Deliberative processes turned into a pedagogical arena in Rwanda's green urbanisation

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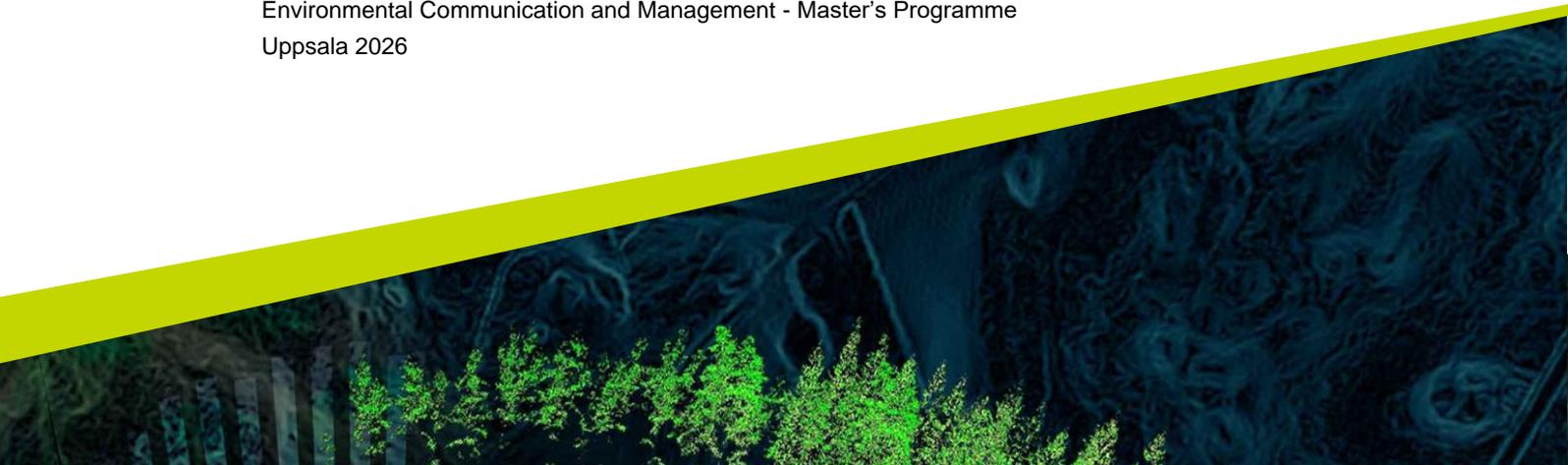
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Abstract

This thesis explores the transformative role of public participation in Rwanda's rapid urban development, with particular attention to the Green City Kigali (GCK) initiative. Traditional models of urban planning in Rwanda often treat public engagement as a superficial or procedural step, which limits genuine stakeholder influence and fosters resistance rooted in cultural norms and misinformation. In contrast, this study examines a new model that I themed "Pedagogical Approach (PA)"—viewing participation as an ongoing educational and capacity-building process—that seeks to embed civic learning into the fabric of urban planning. Through qualitative research involving interviews with some public servants (planners) from different government institutions, the study reveals that continuous teaching, trust-building, and cultural sensitization are critical for fostering meaningful citizen involvement.

Key findings demonstrate that transforming participation into a sustained learning process facilitates behavioural change, alleviates fears related to displacement and affordability, and cultivates a sense of ownership among citizens/recipients. This approach addresses deeply ingrained norms around land ownership, privacy, and societal hierarchies by employing repetitive engagement, simplified technical communication, and systemic demonstrations of urban standards. Moreover, the findings underscore that patience, empathy, and long-term commitment are essential components enabling this pedagogical strategy to succeed in a context of rapid development and top-down governance.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on participatory urban planning by highlighting the importance of shifting from symbolic consultation toward an embedded culture of civic education. It offers practical policy recommendations for balancing swift infrastructural delivery with the inclusive and educational engagement of communities, ultimately aiming to produce more sustainable, equitable, and socially resilient urban environments. The insights from Rwanda's experience with GCK provide valuable lessons for other rapidly urbanising contexts seeking to reconcile development imperatives with participatory, culturally sensitive governance.

Keywords: Explain-ing, teaching, pedagogical process, deliberative processes, urbanisation, planning

Table of contents

6

List of figures

Abbreviations

GCK: Green City Kigali
MoE: Ministry of Environment
SLU: Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Urbanisation is widely recognised as a critical driver of socio-economic development, offering pathways for poverty reduction, economic growth, and improved living standards (Calderon et al. 2022; Dociu & Dunarintu 2012). However, the rapid expansion of cities also presents complex challenges, particularly in balancing the roles of experts knowledge and citizen participation in urban planning processes (Lane 2006). Inclusive urbanisation, which emphasises equitable access to resources, services, and opportunities for all residents, depends heavily on effective governance that integrates diverse voices and knowledge systems. Yet, in many emerging city projects like Kigali, there remains a persistent tension between the dominance of experts along with government officials' knowledge and the meaningful involvement of lay citizens.

Urbanisation in Rwanda has been accelerating at an unprecedented pace, driven by national ambitions to transform the country into a modern, sustainable, and prosperous society. Central to this vision is the Green City Kigali (GCK) project, a flagship initiative designed to exemplify Rwanda's commitment to sustainable development, innovative urban planning, and environmentally friendly infrastructure. While rapid urban growth has the potential to catalyse economic growth and improve living standards, it also presents complex challenges related to social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and community participation.

This thesis explores these challenges within the context of the Green City Kigali Initiative, a flagship green urban development project, which at the time of writing this thesis, is in its early stages in Rwanda. The Green City Kigali project aims to establish a model for sustainable, green urbanisation that can be replicated throughout the country (MoE 2020). While the project holds significant promise for advancing environmental sustainability and urban resilience (MoE 2020), it also reflects broader governance dynamics where expert-driven decision-making may inadvertently hinder deliberative democracy and participatory planning.

In Rwanda, public participation is currently perceived as a cornerstone of democratic and inclusive urban planning processes. It is envisioned to foster a sense of ownership, ensure responsiveness to local needs, and promote social cohesion. However, translating these ideals into practice, especially within contexts characterised by top-down governance, resource limitations, and deeply rooted cultural norms, remains fraught with difficulties. Despite constitutional

commitments to citizen engagement, the reality often reveals superficial or symbolic participation, where community voices have limited influence on tangible planning outcomes.

This discrepancy between the idealistic importance of public participation and its practical implementation raises critical questions: How can urban development projects like GCK effectively incorporate genuine citizen involvement? What strategies are necessary to overcome structural, cultural, and perceptual barriers? And how can participation be transformed from a formal requirement into an empowering, continuous learning process that fosters deep engagement?

1.2   Aim and research questions

This thesis aims to investigate the nature, practices, and underlying dynamics of public participation in Rwanda's urban development projects, with particular emphasis on the Green City Kigali (GCK) initiative. Rwanda's rapid modernisation, driven by notable flagship projects such as GCK, presents a unique context where the pursuit of a modern, internationally recognised development narrative intersects with the principles of inclusive governance. Despite the strong advocacy for participatory planning, there exists a complex circumstances in which public engagement often remains superficial, constrained by structural, social, and political factors.

The primary objective of this research is twofold: firstly, to analyse how planners conceptualised, operationalised, and experienced public participation across different stages of urban development in Rwanda; and secondly, to examine how participation functions as a pedagogical process—an ongoing effort aimed at educating, informing, and empowering citizens to co-own development initiatives. The emphasis on participation as a pedagogical process emerged from my data collection, as participants frequently stressed the importance of continuous education, explanation, and trust-building. This approach underscores the importance of moving beyond token or insincere consultations toward a model that fosters, on one hand, genuine understanding, dialogue, and shared decision-making; and planners' driven decisions on the other hand.

The study will explore how overarching priorities influence the scope and depth of citizen involvement, often leading to a situation where participation is tailored to serve efficiency and image preservation rather than meaningful inclusion (Arnstein 1969; Cooke & Kothari 2001). Thus, this raises critical questions about the legitimacy, sustainability, and democratic quality of such planning processes.

By engaging with diverse perspectives from public servants who are deeply involved in urban planning, the thesis seeks to uncover the factors that facilitate or hinder deliberative processes. It will also explore the strategies and practices used to bridge knowledge gaps, mitigate fears, and build trust within communities. Special attention will be paid to the role of continuous education and communication, viewed as essential components of participation as a pedagogical process, that aim to transform citizens from passive beneficiaries into active co-creators and custodians of their urban environment.

This investigation is guided by the following central research questions:

1. How is public participation understood, valued, and practised within Rwanda's urban development projects, such as Green City Kigali?

2. What are the key structural, institutional, social, and perceptual factors that influence the extent, quality, and continuity of citizen engagement in urbanisation projects?

3. To what extent do national development narratives, international standards, and political priorities shape or constrain participatory practices, especially when these practices conflict with requirements for rapid implementation and project delivery?

4. How do citizens' perceptions, fears, and levels of awareness affect their engagement, trust, and willingness to collaborate in urban planning processes?

5. What communication, education, and engagement strategies are employed by planners and policymakers to bridge knowledge gaps, involve marginalised groups, and build sustainable participation?

The overarching purpose of this research is to contribute nuanced insights into the complexities of participatory urban planning in a post-conflict, rapidly developing setting. It seeks to identify practical pathways for fostering a participatory culture that is rooted in transparency, inclusivity, and mutual learning. Ultimately, the thesis aims to inform policy and practice advocating for approaches that balance efficiency with democratic legitimacy, and highlight the transformative potential of embedding participation as a pedagogical, continuous process rather than a tokenistic formality.

1.3 Structure of the study

This thesis begins with an introduction that contextualises Rwanda's rapid urbanisation and development ambitions, highlighting the crucial role of public participation in urban planning and governance. This section underscores the tensions between the pressing need for infrastructure delivery and the desire for inclusive, democratic engagement, setting the stage for the subsequent exploration.

