

INDUCED PARTICIPATION AS THE BASIS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT
OF A SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY. THE CASE STUDY
OF TĂRLUNGENI VILLAGE, BRAȘOV COUNTY, ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the way in which induced participation, defined as state-initiated participation implemented through bureaucracies, can be mobilized as a planning instrument to address less visible structural problems. Using Tărlungeni Village (Brașov County) as a case study, the article argues that proximity to Brașov City generates a risk of functional dependency and “annex” development, while the commune’s unusually young demographic profile (approximately one quarter of residents are aged 0–14 years old) creates both demand and opportunity for the development of new local social infrastructure. The paper’s central claim is that an inclusive cultural and educational center can operate simultaneously as [1] a complementary amenity that reduces weekly leisure and education outflows to Brașov and [2] a soft integration mechanism in a community marked by ethnicity-based segregation, particularly in education.

From a methodological standpoint, the study employs a mixed-methods design: demographic and administrative statistics are triangulated with a consultative study conducted by the authors, who were contracted by an independent agency that, together with the local government, provides funding through New European Bauhaus funds. The research consisted of three theme-based focus groups (problems, needs, solutions) and an opportunity-sample survey conducted both online and in the field in all the villages of Tărlungeni (Tărlungeni, Purcăreni, Zizin, Cărpiniș). Results show a high perceived need for the center (4.27 / 5.00), a strong stated desire to volunteer for future activities aimed at establishing this center (72.5%), and recurrent narratives of limited interethnic interaction despite a local public discourse mentioning the “absence of interethnic tensions”. The results of the consultative research formed the basis for a set of proposals designed to support the establishment of a future community center.

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However, the article also demonstrates a key constraint of the induced participation: implementation lag driven by bureaucratic, financial, political blockage in Romania, which risks eroding trust and reinforcing the very segregation the process seeks to mitigate.

Keywords: induced participation, participatory urbanism, vulnerability, social segregation, community.

INTRODUCTION

Tărlungeni is one of the largest rural communities of Braşov County. With a population of 12,166 inhabitants in 2022 (according to the National Institute of Statistics), and with a tendency of continuously increasing its population due to its proximity to the city of Braşov, this village presents the risk of becoming a mere extension of the larger city, largely dependent on its amenities. To avoid becoming functionally subordinated to Braşov, Tărlungeni must find ways for a sustainable development, which would include creating the facilities, amenities and the social infrastructure its inhabitants need. By having one of the largest underage populations in the area, representing a quarter of the total population of the village, this settlement has the potential of turning into an attractive area for young generations of people. Thus, the need for a cultural and educational center in Tărlungeni is not only supported by the inhabitants, as it results from the survey and focus groups we conducted, where they expressed both their support and their willingness to contribute to future activities. It is also substantiated by demographic data indicating a markedly young population structure, with children accounting for approximately one quarter of the total population, thereby reinforcing the case for developing a dedicated cultural and educational hub oriented towards younger age groups.

The article aims to assess the potential of an inclusive cultural and educational center to operate simultaneously as a complementary facility, capable of reducing those recurrent outflows for leisure and educational purposes to Braşov, and as a soft integration mechanism within a community characterised by ethnicity-based segregation, particularly within the educational system. A defining characteristic of Tărlungeni's demographic structure is its pronounced ethnic diversity, with the population distributed in relatively balanced proportions among Romanians, Hungarians, and Roma. Hence, the incorporation of the induced participation concept within this research serves a diagnostic and instrumental role, enabling the identification and articulation of less visible structural issues within the social fabric of Tărlungeni, particularly the ethnicity-based segregation. By structuring the participatory process in a guided intentional manner, the research seeks to resurface latent community needs and tensions that might otherwise remain unexpressed.

The statistical data analysis, along with the consultative study we conducted, based on surveys and three focus groups with various key members of the

community, have shown that the population of Tărlungeni not only needs but also eagerly wants *a cultural and educational center*. The study was initiated by a private company, in cooperation with the public administration of Tărlungeni, being funded by New European Bauhaus. Throughout our discussions with the members of the community, mentions were made of a previous attempt to build a similar center, a few years ago. “Parents and teachers have come together and organized the space, but unfortunately it didn’t last long, because the number of children increased rapidly and we needed that space to be allocated to the school”, mentioned one of the teachers that participated in the second, exploratory focus group.

