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A 'Justice Doughnut' approach to reconciling directionality and subsidiarity in regional development: Evidence from green transition in North Sweden

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Abstract

As green transitions accelerate, the resulting socio-technical transformations often produce uneven spatial impacts, generating 'green' discontent in peripheral and rural regions. Despite the growing discourse on 'just transition', regional policy models frequently overlook the multidimensional nature of justice. Through this study we explore how justice can be conceptualized and operationalized within regional green transitions? Theoretically, we propose a framework – the *justice doughnut*- that positions the trivalent approach (distributional, procedural, and recognitional justice) in regional development. We situate this framework amidst the evolving tensions between top-down 'directionality' (driven by sustainability mandates and strategic autonomy) and bottom-up 'subsidiarity' (rooted in place-based policy). We hence recontextualise justice as a mutually constitutive space that mediates the governance of regional transformations. Empirically, we illustrate this framework with a case study in Jämtland-Härjedalen, a peripheral region in North Sweden, vital to national transition ambitions. Employing an abductive, multi-method qualitative design - incorporating policy analysis, stakeholder interviews, and deliberative workshops- we examine the multilevel interactions between local, national, and EU actors. The findings reveal pervasive asymmetries in resources and legitimacy, alongside significant intra-regional differentiation. By highlighting how governance logics shape justice outcomes, we offer a generative lens for rethinking just regional development. We, hence, contribute to a deeper understanding of the institutional conditions necessary to reconcile national transition goals with regional equity in peripheral European contexts.

Keywords: regional development; directionality; subsidiarity; just transition; peripheral regions

1 Introduction

Green transitions are gaining traction globally with the imperative to achieve net-zero emissions while addressing regional developmental needs such as the creation of green jobs and improving quality of life (Li et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2024). Especially, the transformation of socio-technical systems including energy, urban infrastructure, and industries, is emerging as critical input to the design and implementation of regional development policy, striving to integrate local development agendas within broader global climate change adaptation and mitigation frameworks (Chlebna & Suitner, 2025). However, it is becoming increasingly evident that such transformation processes impact different places and communities or social groups differently, often giving rise to pockets of ‘green’ discontent. This is especially visible in less developed, peripheral, and rural regions, indicating the need to account for variations in vulnerability to socioeconomic reconfigurations brought about by green transitions (Rodríguez-Pose & Bartalucci, 2024; Südekum & Posch, 2024).

In order to address the issue of green discontent, the concept of ‘just transitions’ is central to understand how societies can balance environmental sustainability with economic development and social equity (Topaloglou, 2024). Although justice is increasingly being acknowledged in regional green transition discourse its implementation remains partial, inconsistent and fragmented (Doucet, 2006). What exists is a targeted policy model that addresses disparities between regions through operationalising concepts such as spatial justice (redistribution of resources) and just transitions. However, what is missing is a deeper integration of justice as a multidimensional principle. Hence, we ask the following overarching research question:

How can justice be understood in the context of green transitions in regions?

In doing so we first theoretically recontextualise the three tenets approach to justice, covering distributional, recognition, and procedural justice in the context of regional development. The three tenets are grounded in a large body of work on energy justice (Dawson, 2010; Schlosberg, 2007) and complement the current perspective on justice in regional development, which is more focused on uneven development, i.e., the distribution of, for instance, jobs, income, or investments, or regional differences in opportunities and vulnerabilities to climate change (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2025, Rodríguez-Pose and Bartalucci, 2024). We embed the three tenets in the context of place-based regional policy approaches, which have become central in European policy making since the 2000s (Barca et al., 2012, Barca, 2009). The place-based approach emphasizes local knowledge and the participation of local actor groups. However, despite this shift to the local level, current approaches have shortcomings in recognizing and including local communities and stakeholder groups more meaningfully (Molica et al., 2025, Jolly et al., 2020). Furthermore, the increasing emphasis on directionality in terms of articulating high-level priorities related to sustainability transitions, and lately also to competitiveness and strategic autonomy in the context of geopolitical tensions may limit local decision-making powers, which place-based policies aimed to achieve (Grillitsch et al., 2025b). We, hence, conceptualize the three tenets as a mutually constitutive space – the *justice doughnut*’ – mediated by directionality and subsidiarity in the context of sustainability transitions in regions.

We illustrate this empirically through a focused case of region Jämtland-Härjedalen (J-H) in Sweden. The region J-H offers a compelling entry point for surfacing potential justice concerns and mechanisms for more equitable and fair regional development due to its position as historically peripheralized, while at the same time having experimented with more inclusive regional policy and planning practices. Located in Sweden's northern inland, J-H exemplifies how spatial, institutional, and discursive marginalisation intersects with everyday regional development and planning practices. The region's municipalities face uneven demographic and economic pressures, long distances to core services, and limited access to national investment. Yet they simultaneously serve as vital contributors to national energy and resource provisioning for a transition to a green economy. This paradox of being both peripheral and vital for a green economy indicates structural justice concerns around recognition, redistribution, and procedural inclusion. Moreover, what makes Jämtland particularly salient for studying multilevel governance is the dynamic interaction between local, regional, national and EU actors, and our study reveals perceived asymmetries in attention, resources, and legitimacy. These dynamics highlight the need for aligning territorial cohesion with differentiated local needs. Moreover, the internal differentiation within the region - between 'stronger' and 'weaker' municipalities, illustrates how justice concerns must also address intra-regional disparities and symbolic geographies. The region J-H thus offers an empirically rich and theoretically generative lens for rethinking just regional development in peripheral European contexts.

2 Justice in regional development

2.1 Subsidiarity and directionality in regional development

One of the big challenges in regional development is to balance directionality, in terms of higher-level priority setting with subsidiarity, in terms of recognising and valorising local knowledge (Barca, 2009, Grillitsch et al., 2025b). Recently, the weight of directionality has increased with several high-level priorities. The discussion of directionality gained traction with the shift towards sustainability imperatives and the need to address societal challenges (Schot and Steinmueller, 2018, Weber and Rohracher, 2012). Moreover, a more complex picture of directionality has emerged lately, emphasising among others competitiveness in geopolitical competition and strategic autonomy (Draghi, 2024, Grillitsch et al., 2025a, Edler et al., 2023). The strengthened directionality increases the likelihood that political decision-making moves away from the local level, or that local actors face a narrower opportunity space, thus limiting subsidiarity.

