

Public Participation in Malaysian Land Development Remains Largely Symbolic: An Institutional Analysis

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Abstract

Public participation is widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic land-use planning and development governance. In Malaysia, participatory requirements are formally embedded within statutory planning and land development processes through mechanisms such as public displays, consultations, and objection procedures. Despite this formal inclusion, public participation rarely exerts meaningful influence over core development decisions, particularly in large-scale and investment-driven projects. This paper argues that the persistence of symbolic public participation cannot be adequately explained by weak implementation or limited public awareness alone. Instead, it contends that participation is institutionally positioned in ways that systematically constrain its influence. Adopting a conceptual and institutional analytical approach, the paper integrates participation theory, particularly debates on power and tokenism, with institutional perspectives that emphasise governance orientation, rules-in-use, and decision-making authority. The analysis focuses on how predominantly top-down governance structures, late-stage and non-binding participation designs, and weak accountability mechanisms interact to reproduce symbolic participatory outcomes. The paper develops a theoretical framework that explains how governance orientation, participation design, and institutional positioning jointly shape participatory influence in Malaysian land development. By shifting attention from the procedural presence of participation to its institutional role within planning systems, the study contributes to planning and governance scholarship and provides a basis for rethinking participatory reform in Malaysia and other contexts characterised by centralised authority and proceduralised participation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Public participation has long been recognized as a core element of democratic governance in land-use planning and development. In planning theory and policy discussions, participation is commonly promoted to increase transparency, improve the quality of decision making, and strengthen the legitimacy of development outcomes (Healey, 1997; Innes & Booher, 2004; Reed, 2008). At a basic level, participation is expected to give affected local communities the opportunity to voice concerns, share local and contextual knowledge, and influence decisions that shape their social, spatial, and environmental surroundings (Pretty, 1995; Fung, 2006). Participation is therefore often understood not simply as a procedural step, but as a normative foundation of good planning and governance. These expectations have been formally embedded in many planning systems, including Malaysia's. Malaysian statutory planning and land development frameworks require public participation through mechanisms such as public displays, objection periods, hearings, briefings, and consultative sessions (Shamsuddin & Sulaiman, 2016; Yin, Yusof, & Lee, 2020). On paper, these procedures suggest that participation is an integral part of development decision-making. Participatory activities are visible, routine, and embedded within established administrative processes, reflecting a formal commitment to inclusive planning. However, the existence of participatory procedures does not necessarily mean that the public has meaningful influence over development outcomes. A growing body of Malaysian planning literature shows that public participation rarely leads to substantive changes in key decisions, such as land-use zoning, development intensity, or project approvals (Mohamad & Mohd Yusof, 2018; Yaakup et al., 2017).

In many cases, participation takes place after major decisions have already been made. As a result, participation often functions more as an opportunity for expression than as a mechanism for shaping outcomes. To illustrate how this gap between formal procedures and substantive influence manifests in practice, several large-scale land development projects in Malaysia provide useful reference points. High-profile developments such as Forest City, the Pengerang Integrated Petroleum Complex (PIPC), Bandar Sri Sendayan, and Silicon Island have all formally complied with statutory participation requirements, including public displays of plans, briefings, and consultation sessions, as mandated under Malaysia's planning framework (Shamsuddin & Sulaiman, 2016; Yin, Yusof, & Lee, 2020). From a procedural standpoint, these projects appear to demonstrate visible efforts to engage the public at different stages of the development process. However existing studies and policy analyses indicate that public participation in large-scale development projects is often limited in practice and tends to occur at relatively late stages of decision-making namely after the core project parameters have already been determined (Yaakup et al., 2017; Mohamad & Mohd Yusof, 2018). This pattern is particularly evident in projects associated with foreign direct investment (FDI). In many instances, key decisions such as project location, land-use designation, development scale, and strategic objectives are largely finalised prior to public engagement.

As a result, local communities are frequently left out of decision-making, with participation confined to technical objections, mitigation measures, or requests for clarification rather than influencing the fundamental direction of development. This pattern is not unique to any single project, but reflects broader governance dynamics surrounding large, capital-intensive developments aligned with national or state economic priorities (Shatkin, 2016; Ghimire et al., 2017). In such contexts, participatory mechanisms tend to operate within narrowly defined institutional boundaries, reinforcing a consultative rather than deliberative role for affected communities. These examples therefore underscore the central argument of this paper: that symbolic participation is not merely the result of weak implementation or limited public engagement but is closely linked to how participatory mechanisms are institutionally positioned within planning and development governance structures.

