Inclusive governance: empowering communities and promoting social justice

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1 Introduction

Governance faces complex challenges such as rapid urbanization, increasing socioeconomic inequality, the effects of climate change, and the need for sustainable economic development. These challenges require the active participation of local and regional stakeholders and marginalized groups often excluded from decision-making processes. To improve social inclusion in territorial governance, adopting more participatory and transparent approaches is vital, ensuring that all voices are heard in planning and implementation at the local and regional levels (Kapucu et al., 2024).

Public governance is the process by which social actors establish common objectives and coordinate actions to achieve them. This approach stresses that the action of governing is more relevant than the government itself, emphasizing the importance of involving multiple actors in decision-making (Eckersley et al., 2024). Inclusive governance is presented as a key model for meeting the needs of diverse communities, characterized by its ability to integrate governments, civil organizations, and local communities in decisions that affect their lives.

The shift toward new governance is due to social diversity, complexity, and dynamism. These elements require public action that resorts to new modes of governance, such as self-government and co-governance. In this context, fostering an open public administration that allows for effective and equitable participation is essential, thus guaranteeing representative and effective public policies and authentic and lasting social justice (Campomori and Casula, 2022). This paper aims to provide an opinion regarding the analysis of how inclusive governance can transform social and political dynamics in diverse communities, highlighting its role in empowering marginalized groups and promoting social justice.

2 Inclusive governance

Inclusive governance has emerged as a fundamental approach to addressing the needs of diverse groups and communities. This model encourages the adoption of specific strategies that seek to optimize the government's response to these groups. Increasing socio-political, economic, and environmental polarization poses challenges and opportunities that vary according to the country's context.

Inclusive governance extends beyond formal actors, promoting social justice through the participation of activists, organizations, and social movements (Hariram et al., 2023; Yates et al., 2024). These actors are essential in building just and equitable societies free from authoritarianism and injustice. In addition, it is critical to develop community-driven financing strategies based on principles of equity, collective care, shared power, accountability, adaptation, and continuous learning. These strategies not only strengthen communities' capacity but also foster a more inclusive and participatory environment (Lansing et al., 2023).

Recently, there has been growing concern about the lack of access to essential services, such as clean water, health care, and sustainable livelihoods, and the need to protect biodiversity. These fundamental human rights can only be guaranteed through inclusive environmental governance. An effective climate and environmental policy must strengthen inclusive governance mechanisms (Ekardt et al., 2023). In Latin America, initiatives are being implemented to improve environmental governance, involving government agencies, businesses, and communities. These actions have increased community awareness of critical issues such as sustainable development, human rights, pollution, health, biodiversity, and climate change (Salvador and Sancho, 2021).

The analysis of inclusive governance must consider the challenges of inequality, conflict, environmental crisis, urbanization, and global health, among others. To address these issues, a panoramic analysis is needed that includes (1) Theoretical Approaches, (2) Methodological Approaches, (3) Effects of Inclusive Governance in the territories, (4) Challenges, (5) Opportunities, (6) Specific areas of application, and (7) Impact toward sustainability (van Niekerk, 2020). Local governments often consider their work in governance fair and equitable, as they automatically link governance with inclusion. However, in practice, power imbalances can disadvantage marginalized groups and communities. Therefore, adopting an intentional approach to meaningful inclusion can improve democratic outcomes and governance stability (Quick and Feldman, 2011).

Good governance promotes fundamental principles such as equity, participation, pluralism, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law, thus ensuring both the effectiveness and sustainability of public policies. This governance process involves collaboration among diverse actors, which makes it possible to identify, organize, make decisions, and carry out actions to address environmental, economic, and socio-cultural issues at local, regional, national, and international levels. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand governance as a multidisciplinary, multilevel, and territorially contextualized approach (Glass and Newig, 2019). The territorial governance approach focuses on the capacity of societies to manage their affairs and develop their territories through the participation of various actors, including (a) Through vertical multilevel governance, the State coordinates the central, regional, and local levels; (b) Civil society; (c) Local public agencies; (d) The private sector, which contributes to horizontal multilevel governance, facilitates non-political actors' inclusion in decisions. This approach promotes economic growth with social inclusion and highlights the importance of inclusive governance, which requires exploring mechanisms and strategies for its effective implementation (Arango-Espinal et al., 2020).