Parents, teachers, and children, all mentioned, during the survey and the focus groups, that they would find it extremely useful to have a cultural and educational center in Tărlungeni. In their opinion, this center would help bring together the multiethnic community. Furthermore, most of them have mentioned that by having such a cultural and educational center in Tărlungeni, people will not feel so dependent on the city of Braşov, and they would choose to spend more time in their village. Even though the survey has shown that many people spend their free time near their homes, most of them also mentioned that at least once a week they go to Braşov for different activities, such as sports or education.

A cultural and educational center in Tărlungeni would have the potential to not only create a social bond between the residents from the three ethnic groups which, at this point, are very segregated. It would also have the potential of generating an increase in the quality of life of the population, also helping the population from the villages within the commune (*Cărpiniş, Purcăreni, Tărlungeni, Zizin*) have an attraction closer to their homes and, at the same time, lifting the pressure off Braşov, which is now the main attraction for the entire population in the nearby rural and urban settlements, due to their lack of such social, cultural and educational amenities.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

SOCIAL SEGREGATION

The village of Tărlungeni is deeply characterized by social segregation, based on ethnic differences, especially at the education level. Thus, Tărlungeni has four different school buildings, one for each territorial subdivision (Tărlungeni, Purcăreni, Zizin and Cărpiniş). Among these buildings, the Tărlungeni school is the largest, being also divided into two different buildings – one in Tărlungeni (for the Romanian children) and one in Zizin (for the Hungarian children). The other school in Zizin has a number of 373 pupils (statistical data from 2021/ 2022 school year). All pupils studying there are of Roma origin, most of them inhabiting the southern half of Zizin Village, considered to be a disadvantaged area.

In this case, the analysis explores the problems of the three ethnic groups sharing a common citizenship framework, yet differentiated by distinct cultural characteristics, as discussed above. When we are discussing ethnicity, the debate usually shifts to “ethnic minorities” (Oppenheimer, 2001) – those ethnic groups that do not represent a majority at a national level, from a quantitative perspective. Within certain European institutional frameworks, “ethnic minorities” are sometimes defined as groups that are not historically native to a given territory, and are perceived as culturally distinct in terms of language, traditions, religion, collective memory, or origin (Venice Commission, 2006) (Council of Europe, 2002). Other researchers identify ethnic boundaries based on deeper factors than language, numbers and traditions, such as past political relations (especially conflicts) and other significant historical events (Mounk, 2022, pp. 36–49). Some connections might be more important than others when defining ethnic groups, but they are more flexible and less uniform than we might think (Yang, 2000, Mounk, 2022, Rotaru, Crețan, & Ianăș, 2023). More often than not, differences among ethnic groups may result in prejudice and discrimination between groups that stands in the way of discovering shared interests. Thus, induced participation would act as a mitigation force that connects separate groups. The three focus groups were structured around thematic axes rather than ethnic criteria, each session addressing a distinct dimension of community life: (1) perceived problems, (2) identified needs, (3) potential solutions. This thematic design pertains to the organization of the discussion guides, not to the composition of the groups themselves. In terms of participant selection, no ethnic segmentation was applied. Instead, each focus group included participants from all major ethnic communities present in Târlungeni (Romanians, Hungarians, and Roma).

Consequently, every session functioned as a mixed setting in which individuals from different ethnic backgrounds engaged simultaneously with the same thematic prompts. This approach was intentionally adopted to avoid the reproduction of ethnic boundaries within the research design and to create conditions for interethnic dialogue. By bringing together diverse participants within each thematic discussion, the study facilitated the articulation of shared concerns and overlapping interests, particularly in relation to the development of a future cultural center.

In this sense, induced participation operated not only as a methodological choice but also as a social mechanism, enabling interaction across groups lines and supporting the emergence of a more integrated perspective on community development.

In Romania, the prevalent ethnic group is Romanians, followed in numbers by Hungarians and Roma – an ethnic composition that has maintained the same structure for the last century, between 1930 and 2021 (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2021). Interethnic tensions among these groups are also a recurring feature given the ethnic composition, as evidenced by historical records, particularly in Transylvania, where Romanians, Hungarians, Roma and Germans co-existed for several centuries.