This gap between procedural inclusion and substantive influence raises an important analytical question if participatory mechanisms are in place and regularly implemented, why does public participation in Malaysian land development continue to have such limited impact on decision-making for the locals? Existing explanations tend to focus on operational issues, such as weak implementation,

limited public awareness, or administrative capacity constraints (Yin et al., 2020). While these factors are relevant, they often treat symbolic participation as a problem of poor execution, rather than examining how participation is structurally embedded within governance systems. As a result, less attention has been paid to the institutional conditions that shape when participation occurs, how it is framed within planning processes, and how much authority it is given within decision-making hierarchies. This omission is significant, because it suggests that symbolic participation can persist even when procedural requirements are met and participatory activities are conducted well.

This paper adopts different analytical orientation. It argues that symbolic participation in Malaysian land development is best understood as an institutionally produced outcome, rather than as a failure of implementation or public engagement. Drawing on participation theory particularly Sherry Arnstein's (1969) emphasis on power and influence and institutional analysis that highlights rules, authority, and accountability structures, most notably associated with Elinor Ostrom (1990; 2005), the paper examines how governance arrangements shape participatory possibilities. Specifically, it focuses on how a predominantly top-down governance approach, combined with late-stage consultation, non-binding participatory roles, and weak accountability mechanisms, constrains the ability of public participation to influence development decisions. The paper is conceptual in nature and adopts an institutional analytical approach rather than an empirical investigation. Its aim is not to evaluate participatory experiences or measure outcomes, but to explain why participation is structurally positioned to remain largely symbolic within Malaysia's land development governance system. By integrating participation theory with institutional analysis, the paper moves beyond descriptive critique and offers a systematic explanation of how symbolic participation is reproduced through governance design. This study contributes to planning and governance scholarships in three ways. First, it reframes debates on public participation by shifting attention from the presence of procedures to the question of institutional influence. Second, it develops a conceptual model that explains how governance orientation, participation design, and decision-making authority interact to produce symbolic participation outcomes. Third, it offers design-level insights that may inform reflection on participatory reform in Malaysia and in other planning systems characterized by centralized authority and proceduralized participation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Public Participation, Planning and Democracies Ideas

Public participation is widely recognized as a key principle of democratic planning and governance. In planning theory, participation is commonly associated with values such as transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, and legitimacy (Healey, 1997; Innes & Booher, 2004). These ideas reflect a broader democratic expectation that decisions affecting land, space, and community life should not be made solely by technical experts or administrative authorities. Instead, people who are directly affected by development are expected to have opportunities to express their views and influence decisions. From this perspective, participation is expected to improve planning outcomes by allowing communities to raise concerns, contribute local knowledge, and identify social or environmental impacts that may not be fully captured through technical studies alone (Pretty, 1995; Fung, 2006). Participation is therefore often framed as both a democratic right and a practical governance tool. It is meant not only to improve decision-making, but also to strengthen public trust in planning institutions. Within communicative and collaborative planning traditions, participation is further understood as a process of dialogue and mutual learning between public authorities, developers, and affected communities (Healey, 1997). In this view, participation goes beyond information sharing or consultation. It is expected to allow stakeholders to engage in problem definition, consider alternatives, and shape planning outcomes together.

Participation thus becomes central to the legitimacy of planning decisions, particularly in land-use contexts where interests are contested and development impacts are unevenly distributed. At the same

time, planning scholars have long warned that the democratic promise of participation is not automatically realized in practice. Although participatory procedures may exist, their effectiveness depends on how they are designed, when they take place, and whether public input has any real influence over decisions. In many cases, participation exists mainly in procedural form, while decision-making power remains concentrated within political or administrative institutions. Under such conditions, participation may allow expression without influence. This gap between participatory ideals and practical outcomes has been widely documented in planning scholarships. Several studies have shown that participation can function primarily as a legitimizing tool, providing the appearance of inclusion while leaving underlying power relations unchanged (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2008). As a result, participation may satisfy formal requirements without delivering the substantive democratic influence envisioned in planning theory.