The narrative then transitions into a comprehensive literature review that traces the evolution of concepts related to public participation in urban planning. It discusses classic models of engagement, such as consultation, deliberation, and co-production—and critiques the often superficial implementation of these models in practice. Emphasising the importance of democratic principles, social justice, and local knowledge, the review highlights the shift from top-down, tokenistic approaches towards more inclusive and empowering forms of participation. This theoretical groundwork provides the necessary basis for understanding the practical challenges faced in Rwanda.

Following this, the research methodology is detailed, focusing on a case study of the Green City Kigali (GCK) project. It describes the qualitative approach that includes interviews with participants and observations. This section clarifies how data was collected to explore the actual practices of participation, the underlying attitudes, and the contextual factors influencing engagement processes.

The core findings are then presented, starting with the recognition that participation in Rwanda, especially within the GCK initiative, is primarily conceptualised as a pedagogical, educational process aimed at civic learning. The study finds that efforts tend to focus on explaining and teaching with an emphasis on building citizens' understanding, trust, and a collective mindset. It is observed that this approach is long-term, requiring persistent engagement, cultural sensitivity, and trust-building measures to shift norms and attitudes.

However, these participatory efforts are often constrained by the urgency of development projects, resource limitations, and cultural norms that prioritise authority and traditional deference. The study highlights how time pressures and institutional capacities lead to superficial or tokenistic consultations that serve to legitimise predetermined outcomes rather than genuinely co-creating solutions. Examples such as expedited relocations due to environmental emergencies illustrate the dilemma of balancing safety, efficiency, and inclusive decision-making.

The discussion section synthesises these empirical findings with theoretical insights, emphasisingthat genuine participation in Rwanda involves continuous education and long-term relationship building. It explores the idea that for participation to be substantive, it must evolve from symbolic consultation towards deeper civic learning and empowerment. The analysis also critiques the political and cultural factors, such as national reputation concerns, traditional authority norms, and resource constraints, that influence how participation is practised and understood on the ground.

Finally, the study concludes with recommendations for fostering more meaningful engagement, advocating for sustained civic education, systemic capacity-building, and culturally sensitive approaches that embed participation as a core principle rather than a procedural formality. It underscores the importance of ongoing explanation, trust development, and systemic change to realise participatory governance that is genuinely transformative, even within a top-down political context.

1.4 What is Green City Kigali initiative

As it is stated in the official documents of the Ministry of Environment (MoE), and the Green City Kigali Company's website; The Green City Kigali (GCK) initiative is a flagship project led by the Government of Rwanda to address environmental and urban challenges through innovative models of green urbanisation. Positioned as a key component of the Rwandan-German Climate and Development Partnership, the initiative is supported by the German government through KfW Development Bank, with strong involvement from the Rwanda Green Fund and the Rwanda Social Security Board.

At the heart of the initiative is Kinyinya Hill in Kigali, where a 600-hectare site has been designated for development. The project is closely aligned with the City of Kigali Master Plan 2050 and envisions an affordable, sustainable urban community capable of hosting between 170,000 and 200,000 residents.

The initial phase of GCK will be implemented on a 16-hectare pilot site, planned to accommodate 1,700 to 2,000 housing units. This phase will be delivered through public-private partnerships, showcasing the role of collaboration in achieving Rwanda's climate-resilient urban development goals.

To ensure effective implementation, the Green City Kigali Company was established as a special-purpose vehicle by the Rwanda Green Fund and the Rwanda Social Security Board. Its mandate is to design and deliver green

infrastructure and affordable housing solutions, as well as to procure private developers who will implement the pilot site. The ultimate ambition is to set a model for sustainable, climate-resilient urban communities that can be replicated across Rwanda and the African continent (GCK 2024).

Housing within this project is allocated with specific percentages: 10% of the housing is reserved for low-income citizens (Ubudehe Categories 1 and 2), another 10% is designated for wealthy individuals, and the remaining 80% is available for purchase by those who can afford it (Topafricanews 2019).

2. Literature review

The literature on deliberative processes in urban planning emphasises its critical role in fostering democratic governance, social inclusion, and sustainable development. However, the practical implementation of participatory processes often diverges significantly from theoretical ideals, especially in contexts characterised by rapid development, resource constraints, and political priorities (Hallgren 2024). This review synthesises contemporary insights and debates surrounding the nature of participation, with a particular focus on the Rwandan context as illustrated in the provided case study of the Green City Kigali (GCK) project.

2.1 Conceptual foundations of public participation in urban planning

At its core, deliberative processes in urban planning are rooted in principles of democratic governance, inclusivity, and social justice (Esmail & Corburn 2020). Classic models distinguish between consultative, deliberative, and co-productive forms of engagement, emphasising that meaningful participation involves not only informing or consulting citizens but also enabling them to influence decision-making (Calderon 2020). These models posit that participation fosters transparency, legitimacy, and better outcomes in urban development.

Public participation in urban planning is a vital component of creating inclusive, sustainable, and equitable cities. It involves engaging community members in the decision-making processes that shape their environments. This review examines the evolution, benefits, challenges, and strategies associated with public participation in urban planning, drawing on different literature.

The concept of public participation in planning has evolved significantly over time. Early approaches were often top-down, with limited community input. Arnstein (1969) critiques the varying degrees of citizen involvement, from manipulation to genuine citizen control. In recent decades, there has been a shift towards more collaborative and inclusive models, driven by a growing recognition of the value of local knowledge and the importance of social justice (Innes & Booher 2003). This evolution reflects a broader trend towards democratic governance and the empowerment of marginalised communities (Fainstein 2010).

Effective public participation offers numerous benefits. It can lead to more informed and responsive planning decisions (Westin 2019) that better reflect the needs and preferences of the community (Forester 1999). By involving residents in the planning process, cities can foster a sense of ownership and social cohesion, which is essential for the long-term success of urban development projects (Putnam 2000). Moreover, participation can enhance environmental sustainability by incorporating local ecological knowledge and promoting stewardship (Berkes 2012).

Despite its benefits, public participation in urban planning faces several challenges. One common obstacle is the potential for unequal participation (Calderón 2024), where certain groups (e.g. the wealthy, the educated) dominate the process, marginalising the voices of others (Bryson et al. 2013). Resource constraints, such as limited funding and staff capacity, can also hinder effective engagement (Huxley & Dean 1999). Additionally, conflicting interests and values among stakeholders can create tensions and make it difficult to reach consensus (Healey 1997).

To overcome these challenges, planners and policymakers have developed various strategies for promoting more effective and equitable participation. These include using diverse engagement methods (e.g. workshops, online forums, participatory mapping) to reach different segments of the population (Sanoff 2000). Building trust and establishing clear communication channels between planners and the community is also crucial (Innes & Booher 2010). Furthermore, providing adequate resources and training for both planners and participants can enhance the quality of engagement (King et al. 1998).

Public participation is an essential element of contemporary urban planning. While challenges remain, the ongoing development of inclusive and innovative participation strategies holds great promise for creating more just, sustainable, and vibrant cities. By embracing the principles of collaboration and empowerment, planners can harness the collective intelligence of communities to shape a better future for all (Quick & Bryson 2016).

3. Theoretical framework: Environmental Governance

Environmental governance theory studies how societies structure and apply strategies to manage their relationship with the natural environment (Partelow et al. 2020). It encompasses a broad spectrum of concepts, actors, and mechanisms that shape environmental decision-making processes. This field has evolved significantly over time, reflecting the complex and interconnected nature of environmental issues facing the world today. At its core, environmental governance involves the institutions, policies, and practices through which human societies address environmental challenges (Partelow et al. 2020).

Unlike traditional views that focus solely on government regulations, environmental governance recognises the importance of multiple actors, including private businesses, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local communities, and international institutions. These actors collaborate, compete, or influence policies, leading to a multifaceted and layered system of environmental management (Biermann & Pattberg 2008a).

Historically, the initial approach to environmental governance was predominantly state-centric. This perspective emphasised the role of governments and public agencies as the primary entities responsible for protecting the environment through legislation, regulation, and enforcement. Mechanisms such as pollution standards, environmental permits, and penalties for violations exemplify this approach. The underlying assumption was that centralised authority could effectively control environmental degradation (Lemos & Agrawal 2006).

However, the state-centric paradigm faced some limitations. It was often criticised for being slow, bureaucratic, and sometimes disconnected from local realities or innovative solutions. Relying solely on government action can hamper responsiveness and adaptation. This led to the emergence of alternative approaches that sought to incorporate economic and social dimensions.

Complementing these strategies is the concept of collaborative governance, which emphasises involving multiple stakeholders in environmental decision-making. Recognising that many environmental issues are complex and interconnected, this approach seeks to build consensus among diverse actors such as government agencies, businesses, NGOs, and local communities. Such participatory processes foster shared responsibility and often lead to innovative

solutions that might not emerge in purely top-down or market-driven systems (Ansell, Christopher K 2023).

In recent years, the field of environmental governance has been shaped by emerging trends aiming to make management more adaptive and just. Adaptive governance emphasises flexibility, learning, and resilience. Because environmental systems are inherently complex and unpredictable, adaptive approaches recognise the need to revise policies as new information and challenges emerge. This involves mechanisms like pilot projects, feedback loops, and continuous learning (Folke et al. 2005).

Another critical trend is the focus on environmental justice, which aims to address inequalities by ensuring that marginalised communities are not disproportionately affected by environmental harms. This shift underscores the importance of equity and inclusion in decision-making processes, making governance systems more integrated and inclusive (Schlosberg 2004). Looking ahead, the future of environmental governance lies in developing systems that are resilient, participatory, and capable of addressing the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion. Researchers and practitioners are increasingly exploring ways to combine different approaches—state-based, market, and collaborative—to create integrated solutions that are both effective and equitable (Biermann et al. 2010a).

In a nutshell, environmental governance theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how societies manage their natural resources and address environmental problems. From early state-centric approaches to innovative market-based and collaborative strategies, the field continues to evolve, reflecting the complexity of contemporary environmental challenges. Embracing adaptive, inclusive, and resilient governance approaches will be vital for securing a sustainable future for both humanity and the planet.