3 Theoretical approaches applied to inclusive territorial governance

Territorial governance (TG) is linked to cohesion and networks of social relations, where horizontality must prevail over hierarchy to take care of territories. Natural resources, such as land, water, and minerals, reflect how management, production, and resources are aligned in a specific territory, a phenomenon known as resource governance. To achieve sustainable development, raising awareness about conserving the natural and cultural resources offered by communities is crucial (Pokolenko, 2023). This development must be economic, but it must also preserve culture. Although TG has been analyzed from Gramscian perspectives of hegemony and the integral state, fostering a bottom-up approach that responds to local needs is essential. This requires the active participation of villagers, entrepreneurs, NGOs, and governments, who must value ecosystem services as commodities and vital elements for human life (Davies et al., 2018).

Communities offering tourism services should incorporate a nature-based approach into their governance strategies. This involves preserving the community structure, ensuring that benefits are distributed locally, and protecting the area's ecosystem services. Otherwise, when communities do not benefit from tourism, socio-ecological problems can arise (Abreu et al., 2024). Different types of governance often need an analysis of the interconnections between levels. Social interconnections occur mainly at the local or regional level within territories considered regions, as in the European Union, where polycentricity is highlighted to reduce the predominance of central urban areas (Gutierrez-Camps, 2014). Territorial planning has historically used the Theory of Urbanization. This approach should have considered sustainable development, generating problems with actors and communities due to the lack of synergic spatial strategies. What is most beneficial is decentralization and multi-stakeholder participation. Therefore, the communities or companies should manage their problem-solving strategies through decentralized management and the active involvement of local actors (Sulcaj-Gura et al., 2023).

TG comes in several approaches, each with inclusive characteristics. Community governance involves communities technically and financially managing their affairs, with ongoing accountability to their members. It is also called "smart community governance," as it uses technologies such as the Internet, the cloud, and big data to digitize and coordinate residents' daily lives. This facilitates communication between different participants and increases funding for these communities (Santarlacci et al., 2024). An example of innovation in community governance is seen in the strategies of coastal villagers in Central Java, Indonesia, to manage mangrove resources. This participatory approach promotes bottom-up communication and includes local, state, and regional stakeholders. It also stands out for its ability to generate helpful information for decision-making and for the valorization of common property (Damastuti and de Groot, 2019).

TG has been analyzed using the social and environmental justice theory, highlighting the role of social and solidarity economy organizations and public policies in creating sustainable communities and fulfilling sustainable development goals (SDGs).

However, a disconnect between equity, inclusion, and social justice persists due to the lack of legal and regulatory institutions that facilitate the creation and distribution of benefits and opportunities in various regions (Quiroz-Niño and Murga-Menoyo, 2017). The study of TG is related to project policies focused on infrastructure and sustainability, considering it a resilient approach for inclusive improvement. One example is water governance, which seeks to optimize communal supply systems and mitigate hydroclimatic risks. There is a debate on the optimal mix of "green," "gray," and "blue" infrastructure. Projects in this framework prioritize accountability and focus on specific uses with funding already allocated (Asghari et al., 2023).

One of the emerging approaches to TG emerges through graph theory and social network analysis, which explore the relationships built in alternative food networks (AFNs), demonstrating how social values, social networks, markets, and governance systems integrate to transform physical landscapes and human bodies (Foti and Timpanaro, 2021). The links between local food systems and the construction of sustainable futures for human health, education, land management, and economies emerged from social movements of the 1960s that sought to relocate food production and consumption to counter the global industrial food system. Today, the food system is conceptualized as a network of nodes represented by producers, processors, distributors, and consumers (Leach et al., 2020).

Another approach used is collaborative governance, which is based on the sharing and distributing of governance resources and requires effective accountability and the joint assumption of responsibilities. Collaborative governance has as its central objective good governance, with horizontal relationships between partners, agreed and co-produced goal setting, and relational and political accountability (Belrhiti et al., 2024). One example of the application of collaborative governance has been studied in contracting social services between governments and non-profit organizations, gaining increasing popularity in China, and driving enthusiasm for involving these organizations in governance issues (Guo and Li, 2022).