2.2 Participation, Power and the Risk of Tokenism

A foundational critique of public participation is provided by Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of citizen participation." Arnstein conceptualizes participation as a continuum ranging from non-participation and tokenism to higher levels of citizen power. Her key argument is that participation cannot be evaluated simply by whether it occurs. What matters is whether participants can influence decisions and share power within governance processes. From this perspective, participatory mechanisms that allow people to speak but do not allow them to shape outcomes are considered tokenistic. Public hearings, consultations, and information sessions may create an appearance of inclusion, yet remain limited if decision-making authority is retained by political or administrative elites. In such cases, participation may serve to manage opposition or legitimize decisions that have already been made. Later scholarship has reinforced this critique by showing how participatory processes often operate within highly centralised or hierarchical governance systems (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2008).

In these contexts, participation commonly takes the form of consultation without consequence. Communities are invited to comment, but final decisions remain unchanged. Participation may therefore become performative, designed to demonstrate compliance with democratic norms rather than to enable genuine influence (Fung, 2006; Lane, 2005). These concerns are particularly relevant in land-use planning, where decisions often involve significant economic interests and political priorities. Decisions about land allocation, development scale, or project approval are frequently shaped before public engagement begins. When participation is not supported by mechanisms such as shared decision authority, binding deliberation, or enforceable accountability, it risks becoming a procedural exercise rather than a meaningful democratic process. These critiques are particularly relevant in planning systems where participation is formally mandated but institutionally subordinated to centralized decision-making structures. In such contexts, participatory mechanisms may function primarily as procedural safeguards rather than as instruments of shared governance. This reinforces the need to examine not only participatory practices, but also the institutional arrangements that determine how public input is received, evaluated, and acted upon within planning systems.

2.3 Public Participation in Malaysian Land Development

Institutional approaches offer an important lens for understanding why public participation often remains limited despite its widespread endorsement. Rather than focusing on individual behavior or public awareness, institutional analysis examines the rules, norms, and authority structures that shape governance outcomes (Ostrom, 1990; 2005). From this perspective, participation is not simply an event or activity. It is an institutionalised process governed by "rules-in-use" that determine who can participate, at what stage, and with what level of authority. Applied to planning, institutional perspectives suggest that participatory outcomes are shaped less by intention or goodwill and more by governance design (Alexander, 2008; Healey, 1997). Even where participation is formally required, its influence depends on how it is positioned within the planning process and whether it is connected to decision-making power. When participation occurs late, it is limited to advisory roles, and lacks

accountability mechanisms, its ability to influence outcomes is structurally constrained (Innes & Booher, 2004).

Institutional analysis therefore shifts attention from whether participation exists to how it is embedded within planning systems. This shift is particularly useful in contexts where participatory procedures are routinely implemented but consistently produce limited influence. By focusing on authority distribution, governance orientation, and accountability arrangements, institutional approaches help explain why symbolic participation persists across different planning contexts. Recent Malaysian studies continue to report persistent limitations in participatory planning practices despite the formal existence of statutory participation mechanisms (Marzukhi et al., 2022; Zanudin et al., 2022). These studies indicate that public participation frequently remains consultative in nature and exerts limited influence over planning and development decisions. Such findings reinforce the argument that the effectiveness of participation depends not only on the availability of participatory opportunities but also on the institutional arrangements that determine how public inputs are incorporated into decision-making processes. In the Malaysian planning context, this institutional perspective is especially salient given the statutory hierarchy of planning authority and the discretionary powers vested in state and planning agencies. Although participatory procedures are routinely implemented, their influence remains contingent upon how they are integrated into decision-making processes. This highlights the importance of analyzing participation not as an isolated procedural requirement, but as an institutionally positioned component of land development governance.

2.4 Land Governance, Property Development Regimes and Investment-Led Planning

Increasingly, scholars argue that the effectiveness of public participation in land development cannot be adequately explained through procedural design alone but must be examined in relation to the institutional arrangements and political-economic structures that shape land development decisions. While participation scholarship has traditionally focused on the design and implementation of participatory mechanisms, land governance scholars emphasize that planning outcomes are significantly influenced by the interactions between state institutions, private developers, and broader economic development objectives (Shatkin, 2016; Gillespie, 2022; Ho, 2023). In many rapidly developing economies, land has increasingly become a strategic asset for promoting urban growth, infrastructure expansion, and foreign direct investment (FDI). Consequently, governments often adopt entrepreneurial planning approaches that prioritise competitiveness, capital accumulation, and economic transformation (Legacy et al., 2022; Sager, 2021). Under such conditions, planning systems may become oriented towards facilitating development objectives rather than fostering deliberation over alternative development pathways. Although public participation remains formally embedded within planning procedures, its capacity to influence substantive decisions may be subordinated to broader economic and investment priorities.

