

# Local community participation of older village residents: Social differences and the role of expectations

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## ABSTRACT

In rural areas characterised by ageing and declining populations and centralised public and private services, responsibilities for local processes are re-negotiated. In this context, older people's community participation and active ageing are increasingly encouraged in policy documents and discussed by researchers. This paper zooms in on the different ways in which older residents participate in their local communities in a rural region in Germany and how these are related to social differences, participation experiences and expectations. The structuring content analysis of 15 semi-structured interviews reveals that villagers participate, to different degrees, in three fields: local politics, associations and interest groups, and informal community activities. Individuals' experiences of participating in the community are identified as being shaped by complex interrelations between socioeconomic status, gender and residential history. Furthermore, older people's expectations to participate are found as mainly directed towards younger people and incomers. Descriptions of expectations they face encompass other residents' expectations as well as unspecified pressures due to limited means of the municipality. Interpreting these narrations of expectations as forms of responsabilisation, the analysis provides insights into ongoing re-negotiations of responsibilities and reveals the normativity of local community participation in a rural context.

## 1. Introduction

Populations in many rural areas in Europe have strongly aged and declined in number over the last decades. Simultaneously, public and private services including cultural, educational and leisure facilities have increasingly been centralised. Because of these developments, quality of life in rural areas is seen as threatened, with older and less mobile people potentially experiencing social exclusion and loneliness (Kelly et al., 2019; Warburton et al., 2017). Embedded in processes of shifting responsibilities from local governments to citizens (de Haan et al., 2018), 'active ageing' and older people's contributions to their communities have gained significant attention in scientific discussions and policy documents. Simultaneously, research has highlighted traditions of volunteering and informal support networks in rural areas, for example in Germany (Mettenberger and Küpper, 2019) or in Canada

(Narushima and Kawabata, 2020).

Against this background, this paper investigates older rural residents' ways of participating in more detail by addressing the following questions: (1) How does older rural residents' local community participation reflect differences in socioeconomic status, gender and residential history? (2) Whom do older rural residents expect to participate, and (3) how have they experienced and dealt with expectations to participate? The first question is inspired by studies that have underlined differences in participation based on gender and socioeconomic status, indicating unequal distribution of responsibility and the related privileges. These findings question the integrative function and exclusively positive framing of civic engagement and volunteering by researchers, planners and policy-makers (Kleiner, 2021a; Ishizawa, 2015). This paper adds a qualitative perspective to these quantitative studies. The second and third research question are informed by different

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perspectives on the responsabilisation of older adults to passively participate in and actively contribute to their communities. On the one hand, so-called “‘activation’ policies” (van Dyk et al., 2013, p. 108), which pair individual responsibility with community values and ethical notions of care (Rose, 2000), have been described as encouraging older people to participate. On the other hand, studies in rural areas have identified residents’ mutual and self-responsibilisation for their communities (Steinführer, 2015; Bischof and Decker, 2023). By analysing older rural residents’ subjective perspectives on their participation and related expectations, this study adds to the scientific literature on shifting responsibilities in rural areas and older people’s community participation. Additionally, the study can sensitise local and regional stakeholders, policy-makers and planners for potential power asymmetries and misrepresentation in rural communities and inform strategies for dealing with these.

## 2. Older residents’ local community participation and responsabilisation

Scholars in the field of rural gerontology have dealt with various place- and community-related aspects of rural ageing (Heley and Woods, 2021; Scharf et al., 2016; Skinner et al., 2021) including challenges associated with ageing in place (Menec and Novek, 2021; Warburton et al., 2017). Ageing in place has been identified as typically resulting in strong attachment to place at different scales, including residents’ houses, their neighbourhoods or their villages (Wiles et al., 2021; Cook et al., 2007). Additionally, feelings of belonging to local social groups, which are dependent on others’ approval and acceptance, have been highlighted as integral to people’s identity (Antonsich, 2010). Against the background of strongly ageing populations and centralised public and private services, maintaining quality of life and “caring for increasing numbers of vulnerable people in places made vulnerable by community and economic changes” is identified as a major challenge for rural areas (Wiersma and Koster, 2013, p. 64). In this context, older residents’ local community participation has increasingly been discussed as part of the solution – also addressed as active ageing, civic engagement or volunteering (Colibaba et al., 2021). Research has highlighted “potentials and impediments to senior citizens’ volunteering” (Mettenberger and Küpper, 2019, p. 739), relations between older people’s volunteering and their wellness (Warburton and Winterton, 2017) and volunteering experiences and relationships to place (Yarker et al., 2020). A discourse analysis revealed the romanticised role of voluntarism for ageing in rural areas (Joseph and Skinner, 2012) and quantitative papers investigated older rural residents’ non-engagement (Ubels et al., 2020) as well as differences in engagement in different types of communities (Davis et al., 2012).

The approach to local community participation taken in this paper is based on Liepins’s (2000) conceptualisation of communities as constantly produced and reproduced by people in and through practices, meanings, spaces and structures. These processes are embedded in “temporally and locationally specific terrains of power and discourse” (Liepins, 2000, p. 30). Previous research has applied Liepins’s framework and for example investigated discourses of community and older people’s experiences of community in rural places (Doheny and Milbourne, 2017). This paper specifically focuses on practices of local community participation as narrated by older rural residents. The term ‘local community participation’ stands for voluntary activities in the local context – more specifically in villages – which are

community-based and not directed at material gain. Besides the focus on the village level, this definition is similar to that of civic engagement (BMFSFJ, 2020, p. 10) and encompasses a large spectrum of practices and positions in which older rural residents have been found to participate in their communities (Mettenberger and Küpper, 2019). Both formal participation (i.e., in established associations and organisations including sports clubs, village associations, the local fire brigades, the church and local politics) and informal ways of participating (including care and support for neighbours and other people outside of the core family) are considered (Jones and Heley, 2016). The boundary between formal and informal voluntary activities, however, is seen as blurred (Woolvin and Hardill, 2013).

### 2.1. Social differences in local community participation

Various studies have examined the participation of individuals in their communities and observed variations based on social categories such as age, gender, education, professional status, income and length of residence (e.g., Gieling et al., 2018; Meyer and Rameder, 2022; Simonson et al., 2021). In this analysis guided by previous research findings, three social categories were identified as relevant: *socioeconomic status* (combining education, professional status, and income), *gender*, and *residential history*.