3.1 Environmental governance theory to pedagogical approach

Environmental governance theory provides a comprehensive lens for examining how societies organise themselves to manage their interactions with the natural environment. It goes beyond the narrow view of government regulation to encompass a broader spectrum of actors, institutions, and practices (Biermann & Pattberg 2008b; Lemos & Agrawal 2008). Governance, in this sense, is not only about who sets the rules and enforces them, but also about how societies learn, adapt, and innovate in the face of environmental challenges. When connected to

pedagogy, governance theory highlights the crucial role of learning and knowledge exchange in shaping environmental outcomes. Urban sustainability projects, such as the Green City Kigali (GCK) initiative, therefore provide a fertile ground to explore the intersections of governance and pedagogical approaches.

As mentioned earlier, environmental governance was framed through a state-centric paradigm, where governments were the primary authority for protecting the environment. Regulatory tools such as standards, permits, and enforcement mechanisms were considered sufficient for managing environmental degradation (Lemos & Agrawal 2008). This governance mode has parallels with transmissive pedagogical approaches, in which knowledge flows unidirectionally from authority to learner (Sterling 2001).

While such approaches are essential for building professional competencies, such as training planners and developers on green building codes; they risk alienating communities if engagement is limited to information-sharing. Scholars such as Arnstein (1969) and Forester (1999) remind us that genuine participation requires moving beyond tokenistic consultation. In the context of GCK, this suggests that regulatory compliance must be accompanied by participatory pedagogical strategies, such as community briefings and "teach-back" workshops, to ensure inclusivity and understanding.

Over time, market-based approaches gained prominence, introducing economic incentives, public-private partnerships (PPPs), and entrepreneurial models to achieve environmental goals (Biermann et al. 2010b; Bulkeley & Betsill 2005). This logic reflects a shift towards governance that mobilises private capital and innovation. Pedagogically, such approaches resonate with problem-based and studio-based learning models, where learners tackle real-world problems through collaborative design and experimentation (Wiek et al. 2011).

Within GCK, interdisciplinary "green housing studios" could mirror this governance model by bringing together architects, engineers, developers, and residents to co-design affordable housing prototypes. Such pedagogy not only fosters technical innovation but also addresses concerns highlighted by Agyeman (2003) about ensuring "just sustainabilities," where affordability and equity are integrated into environmental innovation.

At the same time, collaborative governance has become central in environmental decision-making. It emphasises dialogue, negotiation, and consensus-building among diverse actors (Ansell & Gash 2008; Emerson et al. 2012). This approach recognises that complex environmental challenges, such as

sustainable urbanisation, require cooperation between governments, businesses, civil society, and local communities. The pedagogical parallel here is deliberative learning, which foregrounds structured dialogue and co-production of knowledge (Dryzek 2011; Healey 1997). Applied to GCK, this could involve citizen juries, participatory mapping, and joint fact-finding processes. These methods echo Jasanoff's (2004) notion of "co-production," where scientific expertise and local knowledge are integrated to generate more legitimate and effective solutions. Such pedagogical approaches also draw on Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, which emphasises the empowerment of marginalised voices through dialogue and reflection.

Another key evolution in environmental governance is the rise of adaptive and polycentric governance models, which stress flexibility, learning, and resilience (Folke et al. 2005; Ostrom 2009; Pahl-Wostl 2009). These approaches acknowledge that environmental systems are dynamic and unpredictable, requiring governance structures that can adapt to new knowledge and changing conditions. Pedagogically, this aligns with experiential learning (Kolb 1984) and social learning (Lave & Wenger 1991), which emphasise iterative cycles of action, reflection, and adaptation.

In GCK, the 16-hectare pilot site provides an opportunity for creating an "urban living lab," where stakeholders collaboratively test, monitor, and refine climate-resilient infrastructure such as stormwater systems or renewable energy microgrids. Such experimental spaces reflect the idea of "post-normal science" (Funtowicz & Ravetz 1993), where decision-making under uncertainty requires inclusive and iterative learning processes.

Finally, the evolution of environmental governance has increasingly foregrounded the principle of environmental justice, highlighting the need for equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens (Agyeman 2003; Schlosberg 2004). Justice-oriented governance emphasises recognition, inclusion, and fairness, particularly for marginalised or vulnerable groups. Pedagogically, this resonates with emancipatory approaches, particularly participatory action research (Chambers 1994; Cornwall 2008) and critical pedagogy (Freire 1970), which aim to empower communities to articulate their needs and shape decisions that affect them. For GCK, this could translate into resident-led affordability dialogues, gender-sensitive design workshops, and livelihood-focused action research, ensuring that urban development does not reproduce inequalities.

Taken together, these parallels illustrate how environmental governance and pedagogy are mutually reinforcing in the pursuit of sustainable urban development. State-centric governance requires technical and compliance-focused

education; market-based governance thrives on problem-based and entrepreneurial learning; collaborative governance relies on deliberative and co-production pedagogies; adaptive governance is strengthened by experiential and reflexive learning; and justice-oriented governance is best supported by critical and emancipatory pedagogies. Each governance mode offers both opportunities and challenges, but when integrated with appropriate pedagogical approaches, they provide a holistic framework for fostering innovation, inclusivity, and resilience.

The Green City Kigali initiative demonstrates how linking environmental governance theory with pedagogical approaches can create not only a sustainable urban model but also a learning architecture that engages diverse actors. Governance provides the institutional framework for managing complex environmental challenges, while pedagogy supplies the means through which stakeholders acquire the skills, values, and capacities necessary to implement solutions. By weaving together regulatory, market-based, collaborative, adaptive, and justice-oriented approaches, GCK has the potential to set a precedent for climate-resilient, inclusive urbanisation that can inspire cities across Africa and beyond.

4. Methodology

4.1 Data collection: Methods, Interviewees and procedure

To answer the research questions on deliberative democracy and power dynamics in the Green City Kigali (GCK) initiative, I adopted a qualitative approach. While my initial research design proposed a multi-method strategy comprising semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis, and observation—in practice, only semi-structured interviews and observation were implemented. This narrowing of scope was due to practical considerations relating to access, time, and feasibility. Nevertheless, these two methods proved to be highly effective and complementary, enabling me to gather rich, nuanced data while maintaining methodological rigour.

Qualitative research emphasises depth, context, and meaning-making, which aligns with my study's focus on governance processes, stakeholder interactions, and perceptions of inclusivity. As Creswell & Creswell (2018) argue, qualitative methods are particularly useful in capturing complexity, sensitivity, and context. By combining semi-structured interviews with observational studies, I was able to bridge the gap between what participants said and what could be witnessed in practice. This methodological integration helped ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the deliberative processes and power dynamics underpinning the GCK initiative.

4.1.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were the cornerstone of this research. They are particularly well-suited for exploring sensitive and complex issues such as power, legitimacy, and participation because they balance consistency with flexibility (Robson & McCartan 2016). While a pre-designed interview guide provided a coherent structure across interviews, open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate freely, ensuring that emergent themes could be explored in depth.

Six interviews were conducted with purposively selected participants, who are solely public servants directly involved in urban planning. This purposive sampling strategy was guided by the need to capture experiences lived by urban planners, spanning both formal authority and grassroots perspectives. By engaging with planners from different government institutions, the interviews

offered insights into how deliberative democracy is understood, applied, and experienced within the GCK project.

The interviews were conducted exclusively in person, depending on the feasibility and availability of the interviewees, and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes on average. Prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of confidentiality. With permission, four out of six conversations were audio-recorded, and Kinyarwanda language was mostly used, later transcribed verbatim for systematic analysis, and later translated into English with the help of google translate. After google-translating, I had to go through the entire interview to double-check for accuracy.

The other two participants consented to me taking detailed notes and allowed the use of their insights for this thesis. This approach aligns with recommendations in qualitative research that emphasise the importance of flexibility and respecting participants' preferences while still ensuring the richness of data (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009; Creswell & Creswell 2018).

The semi-structured format not only elicited reflections on participants' own experiences but also encouraged them to comment on broader governance structures and processes.

The strength of this method lies in its ability to generate detailed, reflective accounts of how individuals talk about participation and power. However, as Creswell & Creswell (2018) remind us, interviews are always shaped by the social dynamics between researcher and participant. Some stakeholders may have been cautious in what they shared, particularly when discussing sensitive aspects of governance. These limitations were mitigated by cross-validating accounts through observational data.

4.1.2 Observation

Observation was the second key method employed in this study. Unlike interviews, which capture participants' verbalised accounts, observation provides a window into real-time behaviours and practices. As Robson & McCartan (2016) suggest, observation can reveal dynamics that participants themselves may not articulate, either because they are taken for granted or because they are politically sensitive.

My observations were carried out during community meetings held after Umuganda (the monthly community work) in Gasharu and Murama cells, as well as in interview sessions at each participant's office respectively. Community

meetings provided fertile ground for witnessing interactions between officials, community members, and other actors. They also allowed me to examine how inclusivity and power were enacted in practice, beyond official narratives.

A structured observation guide was developed in advance, focusing on participation patterns, interaction processes, and visible inter-expressions of authority and citizens. At the same time, flexibility was maintained to capture unanticipated dynamics. Field notes were recorded systematically, including not only verbal exchanges but also non-verbal cues such as seating arrangements, body language, and levels of engagement. This layered approach ensured that the observational data were both rigorous and adaptable to the contingencies of the field.

4.1.3 Integration of Methods

The integration of semi-structured interviews and observation enhanced the reliability and richness of this research. Interviews provided in-depth, reflective accounts of participants' perspectives, while observation offered empirical grounding in lived practice. This methodological triangulation made it possible to compare discourse with behaviour, highlighting both consistencies and discrepancies between official narratives and on-the-ground realities. As Creswell & Creswell (2018) emphasise, the combination of multiple qualitative methods strengthens the depth and credibility of findings.

For example, when participant 5, whom I had attended one community meeting with, described participatory forums as open and inclusive, observations sometimes revealed subtle dynamics of authority that shaped who spoke and who remained silent. Conversely, when officials described their role as facilitative rather than directive, observations confirmed instances where they indeed encouraged wider participation. These cross-method insights were crucial in assessing the role of deliberative democracy and power dynamics in the GCK initiative.