This dynamic is particularly relevant in the context of large-scale and investment-led development projects. Research on urban megaprojects and special economic development zones demonstrates that planning decisions are frequently shaped through close interactions between public authorities and private investors (Shatkin, 2016; Van den Broeck, 2023). Such arrangements are not necessarily problematic in themselves, as investment plays an important role in economic development. However, they may create institutional environments in which public participation is incorporated primarily to satisfy procedural requirements rather than to influence strategic decisions. The political economy literature further suggests that state-developer relationships can significantly affect governance outcomes. In development regimes characterized by strong state intervention and centralised authority, planning institutions often retain substantial discretion over land-use decisions, project approvals, and development priorities (Pierre, 2000; Gillespie, 2022). Public participation in such contexts may be constrained because key decisions are negotiated within administrative and political arenas before public engagement takes place. Consequently, participation may occur only after major project parameters have been established, reducing opportunities for meaningful influence.

These observations resonate with emerging debates on property governance. Contemporary property governance scholarship increasingly emphasizes the importance of transparency, accountability, stakeholder inclusion, and procedural fairness in development decision-making (Ho, 2023; Parker et al., 2024). Effective property governance is not limited to protecting ownership rights or facilitating investment. It also concerns how competing interests are balanced and how affected communities participate in decisions concerning land use, development intensity, environmental impacts, and social consequences. Within Southeast Asia, recent studies have highlighted persistent tensions between development-oriented governance and participatory planning objectives. Comparative research from Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia demonstrates that public participation is frequently institutionalised within planning frameworks but often remains constrained by centralised authority structures and investment-driven development priorities (Bunnell & Das, 2021; Legacy et al., 2022). These studies suggest that participation outcomes depend not only on procedural opportunities for engagement but also on the broader institutional environment within which planning decisions are made.

Recent governance studies further indicate that participatory mechanisms within Malaysian development governance remain constrained by institutional structures and limited opportunities for substantive stakeholder influence (Lim, 2022; Hussin, 2025). These findings reinforce the argument that participatory outcomes are shaped not only by the existence of formal engagement mechanisms but also by the governance arrangements that determine how public input is considered and incorporated into decision-making processes. The Malaysian experience reflects many of these broader trends. Over the past two decades, national and state governments have increasingly promoted large-scale development initiatives linked to economic transformation, industrial expansion, urbanization, and foreign direct investment. Projects such as Forest City, the Pengerang Integrated Petroleum Complex (PIPC), Bandar Sri Sendayan, and Silicon Island illustrate how strategic development priorities can shape planning processes and governance arrangements. While public participation mechanisms are formally incorporated into statutory procedures, evidence suggests that engagement often occurs after strategic decisions have already been made, limiting opportunities for substantive influence over development outcomes. This broader political economy reinforces the argument that symbolic participation should not be understood solely as a procedural problem. Rather, it reflects the interaction between participation mechanisms and wider governance arrangements that prioritise economic development, investment attraction, and administrative efficiency. Understanding public participation therefore requires examining not only participatory procedures themselves but also the institutional structures and development regimes within which they operate. Consequently, symbolic participation may be interpreted as an outcome of governance arrangements that position participation within a broader system of state-led development rather than as an isolated failure of implementation. This perspective provides an important bridge between participation theory and institutional analysis, supporting the need for a more integrated framework capable of explaining how governance orientation, participation design, and institutional authority interact to shape participatory outcomes.

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature reviewed above reveals a persistent gap between the normative aspirations of public participation and its practical influence within land development governance. Participation theory consistently emphasizes that meaningful participation requires more than opportunities for consultation; it requires the ability of affected stakeholders to influence decisions that shape development outcomes. Foundational contributions from Arnstein (1969), alongside subsequent scholarship on collaborative and deliberative planning, argue that participation becomes meaningful only when accompanied by some degree of influence over decision-making processes (Healey, 1997; Fung, 2006; Innes & Booher, 2004). At the same time, institutional and governance scholarship demonstrates that participatory outcomes are shaped not only by participatory mechanisms themselves but also by the broader institutional environment within which they operate. Institutional arrangements determine who possesses decision-making authority, when participation occurs, how public input is considered, and whether decision-makers are accountable for responding to stakeholder concerns (Ostrom, 1990; 2005;

Alexander, 2008). From this perspective, participation cannot be understood as an isolated procedural activity but rather as a governance mechanism embedded within wider systems of authority and decision-making.