Regarding *socioeconomic status*, the literature has indicated differences for the fields individuals participate in and the positions they hold. Higher socioeconomic status has been related to increased likelihood of association membership (Warren, 2001) and higher educational attainment and occupational standing have been associated with leadership positions (Winterton and Warburton, 2021). For depopulating rural areas in the Netherlands, recent non-engagement was found to be highest among the group of those with lower education (Ubels et al., 2020). According to the German Survey on Volunteering conducted in 2019 by Simonson et al. (2021), participation differences between educational groups have been increasing over the past two decades. Meyer and Rameder (2022) highlighted how individuals with higher socioeconomic status who belong to more elitist organisations gain greater prestige from their voluntary activities compared to those with lower socioeconomic status participating in less formalised contexts. Ishizawa (2015, p. 267) further discussed the influence of parental socioeconomic status on differences in participation “across social class”, attributed to resource sharing within families.

*Gender* dynamics specific to different fields of participation have been emphasised by various scholars. In Germany, Simonson et al. (2021) revealed that women and men volunteered in equal proportions for the first time in 2019. However, women were more inclined towards volunteering in social services while men tended to be involved in sports, rescue services, and local politics. Meyer and Rameder (2022) observed gender effects for volunteering in the fields of sports, social services and politics, but not in the field of religion. Kleiner (2022) found that male-dominated fields tended to generate more prestige and increase social status for participants, reflecting gender differences in the work domain. Winterton and Warburton (2021) noted that older women were more likely to participate in group-based social activities while older men often engaged in individual forms of activity.

For rural areas with supposedly close-knit communities, the influence of individuals’ *residential histories* on local participation has been discussed. Gieling et al. (2018, p. 185) found no significant correlations between residential history and volunteering in associations and clubs,

suggesting that “long-term in-migrants eventually become as active in village life as village-born residents”. However, Kelly et al. (2019) noted that incomers were facing challenges in rural communities such as social isolation. Other studies highlighted the heterogeneity within these groups, with varying levels of participation among both incomers and long-term stayers (Lengerer et al., 2022; Gustafson, 2009). Looking specifically at middle class newcomers in rural areas, Haartsen and Stockdale (2018) described their selective participation as interest-based way to integrate. For this discussion, it is crucial to acknowledge the diverse backgrounds and experiences of international and internal migrants residing in rural areas.

## 2.2. *Responsibilisation and the role of expectations*

In the course of the analyses for this paper, expectations to participate towards oneself and others were inductively identified in the material and interpreted as forms of responsibilisation. The term ‘responsibilisation’ stands for ascriptions of responsibility to individuals, actors or groups (Steinführer, 2015). I apply a definition of responsibilisation that is based on Trnka and Trundle (2014), who added the notions of ‘interrelations of care’ and ‘social contract ideologies’ to the idea of neoliberal responsibilisation. In their understanding, interrelations of care are often characterised by dependency as well as commitment for one another. Furthermore, they are not only an element of intimate relationships, but also of relationships between collectives – as for example between residents and their village community. Social contract ideologies based on reciprocity can be identified in larger collectives. These require individuals to give up some of their autonomy in exchange for protection and security in the collective (Trnka and Trundle, 2014).

In the context of neoliberal rural governance, which emphasises individual responsibility for local matters, ascriptions of responsibility have gained scientific attention. One strand of literature has analysed the impact of neoliberal policy and discourse on individuals’ narratives, for example for the active ageing discourse (van Dyk et al., 2013). In rural areas with declining basic infrastructure, research identified forms of responsibilisation, which included the responsibilisation of oneself, of other residents and of other local actors (Schröder, 2017; Steinführer, 2015). Bischof and Decker (2023, p. 288) more specifically analysed “different conceptions of responsibility” in rural dwellers’ accounts and found ideals of active citizenship, ideals of mutuality and one-sided expectations of municipal care. The quantitative analysis by Lengerer et al. (2022) of older rural residents’ participative practices found that external pressures – including expectations by others – were rated as less important compared to community- and self-related motives for participating. However, higher scores for external pressures were found for people who had positions in the local community associated with higher responsibility.

Based on these previous scientific efforts, I identified the following research gaps to address in this paper. First, I add qualitative insights to so far mainly quantitative research on inequalities in voluntary work (Ishizawa, 2015; Kleiner, 2021b; Meyer and Rameder, 2022). Second, this paper not only attends to a specific field of activity, but also to interrelations between different ways of participating. As such it provides an overview of the entirety of participative practices (Lengerer et al., 2022; Mettenberger and Küpper, 2019) and increases the visibility of informal activities. Third, I focus on individuals’ subjective views on their participation, forms of responsibilisation and the normative dimension of community participation (Steinführer, 2015).

## 3. *Methods and research context*

For this paper, semi-structured interviews with a biographical-narrative introduction are analysed. They were conducted with residents of villages with less than 2000 inhabitants in a rural region in Germany in the context of the research project STAYin(g)Rural. The selected region is located in the western part of the former border area between East and West Germany (for more information see Lengerer et al. (2022)), where out-migration of younger people and selective in-migration of older people resulted in a long-term ageing trend. Comparing German rural districts regarding the shares of residents who are older than 65, the region under study ranked among the top five in 2015<sup>1</sup> (BBSR, 2018). In the same year, the average age in the region was 48.2 years, whereas the German average was lower with 43.9 years. In addition, the long-term reduction of public and private services poses a problem for inhabitants with limited physical mobility (Steinführer et al., 2014).