In this context, it is worth noting that the subsidiarity principle is enshrined in the Treaty of the European Union and demands that "decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen" (Art. 10(3) of the Treaty on the European Union) and only if the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved at the local level, shall they be performed by higher (national or European) levels. Sustainability challenges, most notably climate change and biodiversity loss, and geopolitical tensions are global by nature, and require action at and directionality from the national and international levels. Nevertheless, the tensions of such policies are often experienced at the local scales, where they might also be best navigated and resolved (Wanzenböck and Frenken, 2020). The tension between directionality and subsidiarity is thus a multi-level governance challenge.

Catering to the principle of subsidiarity, the place-based approach to regional innovation and development policy has been central in the European context since the 2000s (Barca et al., 2012). The place-based approach recognises the importance of local knowledge for identifying opportunities and challenges linked to the specific local preconditions, capabilities, and industry mixes, and sees local knowledge essential for implementing such policies (Barca, 2009). With a shift to a place-based approach, decision-making for regional innovation and development policy developed in favour of local actors and away from one-size-fits-all European or national prioritizations (e.g., of the main technologies or sectors) (Tödtling and Trippel, 2005). Linked to the concept of regional innovation systems, it allowed for variations in policy approaches depending on regional pre-conditions, also taking into consideration more peripheral and rural regions with thin organizational structures (Isaksen and Trippel, 2016, Grillitsch and Asheim, 2018).

In this context, the introduction of smart specialisation as innovation-driven regional development approach in the European Union and several other OECD countries is relevant and important (Radošević et al., 2017). This approach focusses on how local actors develop and implement policy priorities through the entrepreneurial discovery process. Entrepreneurial discovery is to be understood broadly with entrepreneurs potentially coming from the public sector or the civil society. However, smart specialisation has been criticized for being rather ineffective in addressing regional development in lagging regions, with lower average income, often peripheral and rural (Marques and Morgan, 2018, Hassink and Gong, 2019), thereby, potentially leading to increased regional disparities. In addition, it was found that the participating actors remained mainly the traditional ones including dominant firms, higher education institutions, and the regional authorities responsible for smart specialisation strategies (Molica et al., 2025, Jolly et al., 2020). Hence, the current approach to place-based development is “defective in terms of both substance and process: the substantive shortcoming is that it focuses on a narrowly conceived form of innovation neglecting for instance social innovation; and the process is deficient because the primary agents are narrowly conceived as basically the economic partners in the triple helix – firms, local/regional government and universities, while neglecting fringe actors and vulnerable groups” (Grillitsch et al., 2025b, 4).

Furthermore, the current emphasis on ‘where’ development happens, does little to address “how” decisions are made and “who” is recognised in those processes. For instance, the European Union’s Cohesion Policy channels significant resources to less-developed areas, but structural inequalities within and between regions persist. Development benefits often bypass structurally disadvantaged groups, especially in rural, post-industrial, and border regions, calling for more targeted and differentiated place-based approaches that actively redress uneven capabilities and needs (Batel & Küpers, 2023; Bouzarovski & Simcock, 2017). While planning frameworks aim for spatial balance, they often fail to account for the lived experiences and socio-political marginalisation within regions. Such a distribution focused approach often risks overlooking specific needs, intersecting social identities and cultural histories of diverse (hard to reach) communities, resulting in low acceptability of transition efforts (Garvey et al., 2022).

Furthermore, stemming from the narrow conception of justice in regional development policy in terms of uneven development, economic growth, job creation and innovation are frequently prioritised as ends, rather than means to achieve environmental sustainability and more just and equitable societies (Bueno Patin & Stapper, 2025; Gürtler & Löw Beer, 2024). This also creates potential trade-offs between

democratisation and acceleration of green transition initiatives (Skjølsvold & Coenen, 2021). In addition, current approaches favour large-scale infrastructure deployment to achieve quick returns through economies of scale, at the cost of longer term just transition pathways. The burdens of accelerated transitions are frequently shifted onto sub-national levels, which often lack the institutional capacity, financial resources, and legal authority required for effective implementation (Hielscher et al., 2025). Such development initiatives also risk marginalising already vulnerable groups within such regions like women, Indigenous communities etc. (Eriksson et al., 2025). Thus, justice and acceleration are rarely considered in combination in transition governance and planning.

We can thus conclude that even though place-based approaches emphasise the voice of local actors in designing and implementing regional development policies in line with the subsidiarity principle, there are persistent issues related to the inclusion of a variety of actor groups, and the negotiation and navigation of directionalities imposed from the national or European levels. In order to deal with these issues, we suggest that it is important to integrate a more comprehensive perspective on justice in regional development.

2.2 Unpacking justice – the three tenets approach

To take into account the multi dimensions of justice, we build on the triumvirate of tenets namely, procedural, distributional, and recognition justice (McCauley et al., 2013), which is drawn from a well-established literature on energy justice rooted in the principles of environmental and climate justice (Dawson, 2010; Schlosberg, 2007). The three tenets approach specifically focuses on how policy and system transitions can be leveraged to deliver social and environmentally just outcomes (Jenkins et al., 2016). The usefulness of this approach lies in its ability to reveal how regional development and green transition policies allocate costs and benefits- whether through infrastructure siting (e.g., mining, wind farms), monetary and fiscal mechanisms (e.g., subsidies, tax incentives, measures to address fuel poverty), or consumption practices (e.g., public procurement, support for indigenous and local livelihoods)- while operating within the shifting pressures of global, national, and subnational governance.

Distributive justice is mainly concerned with the distribution of burdens and benefits of transitions. Financing, revenues, and costs are key dimensions of looking at this justice dimension (Heffron, 2024). It is argued that justice with respect to green transitions is inherently a spatial concept which encompasses both the physically unequal allocation of environmental ills and benefits (e.g. exposure to noise pollution from windmills), as well as uneven distribution of non-material elements i.e., their associated responsibilities (Walker, 2009). Thus, distributional justice mostly appears in situations where considerations about desirability of technologies and infrastructure get entangled with place specific contexts (Owens & Driffill, 2008).

The second principle, procedural justice, manifests as a need for fair and transparent procedures that engage all stakeholders in non-discriminatory manners. It has been observed that mere (superficial) engagement of stakeholders often does not deliver justice outcomes. Hence this dimension advocates for ‘meaningful’ engagement, impartiality and full information disclosures by both private and policy actors (Davies, 2006). Thus, green transition and development projects to be procedurally just, must operationalize inclusive and sympathetic engagement mechanisms.