The emerging literature on land governance, property development, and investment-led planning further suggests that planning outcomes are strongly influenced by state–developer relationships, economic development priorities, and the institutional structures that facilitate investment and urban growth. In many development contexts, participatory mechanisms coexist with governance arrangements that prioritize economic competitiveness, infrastructure development, and investment attraction. Under such circumstances, participation may remain formally institutionalised while exerting only limited influence over strategic development decisions. Within Malaysia, existing studies consistently report similar patterns. Public participation is formally embedded within statutory planning procedures and is routinely implemented through public displays, consultation exercises, hearings, and objection processes. Nevertheless, empirical evidence indicates that participation frequently occurs at relatively late stages of the planning process and is often limited to consultative rather than decision-making functions (Shamsuddin & Sulaiman, 2016; Yaakup et al., 2017; Yin et al., 2020). Consequently, public input rarely influences fundamental decisions concerning project location, development intensity, land-use allocation, or broader development objectives. Despite these important insights, several gaps remain within the existing literature.

First, much of the Malaysian scholarship focuses on evaluating participatory practices, identifying implementation challenges, or assessing levels of public engagement. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining how institutional arrangements systematically shape participatory influence. Second, existing studies tend to explain symbolic participation primarily in terms of operational shortcomings, such as limited public awareness, inadequate consultation practices, or administrative constraints. While these factors are important, they do not fully explain why similar participatory outcomes continue to emerge across different projects and planning contexts. Third, the relationship between governance orientation, participation design, and institutional authority remains insufficiently theorized within the Malaysian land development literature. Existing research generally treats these factors independently rather than examining how they interact to influence participatory outcomes. As a result, there remains a limited understanding of the institutional mechanisms through which participation becomes incorporated into planning processes while simultaneously remaining constrained in its capacity to influence decisions. This study addresses these gaps by integrating participation theory with institutional analysis to develop a conceptual framework for understanding symbolic public participation in Malaysian land development. Rather than focusing on whether participation exists or how effectively it is implemented, the analysis examines how participation is institutionally positioned within planning and governance systems. Specifically, the framework proposes that participatory outcomes are shaped through the interaction of three interrelated dimensions: governance orientation, participation design, and institutional positioning of public participation. Together, these dimensions provide a structured explanation for how participation may be formally institutionalised yet remain substantively limited in its influence over development decisions. By shifting analytical attention from procedural presence to institutional influence, the study contributes to ongoing debates on participatory governance, planning reform, and property governance. In doing so, it offers a more comprehensive explanation for the persistence of symbolic participation and establishes a foundation for future empirical research examining participatory governance in Malaysian land development and comparable planning contexts.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Conceptual Research Design

This study adopts a conceptual and analytical research design to examine why public participation in Malaysian land development remains largely symbolic despite its formal institutionalisation within

statutory planning processes. Rather than conducting an empirical investigation of specific projects or measuring participatory outcomes, the study seeks to develop a theoretically informed explanation of the institutional conditions that shape participatory influence. Conceptual research is particularly appropriate when existing literature identifies recurring governance problems but lacks an integrated analytical framework capable of explaining their underlying causes. The study is guided by the assumption that participatory outcomes are not determined solely by the existence of participatory mechanisms, but also by how participation is institutionally positioned within governance structures. Consequently, the analysis focuses on identifying and synthesizing theoretical insights from participation theory and institutional analysis to explain the persistence of symbolic participation in Malaysian land development governance. The conceptual approach is suitable because the problem under investigation concerns institutional arrangements, governance structures, and decision-making processes that transcend individual development projects. Rather than evaluating whether participation was successful or unsuccessful in specific cases, the study seeks to understand the broader governance conditions that consistently limit the influence of public participation across different planning contexts.