Beyond other historical determinants, Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007 has also contributed to the reconfiguration of ethnic relations and social segregation patterns. From a social perspective, becoming a member state of the European Union meant for Romania increasing aid and responsibility on social inclusion matters (Cace, 2010). Recent European social policies promote the mitigation of all forms of social exclusion, such as poverty, marginalization and underclass (Lister, 1996). The term *underclass* appeared and spread in the 1980s US through the works of various authors, such as Ken Auletta or William Julius Wilson. In Europe, Charles Murray is credited with using this concept to refer to minority groups (racial, ethnic or other nature) that are marginalized and affected by poverty, with some of whose members engaging in unlawful activities. Social inclusion, participation and sustainability are addressed in most of the recent international policies, such as the Treaty of Lisbon and the Treaty of Nice (2000), the Leipzig Charter (2007, updated in 2010) and more recently, in the New European Bauhaus initiative (2020 – present). In post-communist Romania, governmental social policies have focused on poverty mitigation, quality of life, and social inclusion, while also aiming to increase the employment rate (Ionescu, 2010).

WHAT IS INDUCED PARTICIPATION?

Our research relies upon the concept of *induced participation*, as it is defined by Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao in a 2013 World Bank Policy Research Report: “induced participation refers to participation promoted through policy actions of the state and implemented by bureaucracies” (Mansuri & Rao, 2013, p. 32). The difference between induced participation and organic participation lies not in the mere existence of a shared purpose, but in how that purpose is defined and how resources are mobilized. In the case of induced participation, both the strategic objectives and the allocation of resources are institutionally framed and supported by public authorities.

Organic participation requires citizen initiative, resources and persistent efforts from the civil society, thus being a form of democratic expression. This type of participation usually appears when a problem affects a significant number of citizens, who are then driven by the common **purpose** of solving that problem. Therefore, the group is formed spontaneously, in an organic manner, with citizens who share the same vision, but not always have the same time or energy **resources**, the same knowledge or the same budget. These differences usually become a strength, offering the group various means for achieving their vision, while at other times they can divide the group. The **stakeholders** are fairly the same involved in the induced participation process: public agencies, professionals and citizens grouped in civic organizations. In this equation, the most powerful stakeholder is the state (public agencies), which makes the final decisions, followed by the civic organization that leads the movement of organic participation and represents the interest of a particular group of citizens (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

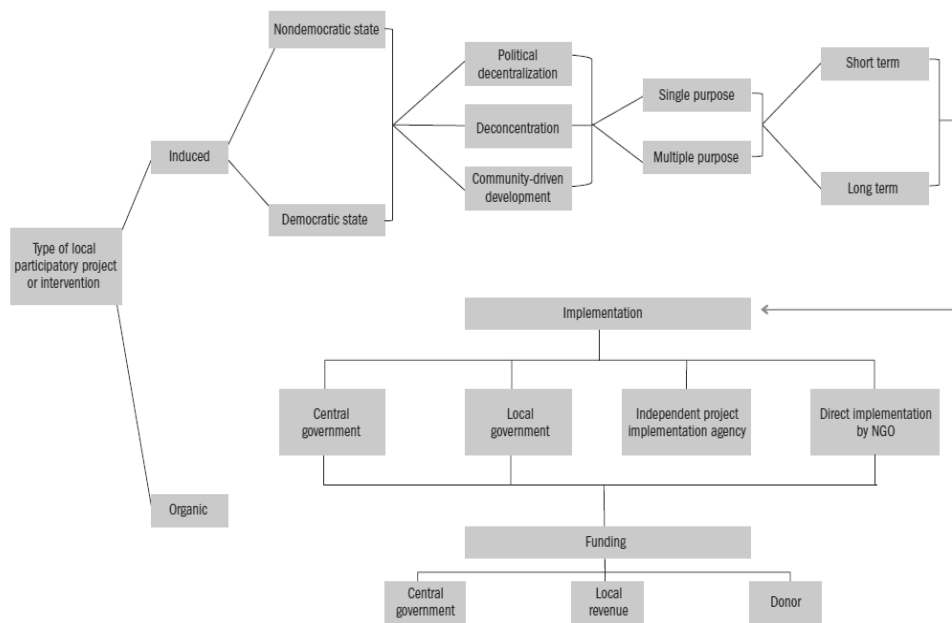
Unlike organic participation, **induced participation** is initiated and facilitated by power institutions – either governmental, regional or local, as a form of decentralization or community – driven development. The main **reason** of the process is usually a matter of public interest, aiming to fulfil the common interests of the civil society and synchronizing with national government goals and **resources** such as national funds and international funding opportunities. Within the scientific literature, three main principles underlying induced participation are identified based on Fung And Wright’s concept of “empowered participatory governance” (Fung & Wright, 2003, pp. 15–18):