The third tenet, recognition justice, often understood as a core component of procedural justice needs to be carefully articulated, as it has a scope broader than effective and fair participation. This means rather than just being tolerant of multiple world views on transitions and development, all social groups must be represented meaningfully, and be free from physical or emotional threats, and be offered complete and equal political rights (Schlosberg, 2007). Disrespect through stereotyping or distorting alternative worldviews (often unintentional) is also a key consideration when planning green transition initiatives. This refers to the risks associated with not just failure to recognize but also misrecognition of different ethnic, racial, socioeconomic and gender differences (Fraser, 2009).

With this backdrop, justice in regional development literature so far has primarily been operationalized through the concept of spatial justice which aligns mostly with the distributional dimension, referring to distributing social and environmental costs and benefits more equitably between and within territories, groups and generations (Madanipour et al., 2022). This is part of the continuous tension between efficient and equitable regional development, where distributing resources to the regions with less favorable economic conditions would reduce economic efficiency but increase cohesion and equity (Iammarino et al., 2017). Cohesion had been a core political priority in the European Union, resulting in the distribution of structural and cohesion funds in favor of the regions with lowest average incomes. Hence, historically regional development has been skewed towards economic concerns such as income, employment, investments, and growth. This focus on improving all regions' competitiveness for economic growth, risks driving attention away from deep rooted foundations of economic deprivation (Pike et al., 2007), which could be captured by a more comprehensive view on justice.

2.3 The Justice Doughnut- recontextualising justice in regional development

Based on the above, we observe that although now, regional development policy design is guided by normative principles of prioritarianism (incentivizing the least well-off) or egalitarianism (reduce relative inequality), the dominant rationale is often utilitarian focusing for instance on income (van Vulpen, 2023). Moreover, while the three-tenets approach to justice has gained traction in the energy and sustainability transitions literature, regional development debates have only recently witnessed a shift from spatial(distributive) to procedural dimensions of justice (Shucksmith et al., 2021). This discursive shift flows from the problematization of overemphasising distributive dimensions – that risk obscuring the institutional, cultural and socioeconomic contexts within which such distributions are embedded (Young, 1990). This particularly relates to the growing tensions between directionality and subsidiarity in the governance of regional development initiatives, including green transitions and geopolitical objectives. Such tensions arise because regions are simultaneously expected to align with overarching strategic visions while tailoring actions to their specific socioeconomic, institutional, and cultural contexts.

We argue that this is precisely why and where justice needs to be recontextualised in the regional development context. The current justice framing is skewed towards sustainability transition, and hence in regional development contexts, it falls short in adequately addressing how priorities should be set (procedural justice) or whose identities, knowledges, and lived experiences need to be recognised in shaping transition pathways (recognition justice). Directionality foregrounds the steering role of higher-level institutions and the pursuit of collective missions or priorities, whereas subsidiarity emphasizes local

autonomy, differentiated capabilities, and historically situated forms of agency (Grillitsch et al., 2025). Without a justice lens that mediates these dynamics, the two logics risk pulling in opposing directions - generating transition strategies that may optimise aggregate outcomes yet overlook structural exclusions, local contestations, and capability asymmetries.

Integrating directionality and subsidiarity with the three tenets of justice is therefore conceptually complementary and provides analytical leverage because it enables justice to be contextualised as a multi-scalar, processual, and relational construct, embedded within regional development policy and governance rather than confined to merely distributive endpoints.

However, the three-tenets approach to justice is not without limitations. Although widely applied in transition literature, it has been critiqued for compartmentalizing justice into three distinct domains (Laes et al., 2023). Empirical and conceptual scholarship is increasingly demonstrating strong interdependencies between these domains, calling for a multidimensional and context-dependent understanding. For example, procedural justice (participation) directly shapes both recognitional justice (the inclusion of marginalised groups) and distributional outcomes (allocation of risks and benefits). Community energy initiatives illustrate this overlap clearly: negotiations over effort, risk and authority among actor groups show that procedural and distributional dimensions are mutually constitutive in practice (Astola et al., 2022). Consequently, treating the tenets as discrete categories obscures normative clarity, simplifies complex power relations and proves analytically impractical (Scholz & Schuppert, 2025).

Given these limitations in how justice is operationalised within both transition literature and regional development debates, there is a clear need for an alternative framing that can capture the governance tensions shaping regional development and green transition processes. We therefore bring directionality and subsidiarity into analytical alignment with a relational understanding of the three justice tenets, treating distributional, procedural and recognitional aspects as overlapping and mutually constitutive rather than independent siloed categories. This allows justice to be examined not as an outcome to be measured retrospectively but as a set of dynamic, interdependent processes through which priorities are set, claims are negotiated, and capacities are enabled or constrained across scales (Figure 1).



Figure1: The Justice Doughnut- Justice as a mutually constitutive space mediated by directionality and subsidiarity

Source: Authors' composition

Our contribution lies in recontextualising justice in regional development contexts, offering a framework that can account for place-specific institutional conditions, differentiated capabilities and evolving power relations in green transitions against the broader global and national frameworks of development, climate change mitigation and adaptation. In doing so, we propose a 'Justice Doughnut' that resonates with the core premise of Doughnut Economics - development must take place within a clearly defined normative boundary (Fanning & Raworth, 2025). This model visualises a safe and just space formed between ecological ceilings and social foundations, arguing that societies thrive only when biophysical limits and social needs are simultaneously respected (Raworth, 2017). We draw on this conceptual grammar but adapt it to the policy and governance dynamics of regional development and green transitions. In the justice doughnut we reimagine the bounding forces through the logics of directionality and subsidiarity, which shape how priorities, place-based capabilities and normative concerns evolve across scales. These logics interact within the justice doughnut, where distributive, procedural, and recognitional elements are negotiated as mutually constitutive processes. The interplay between directionality (top-down logics) and subsidiarity (bottom-up logics) can generate trade-offs, synergies or shifts in emphasis, producing different constellations of justice elements within the doughnut. Thus, wellbeing and more broadly justice emerge within bounded, dynamic spaces and is mediated through multilevel governance frameworks.