4.1.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to this study. An official letter of approval was obtained from the Ministry of Environment, where I previously did my academic internship. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research through the letter, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained verbally or in writing before each interview and observation session. To protect anonymity, participants

are referred to by numbers (i.e. Participant 1) rather than by names throughout this thesis.

Field notes were recorded discreetly, and identifiable details were omitted to protect participants' privacy. Given the sensitive nature of discussing governance and power relations, particular attention was paid to ensuring that no data collection process placed participants at risk.

Semi-structured interviews captured stakeholders' experiences and perspectives, while observation provided first-hand insights into governance practices as they unfolded in real time. Together, they offered a well-rounded analysis of deliberative democracy and power dynamics in the Green City Kigali initiative.

The findings derived from the data are therefore both credible and nuanced, providing an essential foundation for analysing participatory governance in Kigali and beyond.

4.2 Limitations of the research

Given the limited time available to conduct this research, I was constrained to rely primarily on data generated from one-off interviews with participants. There was no opportunity to conduct follow-up interviews, even when the need arose. The insights obtained might have been more comprehensive had there been additional time, which could have enabled an ethnographic approach, the facilitation of focus group discussions, or participation in public dialogues and more community meetings where stakeholders could express differing views and engage directly with one another.

Broader interaction would likely have yielded richer findings, allowing me to compare different forms of knowledge and to explore in greater depth how people conceptualise and experience deliberation and public participation within the framework of environmental governance. Since it was nearly impossible to re-engage with interviewees after the initial conversations, I also missed the opportunity to capture evolving perspectives, particularly in cases where participants may have reconsidered their earlier reflections on the deliberation processes.

Another important limitation relates to the timing of the research. Data collection began almost a year after the initial deliberation processes for the Green City Kigali initiative had officially ended. This meant I could not directly observe the deliberative practices as they unfolded, nor could I document the immediate

dynamics of dialogue, consensus-building, or contestation among stakeholders. Instead, I had to rely on retrospective accounts from interviewees, which may have been shaped by memory gaps, reinterpretation, or subsequent developments. This temporal distance limited the extent to which the study could fully capture the lived realities and nuances of participation in the Green City Kigali initiative.

4.3 Positionality and Ethics

Positionality and ethics are central to the credibility and integrity of qualitative research. As Robson & McCartan (2016) argue, acknowledging one's position as a researcher is not simply a procedural step but a critical determinant of research quality. In my case, conducting research in Rwanda came with both opportunities and responsibilities. My identity as a Rwandan provided a degree of insider knowledge that shaped the data collection process in important ways. Scholars such as England (1994) and Berger (2015) emphasise that cultural familiarity and shared social context often grant researchers easier access to participants and facilitate trust-building, particularly when exploring sensitive topics such as public participation and deliberation in governance.

In line with this, my understanding of local cultural norms, language nuances, and socio-political dynamics helped me engage participants more effectively and to frame discussions on environmental governance in ways that resonated with their lived experiences. This aligns with Chilisa (2012), who reasoned that researchers working within their own societies are uniquely positioned to negotiate meaning and contextualise complex concepts in locally relevant terms.

I approached each interview strictly in the role of a student researcher, which was important for setting expectations and creating an environment where participants felt comfortable to share openly. This positionality also helped reduce the possibility of being perceived as someone with institutional authority or policy influence, thereby encouraging interviewees to reflect more candidly on their experiences of participation and governance processes. Support from a host organisation (MoE) and its local staff further strengthened this trust, opening doors for interviews and reassuring participants of my credibility and intentions.

Trust is a central component in qualitative inquiry, especially when examining governance processes that often involve sensitive negotiations of power and representation (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

During the interviews, I noticed that participants sometimes adapted or reconsidered their responses in the course of our discussions. This was particularly evident when follow-up questions highlighted the broader

implications of public participation for governance outcomes. As Cornwall (2008) notes, participatory processes can be seen as "invited spaces" where engagement may initially appear limited but can evolve into more reflective discussions about inclusivity, effectiveness, and legitimacy. In my case, conversations with participants occasionally moved beyond procedural accounts of participation to more critical reflections on the strengths and shortcomings of deliberative practices in Rwanda.

This reflective dynamic also revealed the relational and co-constructed nature of qualitative interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). While my role as interviewer shaped the way questions were framed, participants, too, influenced the direction of dialogue through their reinterpretations of participation and governance. In some cases, initial accounts that framed participation as symbolic or constrained were later rearticulated as opportunities for enhancing accountability and adaptability in governance (Fung 2006; Ansell & Gash 2008).

In short, my positionality as a Rwandan student researcher afforded me access and trust, but also came with challenges related to reflexivity and interpretation. Recognising these dynamics was essential for maintaining ethical rigour and transparency in the research process (Berger 2015).

5. Results

During the analysis of data, three main themes emerged: the first that came up is "Transferring public participation into the pedagogical process"; the second is " Some factors that lead to obscuring of public participation in urban planning", and lastly "The fear of tarnishing the reputation of Rwanda as a fast-growing country".

5.1 Transferring public participation into the pedagogical process

In the Green City Kigali (GCK) initiative, which aims to introduce sustainable and inclusive urban solutions, participation is not merely about consultation or checkbox engagement; though I was not expecting it to be so, as it is still a new concept in Rwanda. And I share this claim with all participants who are repeatedly involved in urban planning nationwide.

In analysing the interviews, I noticed that the words *"explain-ing"* and *"teach"* appeared recurrently in participants' narratives when they described how planners engaged with community members. Across the six interviews, these two words appeared a total of 27 times. Rather than framing these encounters as spaces of joint deliberation, planners often emphasised the act of authorities *explaining* decisions or *teaching* communities about the project's objectives, technical aspects, or expected behaviours. This linguistic pattern suggested that participatory processes in the Green City Kigali initiative were shaped less by dialogical exchange and collective reasoning—the hallmarks of deliberative democracy, and more by pedagogical dynamics in which planners positioned themselves as knowledge providers and communities as learners. Consequently, participation appeared to function as a practice of instruction and information dissemination, rather than a horizontal process of negotiation, co-creation, or decision-making.

As planners acknowledge the current shift from top-down planning, public participation is increasingly framed as a pedagogical process—a deliberate and ongoing effort to educate, inform, and empower the public to understand, appreciate, and co-own the development process. This represents a fundamental shift from conventional democratic planning approaches, where decisions are co-created by the concerned stakeholders, to a more transformative model that views citizens as capable learners and co-designers of their urban future.

As reasoned by participants 1, 5 and 6, one of the key aspects in designing and implementing participatory urban development projects like the Green City Kigali (GCK) lies in transforming public participation from a symbolic act into a continuous and embedded learning process. In the context of Rwanda, where the concept of deliberative democracy and participatory planning is still evolving, the responses from research participants reveal that teaching and sensitisation are not just preliminary steps but ongoing stages that define the success of participation. This process is not merely about disseminating information; it is a structured pedagogical approach that empowers citizens to become active co-creators rather than passive beneficiaries of development.

As argued by participant 3, 4, 5, and 6, who all reasoned that the sense of ownership comes from the explanation given to the citizen, who later helps in the implementation of the project; data of this study revealed that transferring public participation into the teaching process is vital for fostering meaningful engagement and a sense of ownership among citizens in urban development projects. Several participants argued that public participation must evolve into a continuous teaching and learning process that builds public capacity to engage meaningfully with complex urban issues.

My interpretation from participants' insights is that this process involves not merely informing the public but continuously educating and involving them until participation becomes habitual and integrated into the fabric of community life. Achieving this transformation demands patience, persistence, and diverse strategies that convert citizens from passive beneficiaries into active collaborators, thereby enhancing the success and sustainability of urban projects.

Participant 5 highlighted the importance of routine communication, stating:

> *"Mainly, it's a matter of explaining to citizens and then when they realise that it happened once, twice, three times... it immediately becomes routine, and the participatory planning gets fast. And implementing the project becomes possible because citizens are part of the project, not beneficiaries of the project."*

This quote encapsulates the idea that participation becomes meaningful only when citizens internalise and adopt it through repeated engagement and guidance. Participation is therefore not just a stage in the planning process but a learned behaviour that grows stronger through repetition and reinforcement.

As reasoned by participants 1, 3 and 5, Rwanda's rapid development trajectory has necessitated the adoption of modern urban planning models that sometimes challenge traditional values and practices. This has resulted in a tension between long-standing cultural norms—such as the value placed on individual plots, backyards, or extended family housing, and new urban ideals such as compact living, shared green spaces, and vertical development. Participant 6 captured this cultural friction:

> *"As our country is in development… sometimes it requires deep sensitisation. Sometimes, due to the mindset or the ability to change from one thing to another, the people may be reluctant to understand the benefits of the project."*

Furthermore, resistance often arises from entrenched mindsets or scepticism, particularly among populations accustomed to traditional living arrangements. For example, Participant 6 highlighted how in slum areas, "most of the people who live there are renters... the owners of the houses benefit from that slum and make money from it but often do not live there." This economic dynamic means "it takes a long journey for you to educate them because in the long run, slums are not good; but in the short term, the owners of the houses feel that they have lost." Such factors make long-term commitment to education and trust-building essential for successful participation.

This resistance is not merely about opposition to specific projects but reflects a broader individual attitude and cultural adjustment to new ways of life that cannot be done through one-time consultations.

The GCK project introduces not just physical infrastructure but a new paradigm of urban living, which requires deliberate socialisation. As Participant 6 further noted: "It is still new in our country, but there are also those who have started to see that it is good even though there is still a long way to go to convince people…many would like to continue living the way they used to." Thus, for participation to be effective, it must be embedded in a broader strategy of continuous civic education and trust-building. Here, the teaching process becomes about reframing the value of the project in both individual and collective terms, emphasising long-term gains over short-term inconveniences.

Participants 1, 5, and 6 claimed that houses' owners, who benefit economically from the current informal settlement structure, are less motivated by abstract ideals like sustainability or community welfare. For them, participation is valuable only if it safeguards their immediate interests. The government, therefore, must employ a teaching strategy that reframes value—from private, short-term profit to collective, long-term gain. "This is not an easy task and

requires empathy, economic clarity, and trust-building mechanisms." said participant 5.