- “Practical orientation” – the participatory process focuses on practical, immediate issues.
- “Bottom-up participation” – solutions are proposed by the stakeholders directly affected by the problem through a creative problem-solving process, while also incorporating the expertise of professionals.
- “Deliberative solution generation” – decisions are relying on a dialogue between the participants and negotiation that results in finding a compromise.

Essentially, induced participation recreates organic participation patterns, but it is important to be supervised by well-functioning state agencies, in order to be effective and avoid the risk of corruption (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). The same authors conceptualize induced participation as comprising three modalities – decentralization, de-concentration, and community-driven development – differentiated according to the degree of involvement exercised by state agencies in local urban planning processes. From a theoretical perspective, community-driven development brings decision-making closer to citizens by allocating financial resources directly to community, enabling them to design and implement social, economic, and urban development projects. In practice, however, these three typologies often overlap, resulting in hybrid arrangements that combine elements of political decentralization, incentive-driven local administrators (deconcentration), and community-driven development initiative.

From an analytical perspective, participation in decision-making can function as an integrative mechanism, capable of bridging socially segregated communities by creating shared spaces for dialogue, negotiation, and collective problem-solving. Ethnicity-based segregation, particularly in the educational system, produces asymmetries in access to resources and information, which in turn constrain the capacity and willingness of certain groups to engage in participatory processes. In such contexts, participation cannot be assumed to emerge organically or to be equally accessible to all social groups. Rather, it requires intentional design to overcome these structural barriers. Induced participation thus operates as a corrective mechanism, aiming to reconfigure the conditions of participation by actively bringing

together socially and spatially fragmented groups within a shared deliberative framework. By doing so, it not only facilitates dialogue across ethnic boundaries, but also enables the articulation of differentiated needs and the identification of common interests. In the case of Tărlungeni, this approach allows the participatory process to function as both a diagnostic tool, revealing the effects of segregation on everyday life, and as a formative instrument, shaping the cultural and educational center as a space explicitly oriented toward social integration and inclusive community development.



Source: *A typology of induced participation* (Mansuri & Rao, 2013, p. 37)

Figure 1. Induced participation constraints.

The implementation section of the figure shows who are those potential stakeholders that can run it, independently or by collaborative means: central or local governmental institutions, independent project implementation agencies or NGOs. In the specific case of Tărlungeni, there has been a combination of bodies that initiated the induced participation process: an independent agency – represented by the authors of this study – contracted by the private company that initiated the research (through NEB funds) in collaboration with the local administration to implement the participatory process and, of course, the local council, which remained actively involved throughout all stages of the research, ensuring an institutional oversight.

WHY INDUCED PARTICIPATION?

Our research is distinctive in its focus on Eastern Europe, a region shaped by approximately half a century of communist rule and the subsequent regime change at the end of the twentieth century, the effects of which continue to influence contemporary developments. Within this cultural and economic framework, democracy remains an evolving process in Romanian society, and participatory practices are shaped by the specific conditions of the post-communist context. Studies focusing on Eastern Europe's big and medium size cities indicate that citizen involvement typically require active stimulation, given the relative scarcity or absence of organic, bottom-up participation in post-communist contexts (Baba, Cherecheș, Mora, & Țiclău, 2009, Hafner-Fink, 2012). We have witnessed, however, a growing visibility and importance of induced participation processes in both urban and rural settlements across Eastern Europe, largely supported by European Union development programs and funding under the 2014–2020 financial framework, particularly through the operational programs (Ministerul Investițiilor și Proiectelor Europene, 2023). A similar dynamic can be observed in Târlungeni, where community development has been strongly influenced by its geographical proximity to Brașov, the largest city in Romania's Central Development Region. Its demographic structure – with nearly a quarter of the population aged 0–14 years old – further reinforces this development potential. In an increasingly aging society (Grundy, 2017, pg. 11–18), this community has an evident demographic advantage, not as a consequence of its actions, but out of chance. However, the consolidation of this demographic advantage ultimately depends on the community's capacity to act, a responsibility that the municipality of Târlungeni appears to recognise.