3 Methods

Research design and methodological approach

We adopt an interpretivist research philosophy to explore how justice is articulated and negotiated in regional green transitions. In doing so we rely on qualitative multi-method research design anchored in an abductive logic of inquiry, because it enables iterative movement between established conceptual lenses and empirical realities. Methodologically, we combine personal interviews, document analysis, focus groups, scenario workshops, risk and failure mapping, and futuring exercises in what we refer as multilevel learning journeys (MLJ). The MLJ was designed as both an empirical site of knowledge production and a neutral, policy-free arena where justice dilemmas are articulated and negotiated between multilevel-stakeholder interactions over a span of two days. The site for the MLJ was deliberately chosen to be a museum which functioned as a 'soft space'. The cultural setting allowed for a space where actor groups including local communities, private players, policy actors and academic actors embedded in diverse governance contexts could engage in open discussions without being bound by institutional routines or political commitments (Hajer & Pelzer, 2018).

Case selection and empirical setting

Jämtland–Härjedalen (J-H) is a peripheral and internally differentiated region where green transition ambitions collide with long-standing territorial inequality and contested legitimacy. The region contributes substantially to value creation at the national level (notably through energy, forestry, and tourism), yet actors frequently experience weak value return, service withdrawal, and infrastructure neglect (Stafverfeldt, 2022). At the same time, J-H contains strong internal contrasts between growth nodes (e.g., Östersund/Åre) and 'inner peripheries', producing uneven municipal capacity and differentiated needs. This makes J-H well suited for analysing how directionality (national/EU priorities, green growth-oriented policy templates) interacts with subsidiarity (municipal autonomy, and place-based needs). These frictions render justice claims visible and contestable in planning and implementation choices.

Sampling and data collection

Data collection followed a three-stage design that moved from formal policy discourse to actor experiences and deliberative interaction. Phase one comprised analysis of policy documents, including smart specialization strategy and regional development strategy, of region J-H to map official problem framings, target groups, and policy instruments, and to establish an interpretive baseline. Phase two involved semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled respondents to achieve maximum variation across governance levels and stakeholder groups, focusing on perceived distributions of costs and benefits, decision-making arrangements, and recognition dynamics affecting legitimacy and capacity to act (refer table 1 for respondent overview). Signed or verbal consent was taken, and all the interviews were pseudonymized and transcribed for analysis according to the data management protocol for the project. Phase three centered on insights from a two-day multi-stakeholder workshop that functioned as a deliberative arena to surface contestation, bottlenecks, and governance mechanisms. Deliberations were documented in real-time by designated rapporteurs to ensure a comprehensive and accurate record of participant interactions.

Governance level	Actor group	Key transition remit	n
<i>Local</i>	Municipalities	Spatial planning; local development; service provision; implementation capacity	2 (R13, R22)
	Industry actor	Project development/operations; local value chains; skills and employment	1 (R14)
	Indigenous community; Civil society	Recognition and representation of local culture/heritage; mediating Indigenous perspectives in development/land-use debates; safeguarding cultural values in transition pathways.	3 (R1, R9, R10)
<i>Regional</i>	Regional policymaker/ politician	Strategy and programme governance for regional development and S3; coordinating transition priorities, instruments and partnerships.	3 (R7, R15, R20)
	Industry Council	Cluster/intermediary functions; investment pipelines; sector coordination	1 (R21)
	Knowledge and implementation company	Competence and skills development for green industries; applied knowledge support for workforce and sectoral transformation.	1 (R2)
	J-H Tourism	Tourism and destination development; representing sectoral priorities (investment, skills, infrastructure needs) in regional strategy processes.	1 (R5)
<i>Local-regional interface</i>	Non-profit association on regional development	Place-based rural development facilitation and project support; community capacity building, experimentation and inclusion in transition activities.	1 (R6)
<i>National – regional interface</i>	Academia (higher education institution)	Research and innovation advisory; knowledge brokerage to policy and practice; strengthening evidence-informed transition and innovation support.	3 (R8, R11, R12)
	Swedish Innovation Agency	Steers innovation-system transformation via funding programmes, pilots and partnerships; amplifies directionality through priorities and design.	4 (R16- R19)
	Cross border organisation	Political coordination; aligning priorities, projects and cooperation agendas across border regions	1 (R3)
<i>EU (Supranational)</i>	JRC, European Commission	S3/Green Deal evidence, guidance and monitoring.	1 (R4)
		Total	22

Analytical framework and coding strategy

Guided by interpretivist philosophy, we treat justice not as a fixed attribute of policy, but as a meaning-laden and contested construct produced through discourse, institutional practice, and lived experience. Informed by theory, our analytical framework builds on the trivalent justice lens - distributive, procedural, and recognitional justice as first order codes for examining how these principles are articulated

and legitimised in regional green transformations. We applied an abductive coding strategy, iteratively moving between these theory-informed categories and empirically grounded patterns emerging across materials.

First, through critical content analysis of Smart Specialisation (S3) and regional development strategy documents, we traced how justice is translated into policy language, including problem framings, target groups, instruments, and implicit assumptions about who benefits, who participates, and whose identities and needs are recognised. Second, we critically analysed the interview transcripts to develop a bottom-up account of how justice concerns are articulated and negotiated through governance processes in the region J-H. Second and third order coding focused on how actors describe the distribution of opportunities and burdens, the organisation of participation and influence, and experiences of recognition or misrecognition, and how these shape perceived legitimacy and capacity to act. Third, we triangulated these insights through critical analysis of in situ documentation from the two-day multilevel workshop, treated as a deliberative arena in which contestation, alignment, and bottlenecks become visible in real time.

This three-stage analysis allowed us to develop a granular account of how justice concerns emerge and evolve across policy discourse, governance practice, and lived experience, and how they are shaped by multilevel governance dynamics, including the interplay between directionality and subsidiarity. Analytical rigour was strengthened through data and source triangulation, iterative recoding and memoing, and systematic comparison across materials to check for convergence and productive disagreement. To strengthen credibility, coding and thematic interpretations were discussed continuously within the research team, enabling reflexive scrutiny of assumptions, checking for over-interpretation, and improving consistency in how justice categories were applied across data sources. The resulting coding structure is reported in the Figure 2.

Ethical considerations

In addition to informed consent, all materials were handled to protect confidentiality and reduce identification risks, particularly given the small-world character of regional governance settings and the sensitivity of contested justice claims. Where required, quotations are pseudonymized, and contextual identifiers are minimised without compromising analytical integrity.