The research project STAYin(g)Rural aimed at investigating staying processes over the life course including relations between staying and individuals’ community participation. An explorative approach combined several methods including a household survey and semi-structured interviews that were conducted in 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, respectively. The survey was conducted as a drop-off-and-collect survey (see Lengerer et al. (2022) for more information on the survey). In the villages, we contacted every second household and chose the last-birthday method to randomly select one member of each household (Dillman et al., 2014). In the questionnaire, survey participants had the opportunity to declare their interest to also participate in a qualitative interview. Out of 1106 survey respondents, 463 respondents were retired or older than 65 years. 41 of them agreed to participate in a subsequent interview. 15 interviewees were selected aiming for equal shares of women and men as well as for diversity in residential histories, age and forms of (non-)participation in their local communities according to the survey information. Out of 29 contacted interviewees, ten declined and four remained unreachable. The interviews, which ranged from 1:04 to 2:17 h with an average of 1:35 h, featured eight male and seven female interviewees. Table 1 provides anonymised information on the research participants. Surprisingly, all interviewees disclosed some degree of community participation since residing at their current place of residence. The survey had indicated that 25% of all older respondents, including two of the respondents who were subsequently interviewed, were not participating at all. The interviews, however, delved deeper into interviewees’ biographies, also considering past ways of participating. The fact that all interviewees participated in their communities suggests the prevalence of participation in the region, but to some extent also reflects recruitment biases. Firstly, the individuals who had agreed to participate in an interview – with an announced focus on staying and living in the region under study – might also be more inclined to participate locally. And secondly, the sample is biased towards interviewees with a medium and high socioeconomic status – groups that are generally more likely to participate in organised community activities (see above). Residents with a very low and those with a very high socioeconomic status could not be reached. Re-occurring difficulties with engaging so-called hard-to-reach groups in research and ways of overcoming them have been addressed elsewhere (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015).

The interviews were conducted on the phone due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the disadvantages of phone interviews, research participants could be in a familiar space without seeing the researcher’s

<sup>1</sup> In a territorial reform in 2016, the administrative district was merged with the neighbouring district that encompasses a university city and has a higher share of younger people. Therefore, this strong ageing trend is not as visible in more recent statistics.

**Table 1**  
Research participants' socio-economic information, residential histories and local community participation.

ID	Age group <sup>a</sup>	Gender	Socioeconomic status	Residential history	Local Politics <sup>b</sup>	Associations and Interest groups <sup>c</sup>	Informal Community Activities
R01	Early retiree	F	Medium	Village stayer	Yes, in the past	Board member of interest group	Past: regular exchange with other residents
R02	Young-old	M	High	Incomer from elsewhere in Germany (in 2010s)	No	Past: chair of interest group	Regular exchange with other residents
R03	Young-old	F	Low	Incomer from elsewhere in Germany, first to region, then to village (in 2010s)	No	Active member of two associations	Regular exchange with other residents
R04	Young-old	F	High	Incomer from elsewhere in Germany (in 1980s)	Yes, in the past	Board member of association	No
R05	Middle-old	M	Low	Village stayer	No	Chair of association	No
R06	Young-old	M	Medium	Village stayer	No	No	Informal political exchange
R07	Early retiree	F	Medium	Returnee from elsewhere in Germany to region (in 2010s)	Yes, currently	No	Regular exchange with other residents
R08	Middle-old	M	Medium	Village stayer (same house)	No	Past: active member of association	No
R09	Young-old	F	Low	Incomer from elsewhere in Germany (in 1970s)	No	Chair of association, member of another association and of an interest group	Support for other residents
R10	Young-old	M	High	Stayer in region, incomer to village (in 1970s)	No	Past: active member of association	Informal political exchange
R11	Young-old	F	Low	Stayer in region, incomer to village (in 1980s)	Yes, in the past	Past: board member of association	Informal political exchange
R12	Young-old	M	Medium	Stayer in region, incomer to village (in 1980s)	Yes, in the past	Chair of association; Past: chair of interest group	Regular exchange with other residents
R13	Middle-old	M	High	Incomer from elsewhere in Germany, first to region, then to village (in 1980s)	No	Past: chair of association	Support for other residents
R14	Middle-old	F	Low	Stayer in region, returnee to village (in 1970s)	No	Past: active member of association	Regular exchange with other residents
R15	Young-old	M	High	Returnee from elsewhere in Germany to village (in 1970s)	Yes, in the past	Past: position in association	Support for other residents

<sup>a</sup> Early retiree: 60–64; young-old: 65–74; middle-old: 75–84.

<sup>b</sup> Local politics includes positions in village politics.

<sup>c</sup> Associations includes legally registered sports clubs (mainly football, tennis and table tennis), local cultural associations (leisure-oriented), and charitable associations. Interest groups subsumes groups that are organised around a common leisure activity or topic without the legal status of an association, such as working groups in community development projects, religious groups and women's groups.

recording device (Schulz and Ruddat, 2012). Participants were asked to tell their residential biographies, followed by questions based on the interviewees' emphases. Only towards the end, a rough guideline informed the choice of questions. Besides interviewees' residential histories and future plans, the interviews covered their feelings of belonging, their social contacts, links to other people and places, experiences and observed changes in the region, and their local community participation. I see this data as co-constructed between the interviewer and the interviewee (Dausien, 2006). In this process, meaning is constructed between past and future, experience and expectation. The 15 transcribed interviews were then analysed with a structuring qualitative content analysis combining both deductive and inductive development of codes (Steigleder, 2008; Mayring, 2019). Interviewees' community participation was categorised based on all their past and present community activities at their place of residence. Most interviewees mentioned several forms of participation over their life course, but also described temporary pauses due to Covid-19 restrictions. While respondents' gender and residential history were also identified based on the interviews, their socioeconomic status was aggregated from three survey variables: net equivalent household income, highest educational qualification and last employment position. Missing data were supplemented by information from the interviews. The values for each of the three variables were classified from 'very low' to 'very high', which allowed for an overall categorisation of interviewees' socioeconomic status. 'Very low' and 'very high' were not applicable in this sample. In the analytic process, I used visualisations to relate interviewees' community participation to their socioeconomic status, gender and residential history. These visualisations are attached as [Appendices A, B and C](#) to increase the transparency of the analysis.

#### 4. Analysing differences in older residents' local community participation

In the analysis, three main fields of participation emerged as relevant. *Local politics* subsumes positions in village councils including mayors and deputies. *Associations and interest groups* includes legally registered associations such as sports clubs, cultural and charitable associations, but also groups without the legal status of an association that are organised around a common leisure activity or topic. For associations and interest groups, a differentiation was made between active participants, board members and chairs. In addition, *informal community activities* were identified. These comprise informal political exchange (i. e., informal meetings to discuss opinions on political issues), regular exchange with other residents (i.e., get-togethers with other villagers, e. g., in the neighbourhood) and support for other residents (e.g., looking after the neighbours' house when they are on holiday or giving people a lift to town in cases of emergency). Each of the following subsections addresses one of the three research questions, while considering all three fields of participation.

