group discussions to gather

feedback and identify the root causes of the congestion. Stakeholders, including parents, nearby residents, and traffic management officials, were recruited to participate in a collaborative problem-framing process. Through these participatory mechanisms, the problem of traffic congestion became clearer, and a consensual problem framing emerged. Solutions, such as creating one-way traffic systems and establishing parent waiting areas, were discussed, tested, and refined. This stage illustrates how translation uses feedback loops—through surveys, workshops, and public meetings—to align diverse stakeholder interests and achieve consensus. The successful resolution of the traffic issue not only addressed the immediate concern but also catalysed broader community involvement in public matters. Residents who had previously disengaged from such issues began to recognise the value of collective action and became more invested in solving public problems.

## **5.2. *Interessement: Aligning Stakeholders' Interests and Shared Values, and Early Empowerment***

The interessement phase in the participatory translation process is critical for identifying key stakeholders, aligning their interests, and empowering them to take part in decision-making. In Bijiang Village, this phase involved building on the community's strong sense of identity with its historical culture, as well as leveraging its deep-rooted social networks to ensure broader participation. By focusing on shared values and common goals, planners were able to mobilise local residents and stakeholders, creating a foundation for collective action and sustainable development.

### **5.2.1. *Community Engagement Through Utilising Social Capital and Local Networks***

In the initial stages of the Bijiang Village project, interessement relied on mobilising influential community members, particularly respected elders and clan leaders, who held a deep reservoir of local social capital. These figures were more than just respected voices; they were cultural gatekeepers with the credibility to inspire broader community involvement. Planners strategically engaged these leaders, not only to align their interests with the project's goals but to foster trust and legitimacy within the village. By enlisting the elders as recruiters and advocates for the project, the planners were able to extend participation beyond individual residents to larger networks of families and clans.

Through clan-based networks and participatory workshops, these community leaders were empowered to present and shape project objectives in ways that resonated with local residents, bridging individual concerns and shared community values. This alignment process reinforced a sense of ownership and cohesion across different social groups, as stakeholders worked collaboratively to identify issues and co-design solutions that honoured the village's historical and cultural heritage. By drawing on existing relationships and trust networks, the planners were able to translate the broader goals of the project into terms that resonated with residents, fostering a participatory culture rooted in shared values and mutual respect.

### **5.2.2. *Interessement as a Mechanism for Aligning Values and Empowerment***

The participatory translation process in Bijiang Village illustrates how interessement—the alignment of stakeholders' interests—is crucial to the success of participatory planning. By identifying shared values, such as the preservation of historical culture and the improvement of traffic safety, planners were able to empower local residents and other stakeholders to take active roles in the decision-making process. This

empowerment fostered a sense of ownership and collective agency, ensuring that stakeholders felt responsible for the project's success and were committed to seeing it through.

The alignment of interests and shared values not only facilitated problem and strategy framing but also ensured that the outcomes were socially sustainable. The community's collective engagement in the planning process resulted in solutions that reflected their values, from the restoration of historical sites to implementing traffic safety measures. This alignment of interests, values, and goals is essential for achieving sustainable community development outcomes, as it ensures that solutions are both locally relevant and widely supported.

### **5.3. Enrolment: Finding Key Stakeholders and Expanding Engagement Via Local Social Networks**

The enrolment phase in the participatory translation process is where stakeholders formally take on roles and responsibilities, and the network of participants expands to include key actors who will drive the project forward. In the case of Bijiang Village, local social networks played a crucial role in facilitating this enrolment. By leveraging the influence of respected elders, parents, and community leaders, the planners were able to significantly expand engagement through clan connections and other social networks, ensuring broad participation in both the historical preservation projects and the traffic issue initiatives.