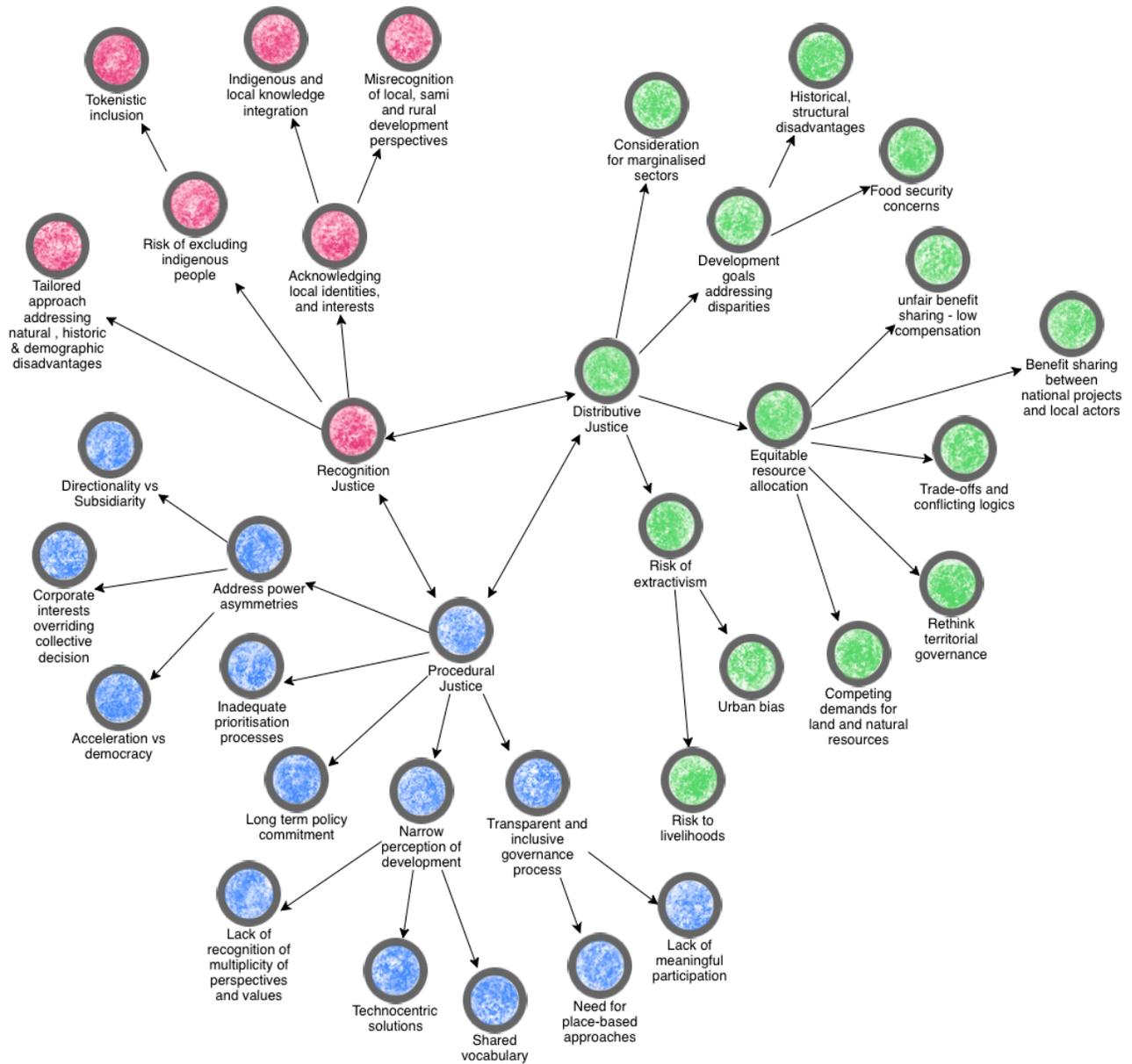


Figure 2: Coding framework for justice dimensions in green regional transformation
 Source: Authors' compilation (personal interviews, S3 and regional development strategy document, & stakeholder workshops)

4 Findings and analysis: Justice dynamics in regional development

4.1 Distributional justice concerns

Distributive justice concerns in Jämtland – Härjedalen (J-H) are best understood as territorial inequity. Meaning patterned misalignment between what peripheral, low-density regions are expected to deliver in the green transition and the material, fiscal, and institutional resources available to do so. The interviews and policy material reveal that distributive injustice is not merely about scarcity. It is produced through

the combined effects of infrastructure provisioning, allocation formulas, and land-use governance, which unevenly distribute transition burdens and benefits across place and social groups. In this sense, distributional justice emerges as an ongoing socio-spatial ordering of responsibilities, risks, and value capture.

One of the prominent concerns is the structural disadvantaging of small and diverse economic actors within growth and transition architectures designed around organisational scale and innovation capacity. The region's business structure, comprising micro and small enterprises, renders participation in national and European growth policy difficult, with direct implications for who can access resources, influence priority-setting, and benefit from transition investments. As one stakeholder put it,

"...Since our businesses are small and diverse due to small markets and isolation, we have trouble building capacity. No businesses can finance clusters and then it is hard to be in the room where the decisions are made because organisations and businesses are too small or perceived to be too small..."
(Stakeholder consultation, 2025)

Such a capacity trap indicates distributional concerns as the inability to mobilise collective representation and co-finance policy platforms limits access to support that could reduce structural disadvantage. Territorial equity concerns refer to uneven infrastructure provisioning translating to unequal ability to comply with or benefit from decarbonisation pathways. In sparse rural geographies like in the region J-H, low-carbon transition expectations are experienced as asymmetrically feasible and increasingly linked to the debates on acceleration versus democracy.

"Transition... it's not for all...The big question is if it's democratic. Is it democratic when we don't have the same possibilities? ...We have to have the same infrastructure to be able to make this transition."
(Interview, R6 Non-profit association on regional development, 2025)

Here, justice concerns comprise uneven availability of public transport, broadband, and other enabling infrastructures, compounded by market failure. *"It is not profitable for the broadband market to connect households and businesses to fast broadband because the distances are large and the costs are therefore very high..."* (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2020) Such gaps translate into differentiated capability to participate in transition-oriented economic restructuring.

The empirical material also foregrounds a fiscal–territorial mismatch between resident-based allocation systems and the region's functional population. Tourism, second-home ownership, and seasonal labour intensify service and infrastructure demand, yet remain weakly reflected in fiscal distribution.