3.2 Analytical Synthesis Approach

The study employs an analytical synthesis method whereby relevant theoretical and empirical literature is reviewed, compared, and integrated to construct a coherent explanatory framework. The literature was selected from four interrelated areas, namely: (i) public participation and democratic planning theory; (ii) institutional analysis and governance studies; (iii) land development and planning governance literature; and (iv) Malaysian studies on public participation and land development practices. Sources were identified through academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, and Google Scholar. Attention was given to literature addressing citizen participation, institutional governance, planning systems, land administration, and property development governance. In addition to foundational theoretical works, recent studies published between 2021 and 2025 were incorporated to ensure contemporary relevance and to reflect evolving debates on participatory governance and investment-led development. The analytical process involved three stages. First, key concepts and arguments relating to participation, power, governance, and institutional design were identified from the literature. Second, similarities and differences between participation theory and institutional analysis were examined to identify complementary explanatory insights. Third, these theoretical perspectives were synthesized into an integrated framework capable of explaining how governance orientation, participation design, and institutional positioning collectively shape participatory outcomes. This synthesis approach allows the study to move beyond descriptive reviews of existing literature and develop an original conceptual contribution. Rather than simply summarizing previous studies, the paper integrates multiple theoretical traditions to explain the structural conditions that reproduce symbolic participation in Malaysian land development governance.

3.3 Scope and Limitations

The scope of this study is confined to public participation within Malaysian land development governance, particularly participation associated with statutory planning and development approval processes. The analysis focuses on institutional arrangements that shape opportunities for public influence, including governance orientation, participation design, decision-making authority, and accountability mechanisms. Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study does not seek to empirically test the proposed framework or measure participation outcomes in specific development projects. The framework is intended as an analytical tool rather than a predictive model. Second, while examples from Malaysian land development projects are used to illustrate broader governance patterns, the study does not provide detailed case study analysis. Third, the analysis focuses primarily on formal institutional arrangements and therefore does not examine informal political dynamics, stakeholder strategies, or project-specific negotiations that may also influence participatory outcomes. Despite these limitations, the conceptual approach offers important analytical value. By identifying the institutional mechanisms that systematically constrain public influence, the study provides a foundation for future empirical research and contributes to ongoing debates concerning participatory governance, planning

reform, and property development governance in Malaysia.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper proposes a theoretical framework that explains symbolic public participation as an outcome of institutional design rather than merely a consequence of weak implementation or limited public engagement. Building upon participation theory and institutional analysis, the framework assumes that the influence of public participation is shaped by the interaction between governance orientation, participation design, and the institutional positioning of public participation within planning systems. The framework is founded on two complementary theoretical propositions. First, participation theory argues that meaningful participation requires more than opportunities for consultation; it requires the capacity of participants to influence decisions and affect outcomes (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006). Second, institutional analysis suggests that governance outcomes are shaped by the rules, authority structures, and decision-making arrangements that determine how participation is incorporated into governance processes (Ostrom, 1990; 2005). Integrating these perspectives allows symbolic participation to be understood as an institutional outcome produced through specific governance arrangements.

The first dimension of the framework is governance orientation, which refers to the overall approach through which development decisions are formulated and implemented. Governance orientation establishes the broader institutional environment within which participation occurs. In planning systems characterized by a predominantly top-down orientation, strategic priorities, development objectives, and project parameters are often determined by government agencies, planning authorities, and political actors before public engagement takes place. Consequently, opportunities for public influence become constrained because the scope of participation is shaped by decisions that have already been substantially defined. The second dimension is participation design, referring to the timing, scope, and form of participatory mechanisms. Governance orientation directly influences participation design because the way planning authority is exercised determines when and how public engagement is introduced into the planning process. Within highly centralised governance systems, participation commonly occurs after major development decisions have been established, resulting in consultation processes that focus primarily on information sharing, public objections, or technical feedback. Under these conditions, participation provides opportunities for expression but offers limited opportunities for influencing strategic decisions.

The third dimension is the institutional positioning of public participation, which refers to the extent to which participatory inputs are connected to decision-making authority and accountability mechanisms. Participation design influences institutional positioning because the timing and structure of engagement determine the practical significance of public input within governance processes. Where participatory mechanisms are advisory rather than binding, public submissions may be received and recorded without creating institutional obligations for decision-makers to modify, justify, or reconsider development decisions. As a result, participation remains procedurally visible but substantively weak.