##### 4.1. Socioeconomic status, gender and residential histories

Activities in *local politics* were only reported by a small number of interviewees with medium to high socioeconomic status. Gender and residential histories varied and key roles included village mayors, deputies, and council members (see [Appendix A](#)). Looking at interviewees' paths into these positions, one incomer and one of the returnees described being asked by village mayors or other inhabitants to

participate. Two life-long stayers and one returnee mentioned participating in associations as having paved the way for their activities in local politics, and several of the former village mayors described a political career that started in politics at the village level and then went on to the municipal and the regional level. The impact of their work included influencing regional developments and subsidies, especially if they went on to engage in politics at the regional level: "I was able to use my professional background to contribute to the community of [this town] and also to [this village]" (R15: 58). Rewards for themselves encompassed public visibility, prestige, and honours.

When you have received all the honours – I have received many honours, you have to work for them somehow, you cannot get them by sitting around – then this is a good time. I can look back on a very nice political time. (R12: 3)

While only a small number of people were active in local politics, most interviewees participated in *associations and interest groups* in diverse roles (see [Appendix A](#)). Sports (mainly football, tennis and table tennis), cultural, and charitable associations were common. Interest groups comprised religious groups, women's groups and community development projects. Older residents from all socioeconomic statuses and both women and men participated in different roles. However, men tended to be chairs while women were often board members. Incomers and life-long regional stayers participated in all roles, but incomers more often participated as chairs, while life-long regional stayers rather reported activities as board members or active participants. For many interviewees, social contacts including family members and neighbours initiated participation. Described outcomes and benefits differed depending on activities and positions and were mostly related to diversion, being in contact with people and realising one's leisure interests.

The large majority of interviewees participated in *informal community activities* (see [Appendix A](#)). Most of them described regular exchange with other residents outside the family. A few also reported support for other residents or informal political exchange.

There is a bakery next to [the supermarket] and every morning a group of old men meets there and discusses the problems of the world. [...] We solve all local, regional and global problems at this table (laughing). (R10: 124)

I have many nice conversations with old people, because they like [my dog] and because I like old people. [...] I regularly get [presents, like] a piece of cake by a woman who appreciates that I feed the deer. And I have a hunter friend who would rescue me [...] or help me with the dogs day and night. (R07: 120)

Men and women of all three socioeconomic status groups reported their participation in informal community activities. Informal political exchange was only described by life-long regional stayers and incomers were the only ones who explicitly mentioned support for other residents. Individuals with all three residential histories reported being in regular exchange with other residents. All except one of the interviewees who participated in informal community activities additionally participated in local politics or associations and interest groups or both. Finally, care activities within the family – which are not the focus of this analysis – were largely mentioned as women's responsibility and in several cases only allowed their husbands to participate in the community:

Associational life and politics shape life, I'm glad that I've always found a lot of support from my wife. [...] She always had my back and said: 'You do your politics'. I would come home in the evening when she was already asleep [...]. She also took care of raising the children, I couldn't have done that. (R12: 35)

In the following paragraphs, I summarise patterns observed in this qualitative sample with regard to socioeconomic status, gender and residential histories. Additionally, interviewees' explicit mentions of these three social categories in the context of participation are highlighted. For *socioeconomic status*, it is striking that local political positions were typically held by those of medium to high socioeconomic status. For participation in associations and interest groups or informal community activities, no such status-based patterns were observed. Only one interviewee explicitly mentioned socioeconomic differences in emphasising the role of informal participation for integration:

I sat at a table with unskilled workers and played skat or chess or whatever. [...] And that's why: celebrations and whatnot, that's all part of integration! Even as an educated person, you have to deal with people who are not quite so educated and know that they have to master their lives just like you do. (R13: 176)

With more men in this sample having formal and representative roles, *gender* differences were most pronounced in associations and interest groups. No clear gender patterns emerged for local politics and informal participation. However, several women addressed gender in relation to local politics and for example reported exclusion, such as this village stayer:

Well, I joined these two village council meetings per year and a few political party meetings. But the Round Table was more important, we had quite an impact with that. [...] Then they additionally founded a regulars' table. Only men. Us two women were not asked. And then of course it was all over. [...] That's when I said, 'Well, screw you guys, for real'. (R01: 109–113)

Another interviewee, who had experienced being the only woman in local politics, explained feeling accepted in male dominated circles because of not being perceived as a woman:

[Being the only woman in the municipal council] didn't bother me at all. [...] I have- we have a good acquaintance: [a former local politician]. We are very close friends, all of us. [...] We were going to some concert and I remember coming down the stairs and he said, 'Man, you're a woman'. And I said, 'What do you mean? I've always been a woman'. And he said, 'Yes, but for me you were always genderless'. Yes, and that's how I felt: genderless. Never a woman. I was basically genderless. I also had arguments with men and when I said something, they didn't say, 'Oh, that's what a woman said', you know? (R11: 60)

Gender was rarely addressed in the context of informal community activities or associations and interest groups. Only one female incomer described the gendered organisation of leisure activities, referring to the past:

In the past, the men went to sing in the singing club or to play football or something and then the women teamed up and played cards. There are five of us, we've been playing cards together once a week for almost 40 years. (R09: 48)

With a focus on *residential histories*, it can be observed that life-long regional stayers, incomers and returnees participated in all fields and subfields. Yet, compared to life-long regional stayers, incomers and returnees more often held responsible and prestigious positions in local politics and interest groups. Overall, interviewees mentioned residential histories more often in relation to their local community participation than the influence of socioeconomic status or gender. Incomers and life-long regional stayers who moved from one village to another for example stressed the value of participation for settling in. Additionally, while some of the quotes above showed how being a woman was seen as potentially problematic in local politics, the example of a female incomer with a high socioeconomic status adds another perspective. "They always found it good somehow: There's a woman from [a city] and she stands up for us" (R04: 145). She felt accepted and appreciated as a politician, exactly because she was a woman with an urban background. This and other interview passages indicate that socioeconomic status, residential history and gender interrelate in shaping individuals' experiences.