"...we receive a low share because we have few registered inhabitants... Funding is based on residents, not on the economic value we generate... during winter break... there are more people here than in Stockholm...but none of them pay taxes here." (Interview, R5 Jämtland Härjedalen Tourism, 2025)

The distributive implication of mismatch between functional and resident (tax paying) population reflects as under-provision of roads, water, waste systems, and emerging transition infrastructures (e.g., EV charging), where local authorities must plan for peaks but cannot finance systems *"just for two weeks in*

the winter” (Interview, R7Hållbar Tillväxt, 2025). Distributional injustice thus becomes an uneven assignment of public service burdens without commensurate revenue.

Moreover, distributive injustice in the region is territorialised through competing claims on land and the cumulative burdens of multiple projects, particularly for indigenous and other place-based livelihoods and cultural practices. These injustices are often unintended and arise due to project-by-project governance, failing to recognise how impacts compound across the same landscapes over time.

“Authorities may treat projects as separate, but for us it adds up... wind parks, roads... it disrupts reindeer herding and Sámi life...regardless of these developments, climate change is still happening.” (Personal interview, R9 Indigenous community, 2025)

These distributive mechanisms are mediated by the tension between directionality and subsidiarity, highlighting risk of extractivism (eg. urban bias, livelihood disruption). Directionality appears where EU/national missions steer resource extraction and infrastructure expansion in remote territories, while perceived returns are externalised, reinforcing the view that *“decisions are made above their heads”* (Personal interview, R8 Local university, 2025) and resources are taken without adequate reciprocity.

“The consequences will be local, but the benefits will be elsewhere, except for a few jobs for a local population.” (Stakeholder consultation, 2025)

“...the energy, mining resources etc. is not being ... used in this region, it is to supply the green transition to other places. But they must put up with the infrastructure... that go through agricultural land, forest, reindeer grazing areas...” (Interview, R1 Indigenous community, 2025)

Subsidiarity is invoked through demands to tailor policy *“according to local and regional conditions”* yet is constrained by supra-national mandates, national fiscal and institutional arrangements that are treated as immovable (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2020). Thus, distributive injustices arise not from a lack of place-based awareness, but from a multi-level governance configuration in which top-down steering and local autonomy might be misaligned, reinforcing peripheralisation though weakened local value proposition and capture, uneven infrastructure provision, and accumulated land-use pressures over time.

4.2 Procedural justice

Procedural justice in region J-H is best understood as a multi-level transition governance challenge. Even where participatory architectures exist, the ability to set priorities, coordinate across sectors, and implementation capacity remains unevenly distributed. The Smart Specialisation Strategy stresses procedural fairness through open steering groups, mobilisation meetings, iterative follow-up, and alignment with *“EU Commission’s compliance criteria for good governance”*. In principle, this reflects the place-based promise of regional development, where regional actors *“shape content and drive initiatives”* through partnerships and learning-oriented evaluation (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2020). Yet our empirical material indicates that formal inclusion mandates often do not fully translate to procedural justice because, governance capacity itself is a scarce regional resource - particularly in peripheral, low-density contexts.

These constraints are articulated in terms of institutional thinness and limited administrative capacity, expressed in weak coordination and intermediation resources and capability. Procedurally, this produces differentiated agency to participate in decision making. Well-resourced organisations can remain continuously present across governance forums, while smaller municipalities and actors face higher opportunity costs and intermittent engagement. As a result, regional development governance does not operate as a neutral arena; rather, access and influence are conditioned by time, staffing, and organisational continuity. In a peripheral, low-density setting, these institutional conditions become consequential for how priorities are formed, how conflicts are handled, and whether place-based strategies can be effectively implemented.

“Capacity is the biggest bottleneck. In our organisation...perhaps two or three truly understand multi-level governance. This mirrors the entire county, very few people, spread across a very large area, with very limited administrative capacity.” (Interview, R2 Private company, 2025)

“...there were some management problems and perhaps ... they couldn't agree on how to do it... And now ... it is quite late also now in the seven-year cycle. And if we don't have a concrete plan to implement it, then I think it's problematic... so it's a lot of structures and levels that should be synchronised...” (Interview, R6 Non-profit association on regional development, 2025)

Procedural injustices in this context arise from inadequate prioritisation processes. Actors depict a broad strategic vision that often do not converge into explicit choices, leaving allocation criteria unclear and directionality weak. This leads to tensions with subsidiarity principles. In the absence of well-articulated priorities, coordination becomes more difficult and goal conflicts are displaced rather than negotiated. De facto decisions are thus increasingly shaped by external templates - funding requirements, regulatory frameworks, and the agendas of dominant actor groups. These dynamics are intensified by limited organisational continuity and institutional memory, which constrain the administrative capacity needed to translate strategy into sequencing, resourcing, and delivery.

“However, the regional organisation has had high staff turnover and limited institutional memory. Many people are new, unsure of responsibilities, and focused internally. This may partly explain why prioritisation has not taken place.” (Interview, R2 Private company, 2025)

The resulting implementation gap centers on the missing governance work of operationalization - specifying the 'how' that links strategic intent to feasible action within the programme cycle. Procedural justice is further strained by horizontal misalignment across sectors and territories. Tourism governance illustrates how multi-actor complexity becomes a procedural issue when organisational ecologies are uneven. Large corporate actors and well-resourced destinations coexist with municipalities that have minimal staffing for tourism, while politicians face a crowded field of representative organisations and unclear points of contact. The challenges thus exceed mere coordination messiness, shaping whose problem definitions become actionable and how readily collective decisions can be formed.

“XXX is a very large company in Vemdalen and Åre. Then you have municipalities without destination companies, maybe they have one person working half-time on tourism. Balancing these actors is challenging...There are many organisations: regional tourism CEOs, destination companies, Visit Sweden

(government-owned), Visita (industry organisation), municipal tourism officers, business associations...It is confusing for politicians to know who to talk to..." (Interview, R5 J-H Tourism, 2025)

Moreover, regulatory misalignment including outdated policy frameworks constrain deliberation about new land-use pressures. For instance, actors argue that current rules governing public access and nature use no longer fit contemporary patterns of mobility and tourism intensity (Interview, R5 J-H tourism, 2025). The most acute challenges appear where land-use decisions are governed by differentiated agency. In extractive governance, actors describe asymmetric agency to consent and veto rights - exploration permissions are granted through a specialised state apparatus; municipalities may have veto rights; private landowners lack the ability to refuse. Such governance design allocates decision making agency unevenly and therefore pre-structures participation i.e., who can contest projects, at what stage, and through which channels.