Our research focuses mainly on the implementation stage of induced participation (Mansuri & Rao, 2013), which consists of participatory instruments. There are multiple types of methods and a variety of instruments that can be put together in numerous ways (Sanoff, 2000). Poljak Istenič and Kozina's study on five Eastern European small and medium cities lists a series of participatory instruments that have been used for the implementation of induced participation processes by the local administrations (Poljak Istenič & Kozina, 2020):

- stakeholder platforms
- workshops
- living labs
- face-to-face meetings
- web platforms
- social media
- consultation and surveys
- voting procedures
- awareness raising campaigns.

The instruments listed above are not infallible – they might succeed or not, depending on how they are implemented, on the effectiveness of state agencies and on the characteristics of the community. In addition to other social and cultural factors, there are also the circumstantial aspects of the political context, which need to be taken into consideration when assessing the success rate. In a community that only sees participation in its electoral stage (electing representatives), the participatory instruments must be accessible, attractive and have didactic components. The goal of induced participation is, in this case, to shift the paradigm of urban planning from power delegation to a deliberative democracy approach (Carpentier, 2012). Finally, from this perspective, decision-making in urban planning should lean towards communicative methods, based on dialogue and negotiation (deliberation) between the stakeholders affected by the decision (Elster, 1998).

The approach used in the case of Tărlungeni is both academic and practical. Thus, the community was presented with the demographic data that led to the proposal for a Cultural Center in the area. From that point on, though, the decisions regarding the activities in that Cultural Center were up to the community members. The focus groups had a collaborative approach, requiring participants to imagine what types of activities they envisioned for the center. This approach not only generated practical ideas regarding the future center, but also yielded two secondary immediate consequences: [1] it brought the members of the community together, as a group, regardless of their ethnicity *and* [2] it brought the community closer to the project, making it theirs rather than the municipality's.

METHODOLOGY

The village of Tărlungeni is situated in the south-eastern part of Braşov County, as part of the Braşov City Metropolitan Area. The study highlights the emerging need for local complementary amenities, whose function is to reduce the growing dependence on the main urban center for services such as leisure, education, and healthcare. The induced participation concept is presented as a possible approach towards solving less perceivable issues of a community, thus introducing municipality-based proposals to the inhabitants, testing their acceptance and jointly developing their final form.

The methodological design of this research is directly informed by the theoretical framework of *induced participation*, understood as a structured, state-supported process aimed at facilitating inclusive and deliberative engagement among community members (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). In this context, the choice of a mixed-methods approach reflects the dual role of induced participation within the research design: as a diagnostic instrument for identifying local needs and constraints, and as a formative mechanism that contributes to shaping future community engagement.

The chosen methodology was mixed, based on both quantitative and qualitative techniques. This was methodologically motivated by the need to triangulate breadth and depth: the survey captures distributed perceptions across the community, while focus groups enable the observation of interactional dynamics and a consensus-building process central to induced participation. The qualitative technique used in this research was the focus group. Focus groups were selected as the primary qualitative method due to their capacity to generate interactive, co-produced knowledge, reflecting the deliberative dimension of induced participation and enabling observation of interethnic communication patterns in real time. In this case, three separate focus groups were organized, in order to test the inhabitant's wish for a Cultural Center in Tărlungeni, to assess the urgency of this sort of project, as well as to understand the existing communication patterns between the three different ethnicities. The focus groups were designed as deliberative spaces, aligned with the principles of "empowered participatory governance" (Fung & Wright, 2003), enabling bottom-up articulation of needs, negotiation among participants, and collective problem framing across ethnically differentiated people. Their thematic organization – on three different themes such as problems, needs, and solutions – was a deliberate methodological decision, intended to counteract existing patterns of social segregation and to stimulate interaction within a shared communicative setting.