Another dimension of teaching identified in the study is the need to bridge the knowledge gap between technical experts and ordinary citizens. As argued by participants 4 and 5, in participatory planning, technical documents such as zoning maps, architectural drawings, and environmental impact assessments can be alienating to non-specialists. Participant 1 articulated this challenge:

> *"Balancing expert knowledge with public opinion when making policy decisions is all about explaining, there is no other way…you should not just rely on the knowledge of the citizen…you explain to him/her; what he/she understands he/she understands, what he/she cannot understand you explain to him/her, and you also show him/her the best practices so that he/she understands."*

For the GCK case, rather than excluding citizens on the basis of technical illiteracy, planners opted to translate complexity into accessibility. This pedagogical duty is taken seriously by both government institutions and implementation partners. As Participant 3 noted:

> *"I wouldn't say that there is no knowledge gap... that's why the government is putting in effort... there are people who don't understand... the gap is there, but the government is also doing everything possible to reduce it."*

This framing places the government not as an enforcer but as an educator, guiding citizens to understand the rationale and benefits behind technical and policy decisions.

To effectively deliver this *teaching process* very specifically in Green City Kigali, planners have adopted a multi-pronged communication strategy that includes face-to-face engagement, community liaisons, media outreach, and visual aids. Participant 4 described: "We went to the sector office and cells office and had someone sitting there, as a front desk officer…we've gotten like radio broadcast sessions, where they call in and ask about the project." This demonstrates a deliberate strategy to meet citizens where they are, with the sole purpose of explaining and offering multiple entry points into understanding the project.

Moreover, the teaching approach is customised to simplify complex ideas. Draft plans and architectural designs were translated into digestible formats so that people could understand and make informed choices. Participant 4 noted: "So we used to bring like a draft design to them and the expert would simplify those designs to help them make a choice."

But still, fear and misunderstanding remained prevalent, particularly regarding affordability and the implications of the master plan while implementing the Green City Kigali Initiative. Participant 4 shared: "They were scared…they said 'Ahaa! The house that looks like this…Ehh! I can't afford it, I can't have that capacity!"

Such concerns were met with further explanation to demystify the intentions behind urban policies and designs, illustrating that education is not just about delivering facts but also about alleviating fear and building confidence.

While reading some news pieces published during the early rise of GCK, I realised that these fears are real and must be addressed with empathy and financial clarity. Teaching here is not just about knowledge, but also about reassurance and psychological support.

In addition to overcoming technical and economic concerns, public teaching must confront deeply cultural expectations, particularly around land and private space. As Rwanda's urban form shifts toward vertical development and shared amenities, planners must guide citizens through a process of behavioural reorientation. Participant 3 emphasised:

> *"It is all about teaching the community…it is constant, it is imperative to aim at getting to the point where it will be understood that this culture doesn't advantage us as Rwandans…for every person to have their own backyard…it will never…"*

Here, the teaching is normative; it seeks to redefine what constitutes comfort, safety, and prosperity in the urban setting. It is perhaps the most challenging aspect of participation, as it touches on identity and intergenerational habits. Participant 4 echoed this point by advocating for behaviour change through systemic demonstration: "It's a behaviour change…if it's a playground, he/she wants the kids to play there…planners need to show him/her that overall in the master plan there are playgrounds…that kids don't have to play in their own playground anymore."

Across all responses, one message was clear: public participation through teaching is not a linear or quick process. Planners were aware of the resistance that could arise, but it is met with persistence. Participant 1 stated: "Actually, the solution to resistance is the awareness…we accompany him/her all along the journey."

This accompaniment is not a single workshop or meeting. It is a long-term relationship between citizens and the state, marked by repeated encounters and mutual adjustment. Participant 4 summarised this approach aptly: "We still like explaining…we went there every day…we reminded them where the world is going... Things are moving. So it's the reality. They also need to wake up and look at the reality." This suggests that participation is as much about managing change and emotion as it is about policy. It reflects a governance approach that is pedagogical, relational, and forward-looking.

The case of Green City Kigali reveals a profound insight: in contexts where participatory planning is still nascent, teaching must be at the heart of participation. It is not enough to invite citizens to meetings or ask for their opinions; they must be continuously taught to understand, critique, and co-own development visions. Participation becomes most meaningful not when it is declared but when it is embedded in a culture of civic learning and mutual respect.

This transition from symbolic engagement to substantive co-creation requires time, trust, and sustained investment in communication, education, and cultural sensitivity.

The Rwandan experience demonstrates that even in a top-down political environment, there is space for transformative participation if citizens are not merely heard but taught, accompanied, and empowered. On this note, it must be recognised that transferring public participation into the teaching stage is not a secondary task but a core function of participatory governance in urbanisation projects in Rwanda. Through continuous explanation, repeated engagement, and deliberate efforts to bridge knowledge gaps, decision-makers strive to build a citizen who not only understands but also contributes to development initiatives. As the case of the Green City Kigali demonstrates, the effectiveness of participatory planning hinges not on the initial invitation to the table, but on how long and how meaningfully citizens are kept there, through learning, through dialogue, and through trust.

5.2 The obscuring of public participation in urban planning

Based on my research participants' point of view, the obscuring of public participation in urban planning emerged as a complex and multifaceted challenge, shaped by a range of structural, social, and perceptual factors that limit the meaningful involvement of citizens in decision-making processes. The perspectives shared by my research participants reveal how public participation, while widely advocated in theory, is frequently compromised in practice by competing interests, resource constraints, and differing understandings between planners and communities.

A major issue mainly in GCK, lies in the limited influence citizens actually wield in planning outcomes, as illustrated by Participant 1 and 4's observation that planners do not impose behavior on citizens but instead focus on delivering infrastructure, expecting residents to adapt independently afterward: "Planners didn't impose what citizens should do there... instead planners said let's get the infrastructure there, then the citizen will do his own thing." argued participant 4. This approach reflects a primarily top-down mindset that can reduce participation to a formality rather than genuine engagement.

Supporting this view, Participant 2 highlighted the Green City Kigali project, where during deliberative processes, conflicting interests between wealthier landowners who were concerned about land loss and less resourceful residents who were seeking financial compensation, resulted in a superficial participatory process:

> *"Those who had land were worried about a canal or a road going through their land, losing a certain part of the land they had previously owned; while those who did not have enough resources were worried about the amount of compensation they were supposed to receive... the so-called inclusive planning (deliberative democracy) process becomes superficial".*

The insights drawn from interviews reveal a nuanced reality where consultation is often symbolic, hurried, or bypassed altogether—despite constitutional commitments to participatory governance. One of the most pronounced issues highlighted by participants is the top-down nature of planning, where the public is informed post hoc rather than engaged in co-creation. Participant 5 candidly reflected:

> *"In the past, there were times when we used to do planning, and then we would bring it to the people for implementation, but you finally find that there are challenges that you had not thought about because you were not sitting down with those concerned citizens during the planning."*

Similarly, Participant 3 reasoned in Scott (1998); Arnstein (1969); and Forester (1982) by warning that top-down approaches may result in rejection of the final product: "If you use a top-down approach in planning, the end results are always that the beneficiaries of your projects or your plans may reject what you have already planned and invested in."

This lack of engagement often leads to misunderstanding and mistrust. For instance, Participant 2 recounted residents' reactions to environmental goals: "When we started explaining the project to the people, some of the people would say… 'You're talking about Green City Kigali…do you think that we're going to eat those trees?" Such reactions illustrate a disconnect between planners and citizens, exacerbated by insufficient communication and a lack of relatable framing. In this context, residents rebelled the word "Green" as forest; a point that strengthens the issue of the knowledge gap between planners and lay citizens.

Knowledge gaps and deeply ingrained mindsets present additional obstacles to meaningful public participation. As if misconceptualisation of green as forest was not enough, many residents do not perceive risks posed by disasters or climate change as imminent, relying on historical experiences that offer false reassurance. Participant 6 described this challenge as a "mind set change" stating:

> *"I would relate these things to 'mind set change' where people start to understand late because they are not able to see the consequences, but the government has looked into the future and realized that if these things continue as they are, they will cause us problems; sometimes you have to take drastic measures so that we can take a bitter medicine, and we reach to the better, protect people's lives, and have sustainable development that does not put people in danger".*

Participant 1 illustrated how residents' understanding lags behind scientific data, saying:

> *"A citizen may tell you 'I have lived in this place for more than 30 years, this is where I was born, this is where my grandparents lived…nothing happened to them, how dare you to tell me that the disaster is around the corner?'…he/she thinks that the rain she/he experienced decade ago, will always be the same…there are increasing risks of climate change, which can make the time for discussions, consultations shorter in order to save the lives of the people".*

Another emerged factor is when planners themselves sometimes experience apprehension about participatory approaches, fearing the complexities that community concerns may introduce. Participant 1 urged that planners should view problems as opportunities, saying:

> *"Planners need to understand the problems. Problems are not what prevent the project from being implemented, but rather finding solutions to them. So, a deep analysis should be done because it provides you with information early. Once you know the problems early, you talk to the community, and they tell you the possible options".*

Participant 5 went further by acknowledging the delicate balance planners must strike between citizens' emotional attachments and legally mandated development goals:

> *"A citizen may be completely unaware of the project and thinks that he/she has nothing to do with it…but as a planner… you ask yourself… why should you follow citizen's emotions? 'No'. That's why the law provides all possible option,s and you use the one that can go with the situation at hand…but **'When a worse comes to the worst, then you do what you are supposed to do.'** The important thing is that at least you secured over 90% people who really understand the direction you're heading to. It sometimes requires ignoring the opinions of the citizens because they keep thinking in old traditions that prevent us from advancing in development…"* Participant 5 stated.

Here, citizens' lived experiences clash with planners' technical projections, especially when it comes to climate risks. While participants acknowledged the reality of climate change, they also acknowledged the difficulty of persuading residents to relocate when the risks are not yet visible to those concerned

residents. Hence, environmental emergencies limit consultation time, forcing quick decisions for public safety, as Participant 1 observed: "If a person is in danger…do we need to take one year of deliberations to get that person to move? No! You help him/her…and then you look at other things later, but first of all you help him".