#### 4.2. Expectations regarding other residents' local community participation

In their reflections on local community participation, interviewees had expectations towards *younger people* and *incomers* (also see [Appendix B](#)). Zooming in on interviewees' statements on *younger people*, only one interviewee specified whom he meant with younger individuals, namely "the following generation, the 30- to 40-year-olds", but then also referred to everyone below 50 years (R02: 39). These 'others' were viewed as reluctant to contribute to the local associations, mainly due to reasons like work and family commitments, voluntary work being unpaid and preferences like online gaming.

Try searching successors to any volunteers in the associations here in the rural. There are none! [...] You don't get paid, you've got other things on your plate, starting with all kinds of electronics and stuff: 'Oh, what am I supposed to do there? Others can do it, right?'. (R13: 148)

Besides younger people's way of life and their decisions, the dominance of older residents in certain roles was criticised as one reason for high average ages in associations: "[In one of the sports associations] the old guys should have let the younger ones take their turn earlier, and should not have blocked" (R12: 47). Organised community and community participation were largely framed as positive and essential for life in the respective villages. Therefore, there was widespread disappointment regarding the younger generation's perceived lack of enthusiasm for participation, which was seen as a threat to the community or rural life. There is "little willingness to take on a leadership role. In my view that is a big problem for the next few years" (R02: 39). One interviewee even saw informal ties under threat due to young people's disinterest:

I mean what still happens between people, even without the associations, that's still okay. At least locally. [...] But I say the word BUT in between: The old people are getting fewer and the young people [...] have other interests than comfortably sitting together in a group. When I think of all the work we used to do together, no matter what it was for, on a voluntary basis. (R13: 168)

This tension was also reflected in interviewees' comments on their

children's participation in the local community, which ranged from letting them do their thing to convincing one's children to participate:

Nevertheless, [my children] have now decided [to follow my example and contribute to the local community], after long conversations with me, but also with friends and acquaintances of mine, who addressed my daughter and my son: 'you have those connections and your father has those connections- and it's in your blood too'. (R12: 19)

Several interviewees discussed *incomers* as a group that was not participating in the local community, but not necessarily stated that they expected incomers to participate. Some interviewees assumed that incomers' reluctance to participate was "the general trend everywhere" (R09: 64) as they did not know the village customs. Others, however, stressed the importance of participation for integration and one very active resident highlighted plans to introduce newcomers more rapidly to encourage their participation:

Welcoming them with a flyer, then saying: 'we'll meet [...] and share some of the [local] history with you.' [...] And then we have to try to get away from the classic associations a bit, do conversation circles or so. And at some point, they will also join associations. Or other associations will develop. (R12: 47)

The majority of interviewees believed that either *younger people* or *incomers* were not sufficiently involved in the community. While they directly expressed their expectations towards younger people, they more indirectly posited that incomers should participate for their own good.

For comments on others' community participation, there were no striking differences in terms of socioeconomic status or gender. However, incomers and returnees tended to emphasise the responsibility of younger people, while life-long regional stayers rather addressed incomers' lack of participation. People who held a position in local politics or in associations and interest groups more often expected younger people to participate as well.

#### 4.3. Facing expectations to participate and ways of dealing with them

Just as interviewees expressed their expectations towards others, several of them also faced expectations to participate themselves. These expectations were reported both as coming from other residents, but also as a more abstract obligation due to limited means of the municipality (Appendix C). Several interviewees, particularly incomers, reported being asked by local residents or the village mayor to participate: "I was then asked if I wanted to join the local council, and they kept asking and bugging me. And after [a few years], I was elected" (R04: 31). Additionally, expectations based on a sense of reciprocity among villagers were observed: "So these are all things that are going on here. But they are also expected, that is also part of it. Here in the give and take, it is clearly important to give something" (R02: 45). And one life-long regional stayer positively mentioned the frequent offers to fill positions after gaining respect within the community. All interviewees who faced expectations by other residents described accepting these and referred to positive effects. The latter included being well known, increasing one's network in and beyond the local community and receiving recognition and positive feedback for one's engagement.

Besides experiencing other residents' expectations, some interviewees also referred to *feeling expected to participate due to limited means of the municipality*, arising from inadequate political initiative and

funding. One interviewee for example listed:

The swimming pool, everything, we have to keep it going through associations. But our museum too. [...] Because, as I said, there's no money. [...] It's also more or less expected that everything is done [by the local residents] – according to the motto: 'Help yourselves'. (R05: 118)

Other interviewees mentioned that they felt expected to participate in social projects for people in need, social activities in the village and public space maintenance. Two of the interviewees problematised the need for residents to step in, but they both also generalised this as a problem beyond the village: "It's nothing new, it's like that almost everywhere" (R05: 118). Two others rather presented the need to contribute to certain activities as a logical consequence of the financial situation of the municipality. One of them criticised that residents generally used to accept this need to participate in the past, but lost this attitude over time. In the context of shared work shifts for public space maintenance, the interviewee mimicked residents' changed attitude:

'Why should I do something if others are doing it? They are responsible for it'. And it used to be completely different. Here, too. And not only here, everywhere. People knew exactly: 'We have to do something together, because there is no other way. Because otherwise there wouldn't be enough money'. (R13: 172)

While the interviewee's criticism primarily referred to the local residents who stopped taking on the responsibility for their surroundings together, he additionally generalised this trend to be a problem "everywhere".

*Expectations by other residents* were reported by both women and men, particularly those with medium to high socioeconomic status (Appendix C). All were active in positions in local politics and associations and interest groups. More incomers and returnees than life-long regional stayers described experiencing these expectations and it is striking that all of them accepted the expectations. For *abstract feelings of being expected to participate*, there is no indication that these are specific to a certain socioeconomic group or gender. However, they were more often mentioned by life-long regional stayers than incomers and all of them held positions in associations or in local politics at some point in their life.

## 5. Discussion

The preceding analyses yielded insights into older residents' local community participation in a rural region characterised by a substantially ageing and declining population. They confirm previous findings on high participation rates among older people when considering the three identified fields of participation (Lengerer et al., 2022). Moreover, interviewees participated primarily within the village context, less frequently extending to other villages or towns.