This stage of the research was conducted between December 2022 and February 2023, and involved collecting data on *the main social inclusion challenges perceived by residents, the perceived need for investment in a cultural and educational center in Tărlungeni, and the population's views on the activities that such a facility could host*. The qualitative component of the research was based on an exploratory approach, intended to gather direct, spontaneous information from the participants. The initiative belonged to a private company who financed the project through NEB funds (name withheld due to contractual confidentiality constraints), to the Town Hall and to the Local Council. The three focus groups were organized in the Tărlungeni Town Hall. The research had an applicative approach, aiming to bring the community together through a common purpose: a Cultural Center that could benefit all the young members of the village. Furthermore, the solutions generated during the debates were meant to be implemented in the project, thus making the inhabitants part of the solution process, rather than delegating it to the municipality.

The research employs two complementary and methodologically equivalent components: a quantitative strand, based on a questionnaire, and a qualitative strand, structured as three focus groups, both strands contributing equally to the investigation. The questionnaire was distributed online and administered on site, on a sample of population from all the subdivisions of the village (Tărlungeni, Cărpiniș, Purcăreni, Zizin), belonging to all three ethnic groups (Romanians, Hungarians, Roma). The survey used an opportunity sample, aiming mainly to understand, from a quantitative perspective, the problems and needs of the population,

and the local amenities that they consider necessary. The use of an opportunity sample is justified by the exploratory and participatory nature of the research, aiming to maximize inclusion across territorial subdivisions and ethnic groups rather than statistical representativeness, in line with participatory governance approaches (Fung & Wright, 2003). The quantitative part of the research, based on a survey that was distributed online among the population of Tărlungeni in January 2023, gathered 323 responses from the participants. The questionnaire was structured around several coherent thematic domains, articulated around location, access to local amenities and social infrastructure, population needs and perceived problems, aspects of social inclusion, and urban mobility conditions within Tărlungeni. These domains were derived deductively from the theoretical framework (access to amenities, social inclusion, and mobility as key dimensions of community integration), at the same time allowing inductive identification of locally specific issues.

Both the questionnaire and the three focus groups were designed as equally important and mutually reinforcing components of the research. Their equivalence reflects the epistemological assumption of the study, which is that participatory knowledge emerges both from aggregated individual perceptions and from collective deliberation processes. While the questionnaire, based on an opportunity sampling strategy, captures a broad spectrum of perceptions across all territorial subdivisions and ethnic groups, the focus groups provided in-depth, deliberative insights into the subject. Their structure was aligned to identify perceived needs, deficiencies in local amenities, and attitudes toward social inclusion, thereby operationalizing key dimensions of the theoretical framework.

In addition, this research describes the demographic reality in Tărlungeni by presenting a quantitative approach of the social tendencies regarding ethnicity, structure of the population, migration, natural evolution of the population and occupations.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE OF THE VILLAGE

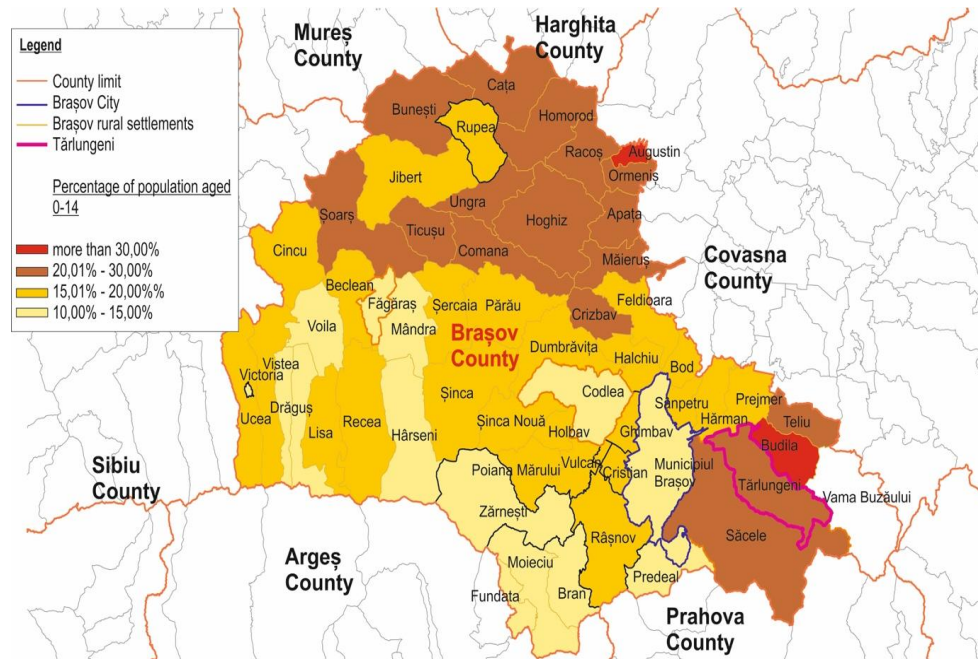
Tărlungeni is a village in Braşov County, situated in the south-eastern vicinity of the city of Braşov, the county seat of Braşov County, which is one of the 42 Counties of Romania. Its location is in the Central Region of the country, in the southeastern part of Transylvania. From a territorial perspective, Braşov County is comprised of Braşov City and other three important cities/municipalities, Coldea, Făgăraş and Săcele, as well as six other towns (Ghimbav, Predeal, Râşnov, Rupea, Victoria and Zărneşti) and 48 villages (rural settlements). Three of the four municipalities of Braşov are in the southeastern part of the County.