The framework proposes that these three dimensions do not operate independently but interact in a sequential and mutually reinforcing manner. A predominantly top-down governance orientation influences the design of participatory mechanisms by limiting participation to later stages of the planning process. Late-stage and consultative participation designs, in turn, weaken the institutional positioning of participation by reducing its connection to substantive decision-making authority. When participatory inputs are not linked to binding decisions or effective accountability mechanisms, participation becomes institutionally constrained regardless of the level of public engagement or the quality of consultation procedures. Accordingly, symbolic participation emerges as the cumulative outcome of these institutional interactions. Participation remains formally embedded within planning processes and fulfils important procedural, administrative, and legitimizing functions. However, because governance authority remains concentrated within state institutions and participatory inputs

possess limited influence over development decisions, participation contributes little to the redistribution of decision-making power. In this context, participation functions primarily as a mechanism for consultation and procedural compliance rather than as an instrument of shared governance. The framework therefore shifts attention away from conventional explanations that attribute symbolic participation to implementation deficiencies, administrative weaknesses, or low levels of civic engagement. Instead, it highlights how governance orientation, participation design, and institutional positioning interact to systematically shape participatory outcomes. Symbolic participation is consequently interpreted not as an anomaly within the planning system but as a predictable consequence of the institutional arrangements through which participation is organized and governed. The framework is intended as an analytical tool for understanding participatory governance in Malaysian land development and provides a foundation for future empirical investigations. By examining how institutional structures shape opportunities for public influence, the framework offers a more comprehensive explanation for the persistence of symbolic participation in planning systems characterized by centralized authority and development-oriented governance.

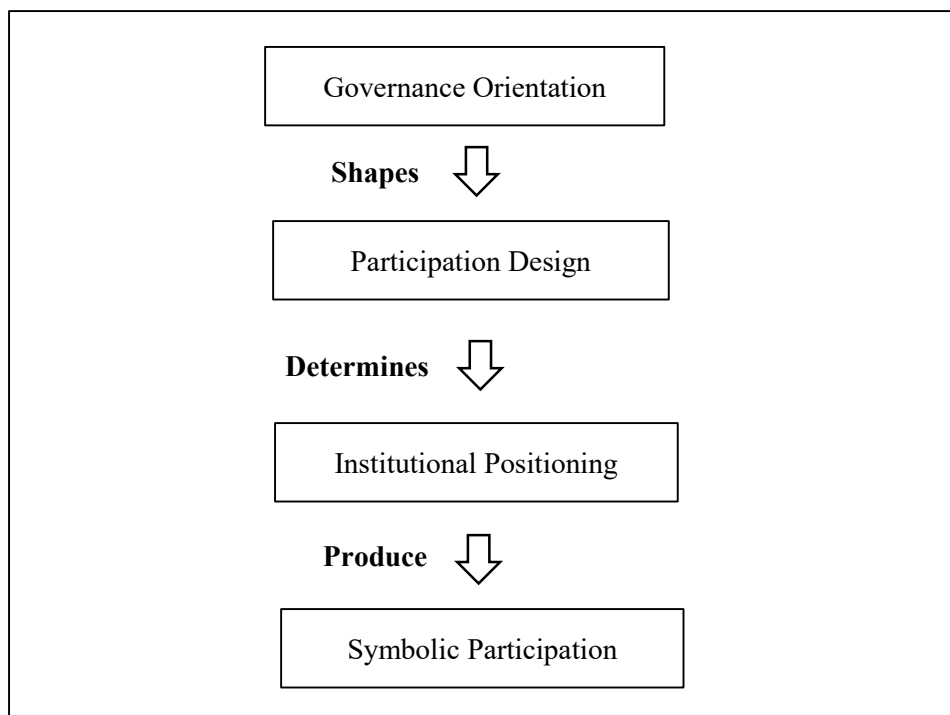


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework Explaining Symbolic Public Participation in Malaysian Land Development