#### **5.3.1. Leveraging Local Social Networks for Sustainable Enrolment**

As the Bijiang project progressed, planners leveraged local networks to sustain enrolment by enlisting core community figures, such as clan leaders, active parents, and respected elders, as ambassadors for the initiative. These individuals, not only well-connected but also trusted voices within their social networks, made them ideal advocates for the projects. This strategic use of existing social networks underscored the importance of understanding local dynamics and structures. By empowering these community representatives, planners ensured that participation was inclusive, reaching a broad cross-section of the village and reinforcing ongoing involvement. This approach fostered a community-driven momentum that sustained engagement throughout the project, establishing a participatory culture that was both enduring and reflective of Bijiang's unique social ecosystem.

#### **5.3.2. Context-Specific Approaches in Community Engagement**

The Bijiang Village case highlights the importance of adopting context-specific strategies in participatory planning. Here, planners recognised that the social dynamics of the village—marked by clan affiliations, school networks, and neighbourhood committees—were crucial in identifying effective engagement strategies. Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach, planners tailored their engagement methods to reflect Bijiang's unique social fabric. For example, involving elders in the historical preservation project was not only symbolic but practically significant, as these elders held influence within the community and could engage others effectively. By embedding the enrolment process within these specific social connections, the planners fostered an authentic and resilient community-driven effort. This context-sensitive approach not only amplified community participation but also ensured that the values and priorities unique to Bijiang were respected and maintained. It demonstrates how understanding and integrating local social nuances can enhance the inclusivity, sustainability, and cultural relevance of participatory planning efforts.

#### **5.4. Mobilisation: Expanding Participation and Transforming Consensus Into Collective Action**

In the final stage of participatory planning in Bijiang, mobilisation played a crucial role in expanding participation, sustaining engagement, and translating community consensus into concrete action. Through the “Bijiang Memories and Community Vision” exhibition, held in public spaces, planners engaged a broader demographic, including residents who hadn’t previously participated. Interactive displays allowed residents to reflect on historical identity and future possibilities, fostering “resonance” with community goals and encouraging contributions from diverse groups, thus solidifying the actor-network. Feedback mechanisms—both online and offline—strengthened transparency and fostered a sense of collective ownership, ensuring ongoing involvement.

This phase transcended engagement, as practical solutions to community concerns, such as traffic management and river revival, were implemented with the collaboration of local actors. In the traffic initiative, trial runs involved parents, local authorities, and police, demonstrating real-time benefits and reinforcing the commitment to collective safety. Launched in 2024, the river revival project symbolised unity and resilience, even among those initially opposed to it, as it became emblematic of community pride and cooperation. The practical successes of mobilisation emphasised that protecting public interests aligns with personal welfare, embedding this understanding into the village’s collective identity.

#### **5.5. Participatory Workshop and Exhibition as Translation Instruments? Lowering Barriers with Accessible Communication**

In Bijiang Village, participatory workshops, exhibitions, and focus groups served as key translation tools throughout all four moments of participatory planning, not only during mobilisation but across the problematisation, intersement, enrolment, and mobilisation phases. These tools were instrumental in translating complex planning ideas into accessible formats, fostering community ownership, and actively involving residents in shaping the outcomes of historical preservation and traffic management efforts. By making the planning process understandable and inclusive, these instruments aligned with the community’s values and priorities.

During the historical and cultural restoration phases, planners opted to use simplified models rather than complex professional blueprints. This approach made the project more accessible, especially to villagers unfamiliar with technical planning language, and significantly increased engagement. The models enabled residents to visualise changes in ways relevant to their daily lives, fostering excitement and interest. Similarly, the “Bijiang Memories and Community Vision” exhibition served as both an informative and participatory space. It displayed visual materials like historical photos and models and encouraged residents to share their stories and ideas, further engaging those who hadn’t previously participated.

During the traffic congestion phase, participatory workshops and focus groups provided a deep engagement platform for diverse stakeholders, including parents, students, school representatives, and traffic experts. These workshops allowed for problem framing and facilitated alignment of interests, ensuring that the proposed solutions addressed both technical and community-driven concerns. Surveys and feedback sessions collected input from 889 community members, adding depth to the collaborative process. For example, the trial implementation of one-way traffic system was a direct outcome of participatory workshops and broader

stakeholder engagement, demonstrating how these efforts fostered consensus-building and effective community-driven solutions.