Institutional capacity and resource limitations further constrain meaningful participation. Participants 3 and 6 highlighted staffing shortages, financial restrictions, and multitasking demands. Participant 6 explained:

> *"…it is the issue of capacity because we are in a rapidly developing country, we need to do many things in a short time, and sometimes we have limited resources, and we find that the staffs are few…one person has many responsibilities… it is not that the government does not recognise that many are needed, but it is also balancing".*

Participant 4 also noted that project structure and timelines imposed by funders sometimes cause planning and stakeholder engagement to be skipped:

> *"Maybe the design of the project and its standards…when the principals of the project are not obliging the project executing entity to conduct that engagement, it can be overlooked… also like there are some projects with a very tight timeline, like the funder gives you the money today…they want deliverables tomorrow. Sometimes the planning is almost skipped, not only stakeholders engagement, but also the proper planning is a bit skipped".*

Participant 3 reinforced this point, linking the rush for infrastructure delivery with the sidelining of inclusive planning:

> *"It's time-consuming to gain consensus…you might have divergent opinions from the general public. But it gives you that hard time to compute and triangulate what you put into something that is again going to respond to the needs of the whole population."*

These time and funding pressures often result in tokenistic consultation, where engagement is done to fulfil formal requirements, not to shape decisions meaningfully. For example, Participant 2 critiqued the superficial nature of some deliberative efforts: "In such a context, the so-called inclusive planning

(deliberative democracy) process becomes superficial." Furthermore, this phenomenon easily mirrors the dual pressures for swift and slow planning that have been discussed in Calderon et al. (2024).

While decision-makers often justify these shortcuts as necessary for progress or safety, they can backfire. As illustrated in the Kangondo/Bannyahe case, residents were relocated under the banner of biodiversity protection and disaster mitigation. Yet the perceived favouritism toward large investors led to widespread mistrust. Participant 6 recalled: "Later, some big real estate companies introduced their projects in that same place. This has caused mistrust…people felt that the government favours big investors at any cost, including turning a blind eye to its lay citizens." This dynamic creates a tension between long-term planning and short-term comprehension—a challenge that leads to decisions being made without full buy-in.
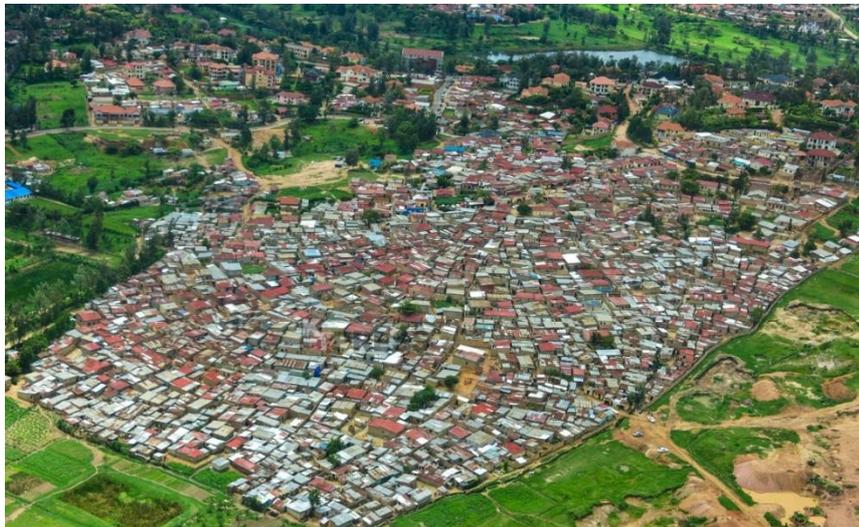
Figure 1.Aerial view of Kangondo/Bannyahe slum before the upgrade, 2018. ©Olivier Mugwiza

The resistance seen in cases like Kangondo (Bannyahe) arose not only from attachment to homes but also from the integral role those places play in residents' livelihoods and social networks. As Participant 6 described, these areas offer access to jobs and ways of life that residents are reluctant to abandon:

> *"In Kangondo…it was planned that the residents would move to another place that was not close to where they lived. That project was also an experience for us because there was resistance from the side of residents, but if you look closely, you will find that those residents had a reason to resist because they already had a way of life in that place".*

Figure 2. Newly constructed affordable houses for families relocated from Kangondo (Bannyahe) slum, 2020. ©Olivier Mugwiza

The tension between the urgency of delivering infrastructure in rapidly developing contexts and the time required for genuine participation presents another barrier. At times, deliberation is seen as a luxury in the face of urgent development needs. Participant 3 recognised that rapidly evolving developmental needs and institutional limitations often curtail deliberative planning:

> *"We urgently need infrastructures…Rwandans need water urgently; we need schools urgently…those are some of the factors that could obscure deliberations. We will do deliberations, but let's have a short time because otherwise if we are not providing, other things will be damaged".*

Participant 1 cautioned that quick outcomes are incompatible with in-depth engagement, emphasising: "If you say, 'I want quick outcomes,' you can't engage with the people. For the GCK case, it has taken almost 3 years of those negotiations…" This trade-off between urgency and inclusivity echoes through multiple testimonies.

Additionally, land ownership complexities and social dynamics further obscure participation in a city where only around 34 per cent of households own the homes they live in, while the majority are tenants (KT Press 2026). Some participants explained that tenants and absentee landlords make it difficult to identify and engage with the right stakeholders. As Participant 1 pointed out: "Sometimes you speak to someone who is not the owner… she/he is a tenant who wakes up early in the morning for business away from that actual place…"; thus, it extends the timeframe for genuine consultations as planners need to meet land owners.

Land rights are a particularly sensitive and contentious obstacle in participatory urban planning. Participant 1 emphasised the constitutional protection of land ownership and the necessity of consulting landowners before advancing plans that affect their property: "We should first of all understand land rights…so how can you decide on my land for which you don't have the right? You can plan, but definitely you will not implement". This legal and emotional connection to land complicates efforts to implement participatory planning, where planners are sceptical towards concerned residents who may exercise their constitutional rights by refusing to be part of the participatory planning or rejecting all proposals made by planners.

Similarly, Participant 6 discussed from the urgency of urban development and climate resilience goals point of view, how informal house owners who do not live on their properties often resist demolitions simply because they are not directly affected:

> *"This has an impact on the implementation of the project because these people (the owners of the houses) actually... in a direct way, they don't feel the impact because even if the house is in bad condition due to natural disaster...they are not even worried about it; the renter is the one worried and directly affected. So these people can hinder the implementation of public participation that would steer the project outcome".*

Finally, the influence of majority rule also acts as a limiting factor in participation. Even when engagement occurs, majority rule often overrides minority voices. Participant 5 stated: "If 90% of plot owners have understood the concept of the project, we proceed… the remaining 10% will understand it slowly." This "inclusion by majority" approach may serve efficiency, but risks marginalising vulnerable or dissenting voices. In sum, what emerges from these accounts is not a rejection of participatory planning in principle, but a deep ambivalence about its feasibility, effectiveness, and priority within the real-world constraints of urban governance.

The Green City Kigali case offers a compelling illustration of how public participation is often obscured—not deliberately in all cases, but through a combination of urgency, resource limitations, institutional mandates, and mismatched expectations. While deliberative democracy is officially endorsed, its implementation remains fraught with complexity. The obscuring of public participation in urban planning stems from the interplay of competing priorities, legal realities, knowledge disparities, and capacity challenges. The ideal of

inclusive planning is often undermined by expediency, distrust, and divergent interests, resulting in participation processes that are frequently superficial or incomplete.

5.3 The fear of tarnishing the reputation of Rwanda as a fast-growing country / Acting to confirm the narratives

In Rwanda's pursuit of rapid urbanisation and modernisation, especially through flagship projects such as the Green City Kigali (GCK), the preservation of the country's reputation as a fast-developing nation emerged as a dominant theme among participants. Through interviews, it became evident that the desire to uphold Rwanda's developmental narrative often shapes and, at times, constrains the scope and depth of citizen engagement.

This theme captures a recurring sentiment among planners involved in the GCK project: a deep concern with preserving Rwanda's image as a model of rapid, orderly development. Participants emphasized how this concern often leads to prioritizing efficiency, progress, and narrative coherence over comprehensive public engagement, especially when citizens express confusion or resistance to development plans.

Rwanda's ambition to transform into a modern, urbanised, and economically developed country plays a central role in how development projects like the Green City Kigali are justified and implemented. Rapid infrastructure development is portrayed not merely as a political choice but as an existential necessity. Several participants spoke of an urgent need to "deliver quickly" in response to the country's developmental needs and its international positioning.

> *"Rwanda is a country that is developing rapidly… we urgently need infrastructure… Rwandans need water urgently; we need schools urgently…People want us to deliver quickly… it is absolutely necessary to speed it up."* stated Participant 1

This urgency appears to justify the compression of deliberative processes, where public engagement is undertaken but ultimately limited by time constraints and the pressure to maintain Rwanda's developmental trajectory.

Furthermore, there is also a perception among officials that citizens often fail to immediately grasp the long-term benefits of development projects, leading to

reluctance or resistance. In such cases, sensitisation/explanations are seen as tools to align citizen understanding with national goals.

> *"It sometimes requires ignoring the opinions of the citizens because they keep thinking in old traditions that prevent us from advancing in development..." – Participant 6*

This suggests that, rather than fostering co-created understandings through deliberation, planners often resort to persuasion or even disregard dissenting voices, believing that the state knows best for its citizens; thus, multiple participants highlighted the preference to avoid public outcry or backlash, especially from those affected by land use changes, expropriation, or resettlement. Public resistance is seen not only as a barrier to implementation but also as a potential threat to the country's global image.

One of the most telling revelations from the interviews is the strategic way in which planners deal with dissent. Public backlash, especially from citizens being displaced or resettled—is seen as a reputational risk that must be managed carefully. The threshold for moving forward with a project appears to be set not at full consensus, but at a majority understanding. Participant 5 reasoned that if 90% of plot owners have understood the concept of the project, they definitely proceed with the implementation… believing that the remaining 10% will understand it as time goes by. But these numbers are statistically too far to be verified as neither the public nor private (independent) institution has officially reported about them.