The first research question focused on how older residents' local community participation reflects differences in socioeconomic status, gender and residential histories. Firstly, positions in local politics tend to be occupied by individuals with a medium to high socioeconomic status, while individuals in positions in associations and interest groups and those engaged in informal community activities are more diverse. This finding thus indicates that people with different socioeconomic statuses in the region under study participate informally and find access to associations and interest groups and positions in these. For local politics,

however, my findings support the idea that more privileged individuals more often participate in formalised contexts. For interpreting this result, we draw on Meyer and Rameder (2022) who quantitatively studied the relation between individuals' resource-related statuses and voluntary positions. They referred to Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) notion of social fields in which actors are dynamically positioned based on the forms of capitals they possess, including economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. Their findings stress the role of symbolic capital – defined as “prestige or status that derives from previous practice” (Meyer and Rameder, 2022, p. 20) – as both prerequisite for as well as an outcome of having a formal voluntary position. Our results similarly indicate that residents with higher socioeconomic statuses are the ones who can acquire additional symbolic capital, or prestige, from their participation in positions in local politics.

Secondly, gender differences were observed while interviewees rarely referred to these when describing their own and others' local community participation. A gender gap was more strongly observed in positions in associations and interest groups than in local politics, where incoming women with a higher socioeconomic status also occupied positions. One interpretation is that incoming women may have more flexibility and time for such positions, as they are not as strongly embedded in local networks and circles of gossip. The latter has been shown to impact women's behaviour and opportunities in rural areas (Jóhannesdóttir and Skaptadóttir, 2023). With a focus on associations and interest groups, it is interesting that life-long staying women with low and medium socio-economic status established women's groups as a response to their husbands' involvement in associations. While gender differences could not be identified for informal community activities, both men and women reported care activities in the family as largely taken on by women. Traditional gender roles were thus still prevalent in caregiving within the family, while gender differences in voluntary work contexts are generally found to quantitatively decrease (Simonson et al., 2021). Therefore, the multiplicity of roles women take on in rural areas needs to be highlighted (Skinner and Joseph, 2011). As opposed to the roles and activities reported by the interviewed men, women less often described receiving prestige or other forms of rewards.

Thirdly, residential histories were diverse in all three fields of participation, but it was striking that several incomers and returnees held responsible positions in local politics and associations and interest groups. However, their trajectories of participation differed. Many life-long regional stayers described starting in associations with subsequent positions in local politics. Their experiences thus support Ishizawa's (2015) finding that participation in associations often translates into political participation. Several male life-long regional stayers who moved from one village to another stressed their fast and easy integration process because of prior participation in associations and resulting regional networks. This finding relates to previous studies that have highlighted the role of sports associations in “building socio-spatial networks within and beyond [...] home communities” (Donkersloot, 2011, p. 139) – especially for men. Returnees' and life-long regional stayers' belonging is aided by such social capital, but also by the symbolic capital related to being a local from the region. Their trajectories of participation can, however, also be interpreted as limited by their local social capital and the status as ‘insider’. Mechanisms of gossip as well as the comfort of already feeling accepted are part of the explanation. Incomers more often took short-cuts into responsible positions, partly because of the village mayors' active recruitment of successors for

vacant positions. Incomers themselves tended to interpret being asked or voted into positions in associations and local politics as recognition and saw it as a way to develop attachment to the new place and its residents. However, they prioritised contributing according to their interests over gaining acceptance from other residents, which indicates their confidence in their choice to selectively belong (Haartsen and Stockdale, 2018; Savage, 2010). Incomers with lower socioeconomic status who participated in associations and informal community activities also related their participation to the wish for acceptance and belonging.

My findings highlight that socioeconomic status, gender and residential history interrelate and together influence the ways in which individuals participate in their local communities as well as their experiences. Interestingly, socioeconomic status-related differences were not problematised by interviewees, while gender-related differences in local politics were addressed by female interviewees. The interviewed men did not mention the topic unless they were directly asked. Gender differences in informal community activities and associations and interest groups were not addressed at all. Residential histories and differences in participation were addressed by many, often relying on the stereotypical dichotomy of incomers versus locals as an explanation for others' non-participation. While these findings question the image of the non-involved incomer and confirm that “categorisations of ‘locals’ and ‘newcomers’ are no longer sufficient to describe contemporary rural population dynamics” (Gieling et al., 2017, p. 245), the analysis also reveals the continued reproduction of these categories by rural inhabitants. This observation underlines the extent to which individuals' residential histories are instrumentalised in discursive boundary setting of local identities and the social construction of belonging (Antonsich, 2010).

With the second research question, I zoomed in on older people's expectations towards others regarding their community participation. These expectations were mostly justified with the need to secure succession for positions in associations and local politics and to continue the organisation and livability of the local community. The analysis revealed that younger individuals and incomers to the village were most frequently expected to participate. Especially interviewees who were or had been in responsible positions often expressed disappointment and their lack of understanding for younger people's perceived non-involvement. Interpretations could encompass lifestyle changes in younger generations with increased digital interaction and individualisation, but also generational differences in views on rural community life. Further research investigating younger people's perspectives on their community participation can offer additional insights and examine the roles of contract ideologies and relationships of care in younger age groups – to use Trnka and Trundle's (2014) terminology. When addressing incomers, some interviewees showed empathy for why they were not participating and suggested guiding them toward participation. Others framed incomers' non-participation as ‘normal’, suggesting it was their own loss for not integrating. One possible explanation for the discrepancy between opinions on younger people and incomers is that older residents viewed younger people as part of intergenerational, reciprocal relationships, while incomers were not automatically seen as part of these relationships. Further research is needed to delve into this matter.

Regarding the third research question on how older rural residents experienced and responded to expectations to participate, two main sources of expectations were identified. Firstly, fellow residents directly



asking them to participate, leading to acceptance or even internalisation of these expectations. These can be interpreted as expressions of social contract ideologies characterised by reciprocity between residents (Trnka and Trundle, 2014). I interpret these ideologies as powerful because of the interrelation between individuals' identities, their place attachment and their feelings of belonging, which depend on others' approval (Antonsich, 2010). Secondly, more abstract expectations were described by the interviewed residents. Those who accepted these seemed to understand their participation as part of an interrelation of care for their village community with the latter depending on support due to negative local developments. The negative perspective of residents who were not willing to follow responsabilisation from 'elsewhere' can be seen as closest indication of a perceived neoliberal responsabilisation. Unwillingness to follow this responsabilisation was identified for residents with a strong place attachment who had experienced larger personal losses affecting their emotional and physical capacities to participate, resulting in anger about being overburdened.