5. DISCUSSION

The framework developed in this study provides an institutional explanation for why public participation in Malaysian land development frequently remains symbolic despite its formal incorporation within statutory planning processes. Existing studies commonly attribute weak participatory outcomes to implementation challenges, including limited public awareness, administrative constraints, and ineffective consultation practices. While these factors may contribute to participatory limitations, they do not fully explain why similar patterns of limited public influence continue to occur across different development contexts. A key insight emerging from the framework is that symbolic participation should be understood as an institutional rather than a procedural phenomenon. The persistence of symbolic participation cannot be explained solely by the existence or absence of participatory mechanisms, as public participation remains formally embedded within Malaysian planning and development processes. Instead, the framework suggests that participation often

remains visible but not influential because its institutional role is constrained within broader governance arrangements. Although consultation exercises, public displays, hearings, and objection procedures are routinely implemented, these mechanisms frequently operate within decision-making structures where strategic development priorities have already been established. Consequently, participation fulfils important procedural and legitimising functions while exerting limited influence over substantive planning outcomes. The framework therefore reveals that governance design plays a decisive role in shaping participatory outcomes. Symbolic participation emerges not because participation is absent, but because institutional arrangements limit the extent to which public inputs can influence development decisions.

A predominantly top-down governance orientation influences how participation is designed and implemented. As major development decisions are often determined before public engagement occurs, participation tends to be introduced at later stages of the planning process and is frequently limited to consultative functions. Consequently, public participation provides opportunities for expression but offers limited opportunities to influence strategic decisions. The analysis further demonstrates that participation design influences the institutional positioning of public participation within planning systems. Where public inputs remain advisory rather than binding, decision-makers are not institutionally required to incorporate public views into final decisions. Under such conditions, participation fulfils procedural and legitimising functions while remaining disconnected from substantive decision-making authority. These findings support Arnstein's (1969) argument that participation should be evaluated according to its influence on decision-making rather than its procedural existence. They also reinforce institutional perspectives advanced by Ostrom (2005), which emphasise that governance outcomes are shaped by underlying rules, authority structures, and accountability arrangements. Also, these findings are consistent with recent Malaysian studies that continue to highlight the persistence of consultative participation, institutional discretion, and limited public influence within planning processes (Marzukhi et al., 2022; Pin, 2024). By integrating these perspectives, the framework explains why symbolic participation persists despite the formal institutionalisation of participatory mechanisms. The study therefore shifts attention from questions of implementation towards questions of institutional design. Rather than viewing symbolic participation as an isolated failure of practice, the framework suggests that it is a predictable outcome of governance arrangements that limit the influence of public participation within land development decision-making processes.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR PROPERTY GOVERNANCE REFORM IN MALAYSIA

The findings of this study suggest that improving public participation requires reforms that address institutional arrangements rather than procedural practices alone. Strengthening participation therefore requires changes to how public engagement is positioned within land development governance.

- a) **Reform Proposition 1: Institutionalise Early-Stage Public Participation** Public participation should be introduced during the initial stages of project formulation and plan preparation rather than after key development decisions have been determined. Earlier engagement would provide stakeholders with greater opportunities to influence development objectives, land-use options, and project alternatives before decisions become difficult to modify.
- b) **Reform Proposition 2: Establish Mandatory Response and Justification Mechanisms** Planning authorities should be required to publicly explain how comments, objections, and recommendations submitted during participation processes have been considered. Such mechanisms would strengthen transparency, improve accountability, and enhance public confidence in planning decisions.
- c) **Reform Proposition 3: Strengthen Legal Recognition of Participatory Rights.** Existing planning legislation could be strengthened by providing clearer statutory requirements regarding stakeholder consultation, public access to planning information, and the consideration of public objections. Stronger legal provisions would help ensure that

participation is treated as a substantive component of decision-making rather than a procedural obligation.

- d) Reform Proposition 4: Promote Greater Decentralisation in Planning Governance. Greater involvement of local authorities and community-based institutions may improve the responsiveness of planning decisions to local concerns. Decentralised governance arrangements can create additional opportunities for stakeholder engagement and reduce reliance on highly centralised decision-making structures.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper argues that symbolic public participation in Malaysian land development is not simply the result of weak implementation or limited public engagement but is largely shaped by institutional arrangements that govern decision-making processes. By integrating participation theory with institutional analysis, the study demonstrates how governance orientation, participation design, and the institutional positioning of participation interact to constrain public influence despite the formal existence of participatory mechanisms. The paper contributes to the literature by shifting attention from procedural participation to institutional influence and by providing a conceptual framework for understanding the persistence of symbolic participation in land development governance. The findings further suggest that meaningful participatory reform requires institutional changes that strengthen accountability, enhance early-stage engagement, and improve the integration of public input into development decision-making. Future research may apply the proposed framework to specific development contexts to further examine how institutional arrangements shape participatory outcomes in practice.

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