Moreover, the government labels almost all development projects with the "Public Interest" tag; thus, it becomes very hard for everyone to resist a project labelled "Public Interest".

Furthermore, Participant 2 argued that some development partners, whether national or international, may play a role in obscuring deliberation processes by instructing the project implementer to avoid any sort of outcry. Those development partners are seen as uneven contributors to Rwanda's economy as they fund many projects across different sectors, urbanisation includes.

> *"The GCK project funders (World Bank, KfW) avoid any sort of backlash that may come from affected citizens' outcry; thus opt for expropriation law that prioritises compensation in the form of money rather than resettling residents in the same place when the project is completed." argued Participant 2.*

Participant 5 supplementary added: "It started mainly as an obligation… perhaps stemming from the conditions from the funders (World Bank, KfW…), but as a country, this is the path we are currently on and it is the one that is providing sustainable answers."

This underscores a pragmatic and strategic approach: managing dissent through financial compensation and phased persuasion rather than allowing prolonged negotiation processes that might delay implementation or trigger people's resistance. These responses also illustrate a desire to maintain order and momentum, often at the expense of deep, inclusive planning. Outcry is treated as a liability to be minimised, rather than a signal for more meaningful deliberation.

Participants frequently referenced the national vision and its alignment with international standards. The idea that development should be future-oriented, even if it does not align with immediate citizen desires—came up repeatedly.

"It is to look at what benefits the citizen the most without looking at his/her desires. We first look at 'In the vision of the country, what is important for the citizen even though he/she may not see it today?'" – Participant 6 asserted.

This language reflects a top-down approach where government-led planning is seen as not only legitimate but visionary, even if unpopular in the short term.

The invocation of international standards, particularly from the World Bank, plays a dual role: it serves as a legitimising frame for stakeholder engagement practices while also acting as a ceiling for what is required in terms of inclusion. Participant 4 argued that they actually follow World Bank standards; section related to stakeholder engagement and information disclosure… in that section, they describe how engagement should be done.

The World Bank standards recommend that before you present content to the local community, you have to have their level of understanding. And then you prepare materials in accordance. While these standards may seem to promote inclusivity, they also provide a benchmark that allows officials to meet external expectations without necessarily fostering deeply participatory practices.

The fear of tarnishing Rwanda's image as a fast-developing country shapes both the rhetoric and the reality of planning and implementation within the Green City Kigali project. National vision, international standards, and the imperative to deliver rapidly converge to produce a development model that privileges control, persuasion, and efficiency over open-ended citizen engagement. Deliberation is not absent, but it is tightly managed and constrained by the logic of progress. While this approach may safeguard the country's reputation in the short term, it

risks undermining the depth of public ownership and legitimacy in the longer journey toward sustainable urban development.

The theme of preserving Rwanda's image as a fast-growing, well-managed country permeates the attitudes and actions of decision-makers in the Green City Kigali project and alike. From strategic communication and minimal resistance tolerance to tight timelines and technocratic justifications, the overwhelming goal is to confirm and reinforce the national development narrative. Deliberation is acknowledged but treated as secondary, useful when it doesn't obstruct progress, dispensable when it threatens to delay the vision. This suggests a tension between the performance of inclusivity and the practice of participatory governance in Rwanda's development model.

All in all, the core of this inquiry is the recognition that in Rwanda, participation is deeply intertwined with national priorities such as maintaining the country's reputation for rapid progress, controlling the narrative around development, and ensuring delivery within tight timeframes.

Besides interviews, my observation offered a valuable complement. For instance, while interviewees often emphasised the inclusivity of governance processes, observations sometimes revealed subtle exclusions, such as community members labelled as "not able to easily understand the concept of urban development". As a recurring complaint from participants' point of view, I perceived it as a *knowledge gap* between planners and citizens; and this has provided an important analytical lens for understanding the complexities of deliberative democracy in practice.

Furthermore, the observation of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, seating arrangements, and engagement levels provided critical insights into the dynamics of community participation. During an after Umuganda meeting where participant 5 was a guest speaker, it was observed that planners sat in a designated covered area, with clean chairs arranged physically separate from the citizens, who were standing or seated on the open terrain for over an hour under the sun. This seating arrangement visually reinforced a hierarchical power differential, positioning planners as authoritative figures and citizens as passive participants or spectators. The guest speaker addressed the citizens for almost an hour without leaving any time for discussions.

Facial expressions and body language further revealed underlying sentiments. When discussing environmental governance issues during interview sessions, participants 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 consistently lowered their voices, indicating discomfort, hesitation, or a sense of caution in expressing their true opinions—a

sign that underlying scepticism or fear might be inhibiting open dialogue. Additionally, during conversations, some participants exhibited closed body language, such as crossed arms or avoiding eye contact, which suggested resistance or discomfort with the topics discussed.

One participant explicitly displayed signs of fear, given the circulating rumours about financial misappropriation related to the GCK project. Their anxious demeanour and cautious tone highlighted a climate of mistrust, which was later confirmed to be linked to broader political issues and concerns over transparency and accountability. This participant's behaviour underscored how rumours, misinformation, and the political context can influence levels of engagement and trust in any kind of discussion. Collectively, these observations demonstrate that beyond formal discussions, non-verbal cues and positioning significantly influence the level of openness and sincerity in community participation, often reflecting deeper issues of mistrust, fear, and social dynamics.

6. Discussion and conclusion

6.1 Cue on Rwanda

The gap between the normative ideals of deliberative democracy and its practical implementation has been a persistent concern in both theoretical debates and empirical studies. According to scholars like Chambers (2004) and Dryzek (2000), genuine deliberative processes require open dialogue, inclusion of marginalised voices, and the capacity for mutual reasoning—elements that underpin democratic legitimacy and social justice. However, as highlighted in the literature review, many contemporary contexts, especially those characterised by rapid development or authoritarian tendencies, struggle to realise these ideals fully. Classic models—such as those proposed by Habermas (1984)—advocate for an ideal speech situation where all participants have equal opportunity to influence decisions. Yet, in practice, structural inequalities, cultural norms, and political priorities often distort or undermine such rational-critical engagement (Cooke & Kothari 2001; Fung 2006).

My study sought to explore how these theoretical tensions manifest in Rwanda, a nation with a declared commitment to participatory governance, yet still facing significant challenges in authentic deliberation. The empirical findings reveal that while the rhetoric of deliberative democracy is present—planners acknowledge the importance of engagement—the actual practice tends to be superficial, serving primarily as a legitimising gesture rather than genuine dialogue. This echoes the critique by Abers & Keck (2006), who argue that "deliberation" in many development contexts becomes a managed process designed to confirm existing trajectories, rather than a space for contestation and mutual learning.

The core issue appears to be the "incompatibility" of two contrasting imperatives: on one hand, the normative aspiration for inclusive, participatory decision-making; on the other, the pragmatic necessity to ensure swift project implementation and maintain national prestige. This dichotomy aligns with critiques by Fung (2006) and Mansbridge (2003), who warn that in settings driven by developmental or governance imperatives, deliberative democracy often sequentially devolves into a symbolic act—done to satisfy legal or international standards—rather than an empowering process. The concept of "superficial participation," as discussed by Arnstein (1969), resonates here, where "tokenistic" consultations serve to reinforce perceived legitimacy without transforming power relations.

Furthermore, this tension is magnified in Rwanda's cultural and political context. Works by Chavunduka (2008) highlight how deference to authority and respect for hierarchy, deeply rooted in social norms, inhibit open, egalitarian dialogue. This cultural backdrop complicates the realisation of Habermas's ideal, which assumes a "public sphere" where all voices are equally able to participate in rational-critical discourse. The data reflects this, showing that planners and communities often perceive participation as a one-way communication—explanation or persuasion—rather than a dialogue that challenges or reshapes power dynamics. This aligns with analysis by Broto et al. (2015), who note that in highly centralised states, deliberation is often constrained by the need to maintain social cohesion and trust rather than fostering contestation.

The political dimension is equally significant. Scholars such as Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018) and Rose (2016) argue that political leaders often manipulate deliberative procedures to reinforce control or project legitimacy, rather than foster genuine engagement. In Rwanda, the desire to project an image of national stability and rapid progress influences how participation is framed—more as a ritual than a functional component of decision-making. As my interviews reveal, planners perceive dissent or resistance not as inevitable features of democracy but as risks to be managed, often through suppression or co-optation, which undermines the very essence of deliberation.

This raises a normative dilemma: the pursuit of rapid development and positive international standing conflicts with the democratic ideals of inclusion and equality. In essence, the very conditions that enable efficient project delivery—tight timelines, resource limitations, top-down authority—are at odds with the slow, inclusive processes that deliberative democracy espouses. As Mansbridge (2003) notes, this trade-off is a common feature in developing countries, where the "logic of progress" often overrides the "logic of participation."

The civil servants and planners who champion participation, therefore, are caught in a double bind—believing in democratic ideals while perceiving that fostering genuine deliberation could hinder Rwanda's development goals. This echoes the work of O'Neill (2001), who discusses the "democratic dilemma" faced by policymakers in authoritarian or developmental regimes—promoting participation that is meaningful versus maintaining control and progress. Consequently, participation becomes a formalised process, often limited to what Fung (2003) and Cooke & Kothari (2001) describe as "manipulative" or "tokenistic," which risks reinforcing distrust rather than building social capital.

In summary, the empirical findings substantiate a broader critique in the literature: that deliberative democracy, in practice, is often a socially constructed and strategically deployed concept—used selectively and constrained by structural, cultural, and political factors—rather than a routinely enacted ideal. The tension between the normative aspiration of inclusive, participatory governance and its pragmatic limitations, driven by development imperatives and cultural norms, remains a core challenge. Addressing this disparity requires not only institutional reforms but also a cultural shift towards valuing genuine dialogue and contestation, even within the constraints of rapid development—an endeavour that many planners in Rwanda recognise but find difficult to realise fully.