Despite the advantages of each approach, there are significant disadvantages. For example, community governance, while it encourages active participation, may be constrained by resource and technical limitations, potentially reducing its effectiveness. However, the establishment of a clear and robust accountability framework can help mitigate the risks of corruption or mismanagement, enhancing the governance process (Miller et al., 2024). On the other hand, collaborative governance, while fostering horizontal relationships and more inclusive decision-making, can be vulnerable to conflicts of interest among the different actors. If power dynamics are not properly managed, this can lead to paralysis in decision-making (Delgado-Baena and Sianes, 2024).

In various geographic territories, spatial planning must be promoted under the spatial planning system according to their needs. The redistribution of power is another of the challenges of inclusive territorial governance so that decision-making is fair and equitable, as well as the accountability that contributes to post-territorial decentralization (Gomes et al., 2024). It is essential to improve the conditions of participation of workers in various productive sectors, who often face asymmetries in bargaining power vis-à-vis companies. The dependence on elite infrastructure in different community projects creates a gap in achieving inclusive territorial governance. In environmental management, the challenge is to assess how much activists are formally organized and where they stand about neoliberalism (Kruk et al., 2018).

4 Opportunities and challenges in inclusive territorial governance

The study of Inclusive Territorial Governance presents an encouraging outlook due to this field's numerous opportunities. Applying a system of specific indicators can lead to improved territorial governance and sustainability. In the exploratory analysis of Inclusive Territorial Governance, increasing local and regional efficiency and fostering regular interaction with citizens and other institutions is an opportunity. There is an opportunity to develop notions of nature together with people, implement new organizational structures, and cultivate the intention and capacity to apply long-term perspectives when planning Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) interventions for sustainable urban development (Bianchi and Richiedei, 2023).

The ecosystem approach to natural resource management has become increasingly relevant in recent decades. This holistic approach recognizes the interconnection between the different elements of an ecosystem and the need to consider the cumulative impacts of human activities on the environment. In fisheries, the ecosystem approach has brought about a paradigm shift from management focused on maximizing the catch of target species to a more holistic view that seeks to ensure the health and resilience of marine and coastal ecosystems (Sander, 2023). Within this framework, inclusive governance plays a crucial role in the conservation and sustainable use of fisheries resources. By involving multiple stakeholders, including fishing communities, public authorities, the private sector, and organized civil society, conditions are created for a more participatory, transparent, and adaptive fisheries management. This makes it possible to make informed decisions based on the best available scientific knowledge and the traditional knowledge of local communities. In addition, inclusive governance contributes to generating a sense of co-responsibility among the different actors, which is fundamental to ensuring compliance with fishing rules and regulations (Skerritt, 2024).

Some examples of inclusive governance initiatives in fisheries include co-management systems, where fishing communities collaborate with public authorities in decision-making and implementing conservation measures. Also noteworthy are community fishing agreements, where communities establish rules and control mechanisms to regulate access to and use of fishery resources. These approaches have proven effective in protecting marine biodiversity, securing the livelihoods of coastal communities, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of fisheries (Hamelin et al., 2024).

Community and deliberative engagement are an approach that focuses on the active inclusion of citizens in the decision-making processes that affect their lives and environments. This approach

seeks to encourage participation and explores how deliberation can lead to responsible innovation. Engaging the community in open and structured discussions creates a space to share ideas, experiences, and knowledge, enriching the decision-making process. Deliberative participation is characterized by its ability to promote constructive dialogue among diverse stakeholders, allowing multiple voices to be heard and different perspectives to be considered. This is especially relevant in contexts where decisions can significantly impact people's daily lives, such as in natural resource management, urban planning, or the implementation of social policies (Gregory et al., 2008).

Integrating community participation in these processes fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among citizens, which can result in more significant commitment to the initiatives and policies adopted. In addition, responsible innovation arises from the interaction between the community and policymakers. More creative and locally tailored approaches can be developed by involving citizens in identifying problems and generating solutions. This type of collaboration improves the quality of decisions and contributes to building more resilient and sustainable communities (Pillan et al., 2023).