"If you look at the minerals, that is a special law, a Swedish law... We have...a special organisation that approves those that can go and look for minerals... The ones that own the land cannot say anything. If you go below the ground surface of the soil, ... you can't say anything you don't own the right to your own land at that moment..." (Interview, R8 Local University, 2025)

It also interacts with the failure to account for cumulative effects, as affected groups report that project-by-project assessments do not match how impacts compound on the ground over time, particularly in landscapes with multiple competing land uses.

These dynamics are shaped by the tension between directionality and subsidiarity, where top-down agenda setting increasingly enters through both programme conditionalities and risk-driven imperatives. Directionality is visible in how EU and national mandates set the terms of engagement. Smart Specialisation is instrumentally necessary because it unlocks European Regional Development Funds (ERDF), while sector-specific policy containers delimit which projects are legitimate and under what rules. Simultaneously, directionality is reinforced by wider pressures that re-rank policy priorities towards acceleration and security. Global climate risks, crisis imaginaries, and geopolitical tensions create conditions in which acceleration can displace democracy. Stakeholders explicitly frame geopolitics as steering national and EU visions in ways that may diverge from local priorities, and as a risk of shaping decision-making under fear (Stakeholder consultation, 2025).

In such governance climate, local agency is experienced as structurally contingent - *"you cannot guarantee agency because the state decides"*, this is magnified in underpopulated regions where political agency and bargaining power are perceived to weaken as demographic weight shifts southwards. Subsidiarity is invoked as a normative anchor- decisions should be taken closer to those affected - but in practice it is weakened by thin administrative capacity, uneven agency, and rigid institutional rules. Respondents also point to an evaporation dynamic, (Hoffman et al., 2021; Haldar et al., 2024) where EU-level commitments (including on inclusion) might get diluted as they are translated at national level, widening the gap between formal principles and lived experiences of procedural (in)justice (Stakeholder consultation, 2025).

4.3 Recognition justice

Recognition justice concerns in the region J-H are articulated both as a question of visibility and struggle over legitimacy. Whose identities and interests are taken seriously in defining what ‘development’ and ‘green transition’ should mean in a socio-politically complex and contested landscape presents a constant tension between top-down and bottom-up governance logics. In the Smart Specialisation narrative, the region is portrayed as distinctive and in need of a tailored approach addressing natural, historic & demographic disadvantages, emphasising that,

“J-H differs in several ways from other European regions; we need to critically examine Swedish and European policies, structures, and concepts and shape the regional growth work according to the conditions prevailing in our county.” (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2020)

The Smart Specialisation discourse also positions Sami culture as *“a strong identity factor”* within the county (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2020). Yet our empirical accounts show that recognition is fragile when identity is treated primarily as a regional asset rather than rights-based agency with its own political and epistemic claims. As one interviewee explains, cultural representation can risk slipping into instrumentalization.

“We also want Sámi society to feel included, not treated as ‘inspiration’ for others... it should not be used to promote the region in ways we cannot stand for, as if we exist mainly for other interests...” (Interview, R9 Indigenous Community, 2025)

This is closely tied to indigenous and local knowledge integration where actors do not simply ask to be “included”, but to have their knowledge treated as valid and translated into dominant policy grammars. The difficulty is that misrecognition is described as structural and historically reproduced, shaping how regional and municipal institutions interpret Sámi culture, land relations, and development priorities.

“Knowledge about Sámi people is very low in Sweden (and similarly in Norway and Finland)... politicians and organisational leaders do not understand Sámi perspectives, especially because Sámi life is interconnected with the land, and Sámi and Swedish societies have different systems and values...” (Interview, R9 Indigenous Community, 2025)

In this setting, tokenistic inclusion is experienced as a recognitional injustice because participation is repeatedly offered after the core framing work is done. This is not perceived as merely a procedural flaw that can be corrected by more consultation alone (Interview, R1 Indigenous community, 2025). Recognition is thus negotiated as editorial adjustment rather than co-produced governance mechanisms, reinforcing the risk of excluding Indigenous people even when inclusion is formally present.

“Many times, we are brought in midway, when the frames have already been set, and then it is hard to change anything fundamental... We gave feedback and they incorporated it, but I am not sure the process was good because we ... did not see the whole material.” (Interview, R9 Indigenous community, 2025)

These recognition justice dynamics are mediated by the interplay between directionality and subsidiarity. Directionality manifests through top-down policy and governance mandates that circulate from EU and national levels into regional development strategy, shaping what counts as good participation and valid

expertise. Subsidiarity is asserted as the counter-logic i.e., development must be defined bottom-up, from local identities and Indigenous rights. For instance, the need for place-based and inclusive regional development and transition policy was stated as, *“We say in Sámi, nothing about us, without us.”* (Stakeholder consultation, 2025)

However, subsidiarity often gets constrained by the institutional stickiness of perceptions and by majoritarian political logics that make recognition contingent rather than guaranteed. *“As long as the political system is based on majority, Sámi issues will not get resolved.”* (Stakeholder consultation, 2025)

The resulting tensions between directionality and subsidiarity can thus have negative consequences for governance capacity and legitimacy. For instance, following the failure to fully implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) plan, Sámi participants report that *“Sámi society has lost trust in the region as an authority. People do not show up.”* (Interview, R9 Indigenous community, 2025).

Summing up, our empirics suggest that misrecognition, tokenistic inclusion, and exclusionary framings operate as a reinforcing institutional dynamic that generate distrust, reduce willingness to engage, and constrain legitimacy and adoption of genuinely place-based transition pathways- undermining subsidiarity in practice.

5 Discussion - Operationalising the Justice Doughnut

Based on our findings and analysis of multi-stakeholder perspectives on the distributional, recognitional and procedural concerns specific to the Region J-H, we operationalise the *Justice Doughnut*. Here, directionality and subsidiarity emerge as the constitutive boundary conditions that shape justice outcomes in regional development and green transition. Instead of conceptualizing justice as an outcome to be assessed ex post, we recontextualise it as a bounded governance space in which priorities, claims and capacities are negotiated across levels. Directionality captures how higher-level institutions steer development through missions, mandates, funding conditionalities and risk imperatives; while subsidiarity captures how those priorities are expected to be reworked through place-based autonomy, differentiated capabilities, and historically situated power relations and agency. The empirical material from Jämtland Härjedalen highlight that, references to justice are closely tied to how directionality and subsidiarity are operationalised in practice. Especially where their institutional translation shapes the scope of local agency and the distribution of costs and benefits of regional transformation.