6.2 Participation as a pedagogical and transformative process

Throughout all interviews, it was evident that participation in Rwanda, especially within the Green City Kigali (GCK) initiative, is predominantly conceptualised as a form of civic education—aimed at enhancing citizens' capacity to understand, critique, and contribute meaningfully to development plans. This aligns with theoretical insights emphasising the pedagogical and educational dimensions of participatory processes, as discussed by Fischer (2000). Efforts to translate complex technical data—such as zoning maps and environmental assessments—into accessible language, and to build trust through repeated engagement, reflect an understanding of participation as a long-term educational process that fosters social learning and civic competence (Wals & Benavot 2017).

The concept of "mindset change" underpins this pedagogical approach, echoing literature that highlights the importance of shifts in attitudes and cultural norms for sustainable engagement (Park et al. 2017; Fatah & Darmawan 2020). Participants emphasise that embedding participation requires long-term sensitisation, civic education, and creating participatory environments that reinforce learning and civic responsibility—elements central to transformative participation frameworks (Fung 2006; Lahoud & Wehbe 2018). Such efforts aim to cultivate trust in authorities and deepen the community's understanding of development processes, which are viewed as essential for genuine participation, especially in contexts characterised by scepticism or resistance. Culturally sensitive approaches that respect local traditions while promoting civic learning are acknowledged as critical for overcoming barriers to engagement, consistent with literature on culturally responsive governance (Sabet & Stevens 2022).

The recurrent use of terms like "explain-ing" and "teach" by all participants underscores the pedagogical nature of stakeholder engagement in this context.

These terms align with conceptualisations in the literature that define participation primarily as education and information dissemination—placing emphasis on clarifying technical details rather than fostering inclusive dialogue or deliberative decision-making (Arnstein 1969; Cooke & Kothari 2001). For example, Participant 1 remarked, "it is all about explaining to residents/citizens so that they understand," illustrating an understanding that comprehension is achieved predominantly through explanation rather than through mutual deliberation. The detailed elaboration—"you explain to him/her; what he/she understands he/she understands, what he/she cannot understand you explain to him/her"—exemplifies a one-directional transfer of knowledge, positioning the planner as a teacher and the community as learners, which reflects the pedagogical model outlined in Freire (1970)'s critical pedagogy.

Moreover, engagement tactics such as presentations, demonstrations, or visualisations—for example, "3D models" or "broadcast sessions"—highlight an emphasis on clarity and explanation rather than dialogue or co-creation (Reason & Bradbury 2001). This reliance on didactic methods suggests that stakeholder interactions are dominated by a pedagogy focused on knowledge transfer, which aligns with the notion of a "pedagogical process" that overrides traditional deliberative models (Connelly 2009). This shift signifies a move from the classic model of participatory democracy—characterised by mutual exchange and consensus-building (Fung 2006; Dryzek 2011)—to a top-down educational approach, where communities are viewed as passive recipients rather than active influencers.

While this pedagogical approach has the advantage of informing and raising awareness among communities, it inherently tends to overshadow more inclusive deliberative practices that involve listening, dialogue, and co-creation of solutions (Bell & Reed 2021). As such, public participation risks becoming reduced to compliance with information dissemination rather than a meaningful democratic process. The dominance of "explain" and "teach" terminology indicates a top-down pedagogical paradigm, limiting the depth, inclusiveness, and legitimacy of community engagement in urban planning (Fischer 2000).

   In summary, the collective application of "explain" and "teach" reflects a foundational pedagogical paradigm influencing urban planning and stakeholder engagement. This orientation favours a didactic, education-driven model over a genuinely participatory, deliberative approach, positioning community members as learners within a one-directional flow of knowledge. Such a shift has profound implications for the depth, inclusiveness, and democratic legitimacy of participatory modelling, potentially transforming forums for community influence into platforms for education rather than genuine co-decision. This recognition

aligns with critiques found in participatory governance literature, emphasising the need to balance educational elements with genuine deliberative engagement to enhance the authenticity and sustainability of urban planning processes (Fung 2006).

6.3 International standards and the tension with rapid development

While global standards such as those promoted by the World Bank advocate for inclusive, transparent, and participatory development, their effective implementation in rapid-growth contexts like Rwanda often faces significant challenges. International principles emphasise early stakeholder engagement, mutual understanding, and respect for local knowledge (Arnstein 1969; Fishkin 2011), yet practical constraints such as compressed timelines, political control, and concerns over reputational risk tend to limit genuine civic participation (Gaventa 2003; Cornwall 2008). Participants observe that while adherence to international standards can serve as a benchmark for desirable governance behaviours, the urgency of infrastructural and economic outcomes frequently overshadows the goal of deep civic engagement. This tension necessitates innovative, adaptive strategies that embed civic education and participatory processes into urban development as ongoing, transformative activities rather than isolated or procedural consultations (Irvin & Stansbury 2004).

Furthermore, the conception of the public interest is often prioritised over community-based concerns, with governments framing development within a national narrative that justifies limited citizen influence. This approach aligns with debates about governance legitimacy, where state-led development can marginalise local voices under the guise of efficiency and progress (Cooke & Kothari 2001; Fung 2006). Such practices highlight the challenge of reconciling rapid implementation with democratic inclusivity, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of top-down models that undermine social equity.

It is essential to recognise that achieving meaningful participation in Rwanda's urban projects is a complex, long-term endeavour that requires balancing swift delivery with democratic legitimacy. Embedding participation as a pedagogical, continuous process—focused on civic education, trust-building, and cultural sensitivity—can help bridge the gap between normative ideals and operational realities (Cooke & Kothari 2001). Future strategies should prioritise strengthening institutional capacity for sustained community engagement, innovating participatory methods tailored to local contexts, and cultivating a participatory culture that values learning, dialogue, and shared ownership (Arnstein 1969). Such an approach has the potential to foster more inclusive, resilient, and

sustainable urban development trajectories aligned with both Rwanda's national vision and principles of democratic governance.

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Popular science summary

Introduction

Rapid urbanisation poses significant challenges worldwide, especially in countries like Rwanda, where economic growth and infrastructure development are prioritised. While international standards advocate for inclusive and participatory urban planning, implementing these in fast-growing contexts often encounters obstacles such as limited resources, cultural norms, and political pressures. The Green City Kigali (GCK) initiative exemplifies efforts to promote sustainable and inclusive urban development but reveals complex dynamics between governance, citizen participation, and cultural values.

Aim and research questions

This study aims to explore how public participation is integrated into Rwanda's urban development processes, particularly within the GCK project. The key questions include: (i) How is public participation understood, valued, and practised within Rwanda's urban development projects, such as Green City Kigali? (ii) What are the key structural, institutional, social, and perceptual factors that influence the extent, quality, and continuity of citizen engagement in urbanisation projects? (iii) To what extent do national development narratives, international standards, and political priorities shape or constrain participatory practices, especially when these practices conflict with requirements for rapid implementation and project delivery? (iv) How do citizens' perceptions, fears, and levels of awareness affect their engagement, trust, and willingness to collaborate in urban planning processes? (v) What communication, education, and engagement strategies are employed by planners and policymakers to bridge knowledge gaps, involve marginalised groups, and build sustainable participation?

Method and findings

Using qualitative interviews and observation, I examined experiences and perceptions of participants involved in GCK. The findings indicate that participation in Rwanda often defaults to one-directional information sharing rather than genuine dialogue. To counteract this, a "Pedagogical Approach" has been adopted—viewing citizen engagement as a long-term process of education, trust-building, and cultural sensitisation. Key results include: (i) participation improves when citizens repeatedly receive information and internalise these messages, gradually adopting a sense of ownership. (ii) cultural norms

emphasising deference to authority and scepticism towards change can obstruct open deliberation. (iii) political emphasis on maintaining Rwanda's image as a rapidly developing nation can lead to superficial engagement, limiting true citizen influence.

Sources of knowledge and influence on environmental governance types

The study draws from theories emphasising adaptive capacity, social learning, and participatory governance. It underscores that meaningful environmental governance requires inclusive, transparent, and continuous stakeholder engagement, rather than one-off consultations. The pedagogical process embedded in GCK fosters a form of adaptive governance, learning through participation, which is vital for managing complex social-ecological systems sustainably.

Factors obscuring deliberative processes

Some factors hinder genuine deliberation:

- Institutional capacity gaps, including a lack of resources and expertise.
- Legal frameworks prioritising rapid expropriation over community input.
- Cultural norms that value authority and traditional living arrangements often lead to scepticism or resistance.
- Political priorities focused on rapid development and image management, which can suppress dissent and limit authentic citizen influence.

Relevance of this study and conclusion

This research highlights that transforming public participation into an ongoing, pedagogical process is crucial for inclusive urban development in Rwanda. It demonstrates that long-term education, trust-building, and cultural sensitivity are essential to overcome barriers to genuine community involvement. The findings suggest that integrating continuous learning approaches into governance can create more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable cities; an insight relevant for other fast-growing nations facing similar challenges.

In conclusion, fostering participatory governance through education and dialogue aligns development with democratic values, ultimately leading to more equitable urban environments that reflect the aspirations and needs of all citizens.

Acknowledgements

I extend my deepest gratitude to all who contributed to the successful completion of this master's thesis. Engaging with my interviewees was both enlightening and rewarding, as their perspectives provided invaluable insights.

I am especially grateful to my supervisor, Lars Hallgren, whose unwavering support was instrumental throughout this journey. His availability, attentive listening, timely and constructive feedback, and empathetic guidance made the completion of this thesis possible.

I also acknowledge the support provided by the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, through the Erasmus+ Grant for making the interviews possible in Rwanda, as well as the Swedish Institute that fully funded my two years master's program in Sweden.

Finally, to my friends, colleagues, and family, particularly Francine and Néo for their understanding and encouragement not only during the writing process, but also the entire two years period away from them; I owe sincere thanks.

Appendix 1

Appendix A: Interview Transcripts

Appendix 1 A: Full transcript of the interview with Participant 1
Appendix 1 B: Transcript summary of the interview with Participant 2
Appendix 1 C: Full transcript of the interview with Participant 3
Appendix 1 D: Transcript summary of the interview with Participant 4
Appendix 1 E: Full transcript of the interview with Participant 5
Appendix 1 F: Full transcript of the interview with Participant 6

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