Social entrepreneurship and inclusive governance are interrelated concepts that highlight the need to create an environment where business initiatives seek economic profitability and promote social inclusion and the wellbeing of communities. Social entrepreneurship focuses on developing innovative solutions to social and environmental problems, addressing challenges like poverty, inequality, and lack of access to essential services. By integrating principles of social justice and sustainability into their business models, these initiatives can significantly impact people's lives and the environment in which they operate (Bansal et al., 2019). By fostering an open and collaborative dialogue between entrepreneurs, local authorities, non-governmental organizations, and citizens, strategies can be designed to drive economic growth and strengthen the social fabric. Social entrepreneurship initiatives that operate within an inclusive governance framework have the potential to mobilize resources and talent more effectively. By involving the community in the value-creation process, employment and training opportunities are generated that benefit all members of society. This not only contributes to the creation of a more robust entrepreneurial ecosystem but also promotes social cohesion and community resilience (Schin et al., 2023).

Including Indigenous women and youth in leadership and inclusive governance is critical to building more just and equitable societies. This process empowers these communities and enriches decision-making by incorporating diverse perspectives and unique experiences. Indigenous women, often marginalized in spaces of power, have demonstrated their ability to lead and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Various training and empowerment initiatives have created platforms that enable these women and youth to develop leadership skills and actively participate in political and social decision-making. This strengthens their voice in the public sphere and promotes the defense of their rights and the preservation of their cultures and traditions (Durán-Díaz et al., 2020).

The inclusion of Indigenous women and youth in leadership positions faces significant challenges. Despite advances in promoting gender equality and political participation, structural barriers that limit their access to opportunities and resources persist. Factors such as poverty, discrimination, and patriarchal cultural norms often hinder their full participation. To overcome these challenges, it is crucial to implement policies that recognize and address existing inequalities, ensuring that Indigenous women and youth have access to leadership spaces and the support they need to exert their influence effectively. In doing so, an inclusive governance model that truly reflects the diversity and needs of all communities can be fostered (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023).

However, implementing inclusive territorial governance also faces significant challenges. One is the need to overcome the traditional disconnect between sectoral policies and spatial planning, which limits the capacity to design and implement comprehensive territorial policies. Another critical challenge is to stimulate the agency capacity of local stakeholders at different scales so that they can effectively participate in the construction of shared development strategies. Finally, institutional, and multilevel coordination capacities must be strengthened to facilitate the articulation of efforts and the mobilization of resources for territorial development projects (Knickel et al., 2021).

5 Conclusions

In conclusion, inclusive governance has emerged as a vital framework for addressing the diverse needs of communities and fostering social justice. By promoting the active participation of various stakeholders, including marginalized groups, this model enhances the effectiveness of governance and ensures that policies are more equitable and representative. As socio-political, economic, and environmental challenges continue to grow, the importance of inclusive governance becomes even more pronounced. It not only facilitates the development of community-driven strategies but also strengthens the capacity of local actors to engage in meaningful dialogue and decision-making processes. Ultimately, inclusive governance catalyzes building resilient societies that adapt to changing circumstances while ensuring that fundamental human rights are upheld.

To enhance inclusive governance, we propose establishing a multi-stakeholder platform that brings together government agencies, civil society organizations, local communities, and private sector representatives. This platform will focus on identifying and addressing critical issues related to access to essential services, environmental sustainability, and social equity. By facilitating regular dialogue and collaboration, the platform aims to develop actionable strategies that promote community-driven initiatives and ensure that the voices of marginalized groups are heard in decision-making processes. Additionally, we recommend implementing training programs to empower local leaders, particularly women and youth, in governance roles. This approach will strengthen community capacity and foster a culture of inclusivity and accountability, ultimately contributing to more effective and sustainable governance outcomes.

Author contributions

MS-S: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PA-R: Conceptualization, Investigation, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft. EP-L: Conceptualization, Investigation, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft. IG-M: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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