Under conditions of strong directionality, regional strategy and implementation are shaped by external policy imperatives and performance demands that define what is fundable, governable and temporally urgent. This produces a recurrent governance pattern where the problem is not a lack of strategy, but a constrained opportunity space for converting strategy into contextually sensitive priorities. In peripheral settings marked by institutional thinness and limited administrative capacity, this can turn prioritisation into a weakly institutionalised practice, with implementation gaps that render place-based choice dependent on external templates. Subsidiarity in such contexts is not absent, but it is frequently exercised

within tight constraints set elsewhere. Requiring policy tailored to sparsely populated geographies, and thin organisational structures.

In this case, it becomes clear that directionality shapes distributional dynamics because many of the core allocation rules are set above the local/municipal or region. Population-based funding formulas, sector-specific programme rules, and nationally planned infrastructure investments determine the baseline level of resources and services available in the region. Territorial equity claims are then made in relation to this baseline, and the region can only partially compensate for it through place-based initiatives. In J-H, distributive concerns are repeatedly articulated through mismatches between functional and residential populations, contributions and benefits received, and between local burdens and extra-local value capture in tourism, forestry, energy and extractive trajectories (refer Figure 2). These indicate how directionality can structure where value is captured along extra-regional circuits, whereas subsidiarity remains weakly equipped - financially and institutionally, to align benefits with locally borne transition burdens.

Similar tension between boundary conditions emerges as procedural justice concerns by shaping 'who can decide and how'. Directionality is inscribed in regulatory architectures that allocate decision making agency unevenly. In land-use and resource governance, authorisation is centralised in specialised state bodies, municipal vetoes are selective, and private landholders' consent is institutionally weak (refer Figure 2). Such asymmetric power relations, pre-structure who can contest projects, at what stage, and with what effects on local value capture and exposure to burdens. Subsidiarity is invoked as democratic proximity, but its procedural roadmap is curtailed by capacity constraints, coordination failures across sectoral systems, and institutional rigidity produced by misaligned or outdated regulatory frameworks. Justice 'evaporation' is also intelligible here. For instance, commitments to inclusion and participation may be stated at higher levels, yet diluted in translation through national implementation practices, administrative routines, and sector-specific legal designs.

As observed in our deliberations with multilevel stakeholders, recognition justice dynamics are also configured by the directionality-subsidiarity interactions. Higher-level steering tends to standardise what counts as development and evidence, often privileging innovation, productivity and growth. Whereas place-based autonomy depends on recognising local and indigenous identities, rights, and plural value systems as legitimate foundations for strategy. Where recognition is partial- expressed through tokenistic inclusion or limited sensitivity to historic, demographic and cultural disadvantages - the scope for subsidiarity narrows in practice. Thus, participation becomes harder to sustain, trust in institutions weakens, and local knowledge is less able to shape priorities (refer Figure 2). These recognitional deficits then translate into procedural unfairness and sharpen distributive disputes, because contested values and identities remain unaddressed while decisions and value capture continue to be organised through external/upstream funding conditionalities and regulatory decision criteria.

Through this case, our Justice Doughnut (refer figure 1) is hence tested as a conceptual tool to trace how the nexus between directionality and subsidiarity configure (i) the distributive baselines and value-capture pathways through which benefits and burdens are territorialised; (ii) the procedural opportunity space and decision-rights architecture through which participation and implementation are enabled or constrained; and (iii) the recognitional principles under which place-based autonomy gains legitimacy. Our

contribution thus lies in proposing a framework that makes justice analytically tractable as a multi-level governance problem. In doing so we recontextualise justice in regional development scholarship- as a bounded, mutually constitutive governance space shaped and reshaped through the interaction of directionality and subsidiarity; and show empirically how particular institutional configurations widen or contract that space, thereby reproducing or mitigating peripheralisation.

6 Conclusion

Starting from an investigation of justice in green regional transitions, this study has turned out to address perhaps the holy grail of regional development policy – the calibration of the twin principles of directionality and subsidiarity (Grillitsch et al. 2026b). This calibration challenge has become increasingly evident in the pursuit of sustainability imperatives as well as high-level policy priorities in response to geopolitical rivalries, focussing among others on industrial policy, dual use technologies, open strategic autonomy etc. (Draghi, 2024, Edler et al., 2023, Weber and Rohracher, 2012) In addition, even though place-based policy approaches (Barca, 2009; Barca et al., 2012) emphasised local knowledge and decision-making close to citizens (subsidiarity), research has pointed at deficiencies in balancing directionality and subsidiarity even before the recently increased impact of high-level policy priorities (Molica et al., 2025, Jolly et al., 2020).

This paper provides a novel perspective to resolving this dilemma. We integrate three dimensions of justice (Dawson, 2010; Schlosberg, 2007) – distributive, procedural, and recognitional – as mutually constitutive space. This space effectively mediates between directionality as outer boundary condition and subsidiarity as inner boundary condition, in what we conceptualize as the justice doughnut. In relation to the regional development literature, this is an advancement how justice is conceptualized from focussing on spatial (distributive) justice towards a more comprehensive perspective that emphasises more generative justice dimensions considering *who* is recognised and involved *how* in regional development processes. In relation to the just transition literature, where the three dimensions of justice are often studied separately, we advance a relational approach linking the three dimensions of justice and situating it in a multi-level governance context.

Our empirical study clearly illustrates how justice becomes a mediating space for the tension between directionality and subsidiarity. Whereas justice outcomes have often been studied ex-post, we suggest that imagining the justice doughnut as emerging space, shaped by multiple local and extra-local actors engaging in regional development, has important practical implications. More specifically, being seen (recognition and distributional), listened to (procedural), and understood (recognitional) is mutually constitutive, and foundational for building the willingness and capacity to resolve potential conflicts and develop a broadly acceptable problem-solution nexus in contested spaces. By doing so, we postulate that this will serve both local communities (because they have been part in the process and could influence the outcome in line with their interests and concerns) and higher-level policy priorities (due to less local resistance and the increased possibility to mobilise).

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