Previous studies did not find evidence for rural residents' participation being driven by external pressures (Bischof and Decker, 2023; Schwarzenberg et al., 2017; Steinführer, 2015). However, my findings underline that local community participation is strongly accompanied by expectations – expressions of social contract ideologies, interrelations of care and neoliberal responsabilisation – which indicate a strong norm to participate. Against this background and the observed differences in participation, the integrative function of community participation needs to be evaluated as ambivalent. While participation was frequently described as positive for integration, experiences of exclusion from certain activities were emotionally difficult for individuals. Even though non-participation does not necessarily reflect exclusion and can also result from a conscious choice to “exercis[e] a right not to take part” (Curry and Fisher, 2012, p. 359), it remains to be researched who is entitled or accepted to exercise this right as well as the implications of such decisions on the lives of individuals residing in villages.

## 6. Conclusion

Many rural areas in Germany, like the region under study, have a culture of self-organisation through village councils, associations, and informal support networks. In the context of substantially ageing and declining populations, older residents' community participation has increasingly received attention as beneficial or even necessary for their own well-being and their communities. This paper explored differences in how older individuals participate in three fields that emerged as relevant: local politics, associations and interest groups, and informal community activities. Socioeconomic status, gender, and residential history were identified as interrelating factors that shape people's experiences of participation. I interpreted this effect in reference to residents' forms of capital and their belonging or wish to belong to social groups characterised by boundaries (Antonsich, 2010). By adopting a relational perspective, which recognises the interconnectedness between individuals and various actors (Trnka and Trundle, 2014), my analysis of experienced and held expectations to participate provided valuable insights into forms of responsabilisation. The findings indicate the strong normativity related to participation in an ageing rural region, a normativity that affects individuals differently depending on their position in the local community. The study's qualitative approach focused on a small sample of interviewees in an ageing region in

Germany with a specific history, offering a localised and time-bound perspective on older residents' community participation. Future research could add to these findings with longitudinal studies and research that compares participation in different life course stages or different places.

Differences in participation need not necessarily be viewed as problematic. However, they may become problematic when certain groups are misrepresented based on gender, socioeconomic status and residential history or, not addressed in this paper, ethnic background. Such misrepresentation might lead to unequal distribution of and access to resources and perpetuate the marginalisation of certain social groups. It is important to raise awareness about this as researchers, planners, and policy-makers tend to focus predominantly on the integrative aspects of community participation (Kleiner, 2021a; Meyer and Rameder, 2022). Strategies for addressing under- and overrepresentation may involve promoting residents' access to information about local organisations, political structures, and their functions as well as increasing official recognition of informal forms of support between residents. Additionally, projects could aim at empowering underrepresented groups and providing support to those already carrying significant responsibilities. Open discussion formats on the needs of different social groups, potential solutions and responsibilities between residents, associations, organisations, local politicians and administration may help to coordinate efforts to safeguard local quality of life in places with ageing populations and centralised public and private services. Such formats could for example be encouraged and financially supported through community development programmes and age-friendly planning strategies (Zhang et al., 2020).

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## Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author used Jenni AI in order to shorten selected text passages. While using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

## Declaration of competing interest

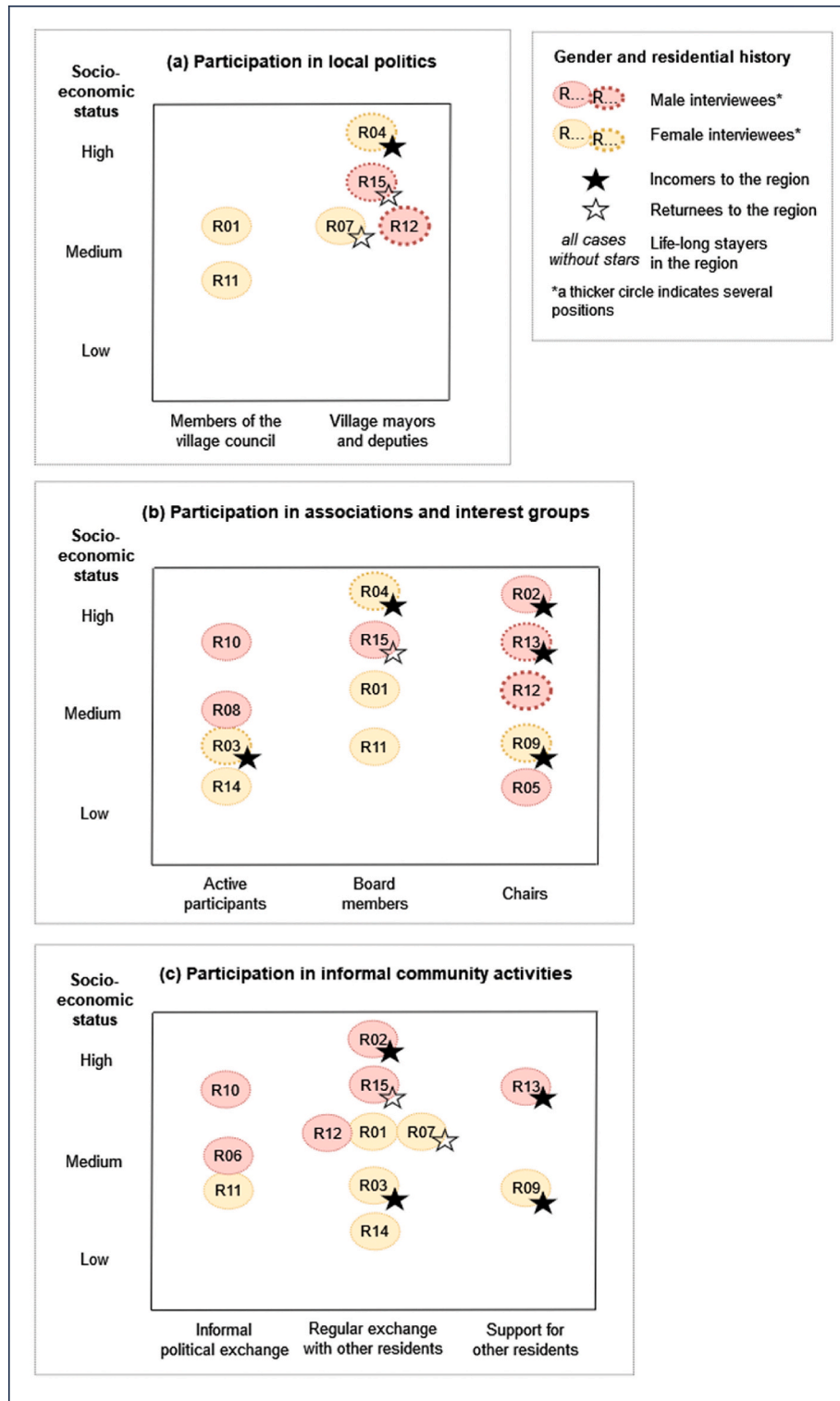
None.