## 6. Conclusions

The case of Bijiang Village highlights the critical role of participatory translation in mobilising the community and sustaining engagement in urban regeneration projects. By applying the four key moments of translation—problematism, interestment, enrolment, and mobilisation—this empirical study illustrates how these moments foster effective participatory planning and enhance Bijiang’s profile as a Historic Cultural Village.

Problematism is the process of framing core issues in a way that resonates with the community’s values and concerns. In Bijiang, this stage was evident in the early identification of historical cultural preservation and traffic congestion as key issues. These problems were framed in ways that reflected the community’s lived experiences and cultural identity, laying the foundation for collective action. Through participatory consultations, the community was actively involved in defining these problems and collaboratively developing solutions, as seen in the planning phases for the traffic congestion issue and the river channel revival. This participatory approach allowed the community to share responsibilities and collectively address objections, ensuring that problem framing was inclusive and relevant to local concerns.

Interestment involves the strategies used to engage and align the interests of diverse stakeholders. In Bijiang, the preservation of historical culture became a catalyst for mobilising local residents who identified strongly with their cultural heritage. By integrating the perspectives of stakeholders—particularly those who felt an emotional connection to the village’s history—the planners were able to empower residents and give them a meaningful role in the decision-making process. This phase demonstrated that addressing immediate concerns (such as traffic safety) while leveraging shared values (like cultural heritage) is essential for fostering long-term participation. The case of Bijiang also underscores the importance of recognising the local context and social ecology in achieving sustainable community participation outcomes.

Enrolment focuses on formalising the roles of stakeholders and expanding participation through local social networks. In Bijiang, respected elders and enthusiastic parents played crucial roles in extending participation beyond a small group of individuals. By recruiting key figures within the village’s social networks—particularly through clan connections and schools—planners were able to engage a wide spectrum of community members. This demonstrates the importance of understanding and utilising local social capital to enhance participation. These above-mentioned local key figures in Bijiang acted as spokespersons, helping to mobilise the community and expand participation to include a diverse range of actors, from students to local businesses.

Mobilisation expanded community engagement and transformed consensus into action, which reached a broader audience and fostered collective ownership. This phase implemented practical solutions, like traffic management trials and the river revival project, with collaborative support from local actors. These successes reinforced community pride and unity, embedding the idea that protecting public interests aligns with individual welfare and strengthening the village’s collective identity.



In Bijiang, workshops and public exhibitions—such as the “Bijiang Memories and Community Vision” exhibition—served as effective translation instruments that broadened community engagement. These participatory methods translated complex planning concepts into accessible language, enabling residents to fully understand and contribute to the projects. By lowering barriers to participation and encouraging interactive problem-framing, the planners ensured that the community’s diverse values and priorities were reflected in the planning outcomes.

The case of Bijiang demonstrates that the four moments of participatory translation operate within a dynamic, cyclical structure, where problem framing, stakeholder engagement, and consensus-building occur iteratively. As interests are continuously negotiated and realigned, the community was able to address immediate concerns while fostering sustained engagement for future projects. The cyclical nature of this process highlights the adaptability required for long-term success in urban regeneration. The iterative approach used in Bijiang allowed for problem reframing and flexible solutions, enabling the community to not only resolve current issues but also create a foundation for ongoing participation in future development projects.

In conclusion, the integration of translation theory into participatory planning offers a robust framework for understanding and managing the complexities of community engagement. The case of Bijiang Village demonstrates that effective participatory planning hinges on the ability to problematise issues, engage stakeholders, leverage local social networks, and mobilise collective action. By continuously negotiating interests and involving community members at each stage of the process, planners can enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of urban regeneration efforts. The insights from Bijiang provide valuable lessons for planners and researchers working across diverse cultural and social contexts. They underscore the critical role of translation in fostering community mobilisation and ensuring the success of participatory planning initiatives. By adopting this framework, communities can address both immediate urban challenges and long-term sustainability goals, contributing to more inclusive and resilient urban development.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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