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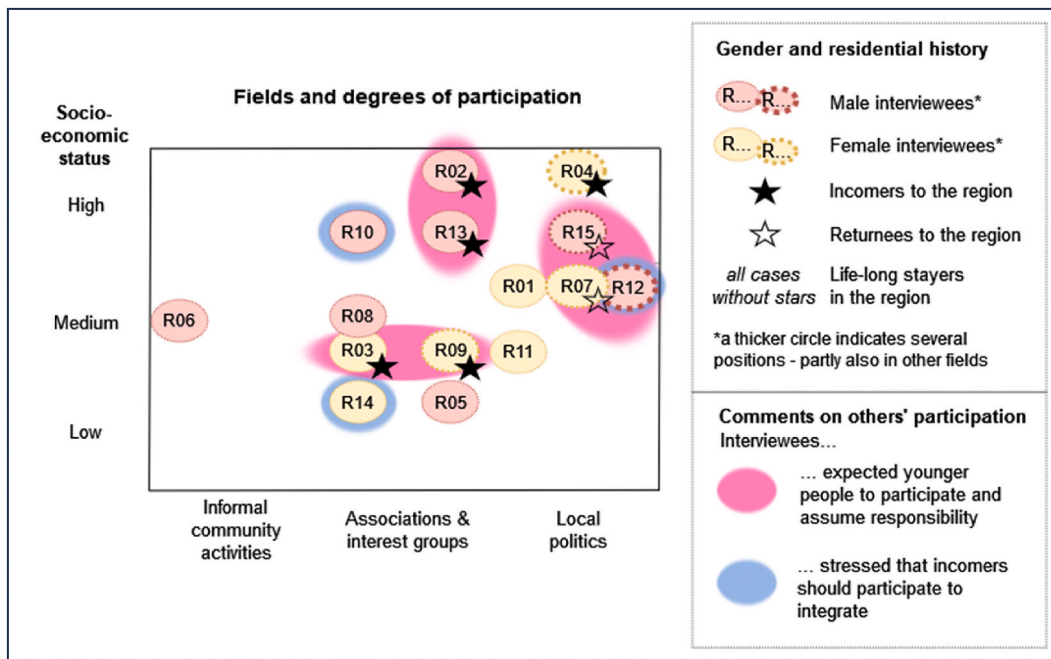
I want to thank the interview participants for their time and their openness to share their stories. Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude for the very productive collaboration within the STAYin(g) Rural project team and for inspiring conversations with Larissa Deppisch.

Appendix

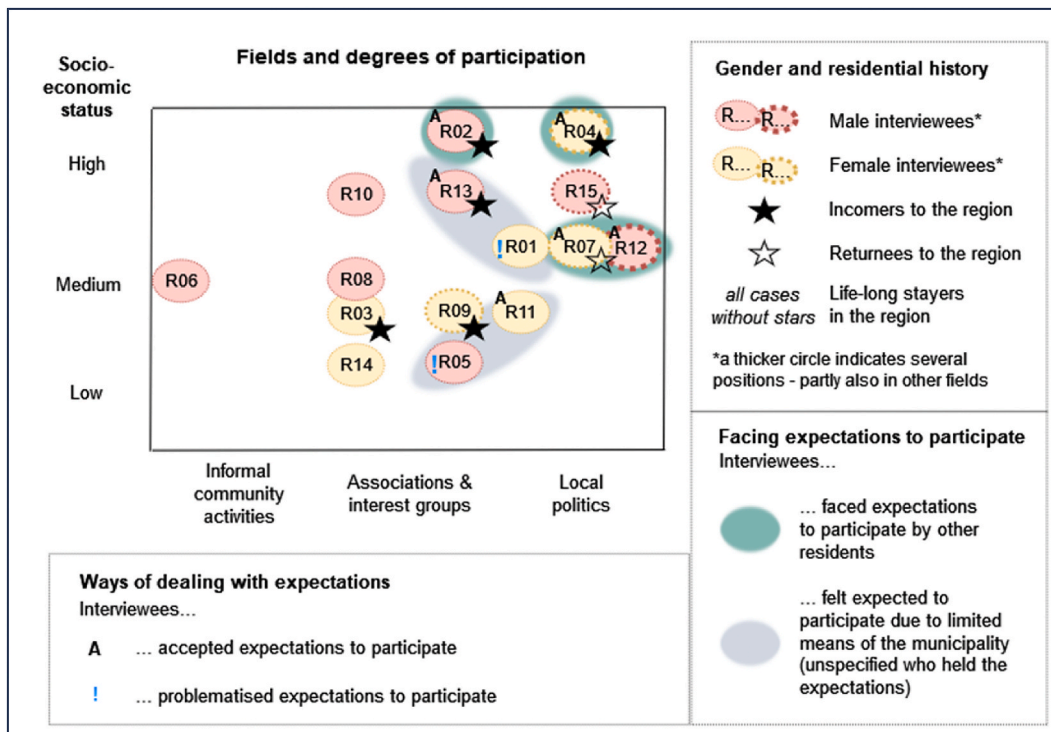
Appendix A: The role of socioeconomic status, gender, and residential histories in local community participation – visualised qualitative findings



Appendix B: Expectations regarding other residents' local community participation – visualised qualitative findings.\*



Appendix C: Expectations to participate faced and ways of dealing with them – visualised qualitative findings.\*



\* In Appendix B and C, interviewees are mapped according to their most formal position in the community. The arrangement from informal community activities on the left to local politics on the right is not a ranking of importance, but rather a depiction of formality derived from interview responses.

## Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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