The County of Braşov has a relatively unbalanced structure, as most of its urban settlements are in the southeastern part of its administrative area, while the rural areas are spread over the western, eastern, and northern parts of the county.

All these urban areas concentrated in the southeastern part of the county are strongly connected to Prahova County, especially with Prahova Valley, which is one of the most touristic zones of Romania.

The Târlungeni Village, the main subject of this study, is situated in the immediate vicinity of Săcele City, approximately 63 km from Braşov City, which makes its position, from a geographical perspective, very advantageous. The closeness to these urban areas, most often offers access for the population of the village to a series of amenities and facilities specific to an urban-settlement. Nevertheless, being in the immediate vicinity of large urban settlements also poses some significant challenges, some of which are related to sub-urbanization and commuting.

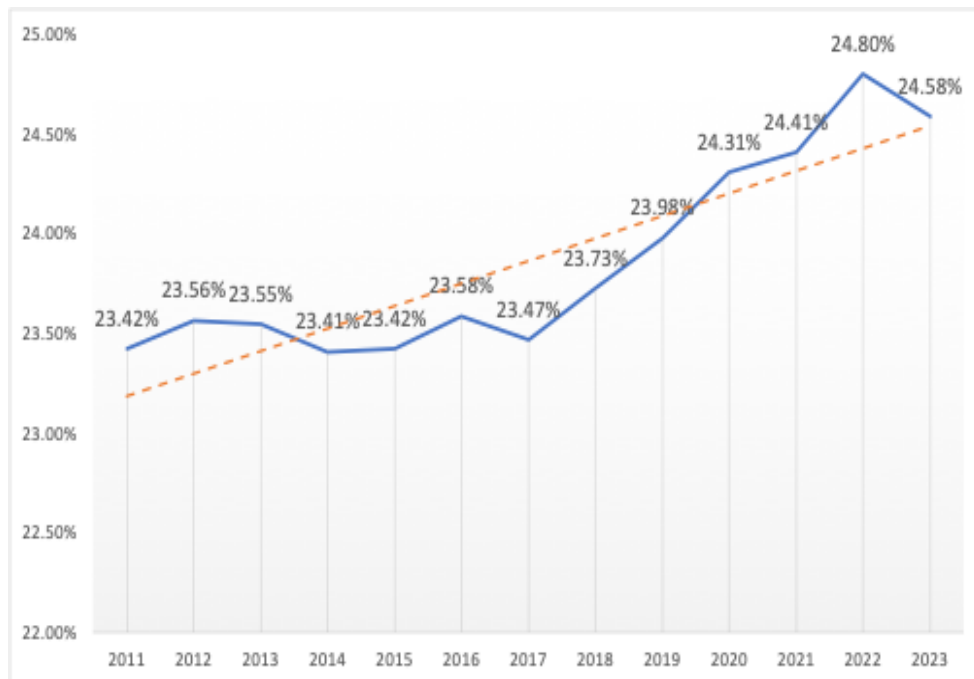
The demographic evolution of Târlungeni indicates an increase of the total population of the village by almost 60% during the 2011–2024 period. Thus, the village has seen its population increase in size, from 8 521 inhabitants at the beginning of the interval, to 13.624 inhabitants in 2024. From an age perspective, the most obvious increase of the population was reported in the 0–14 age interval (the children). This age group increased by almost 67%, while the active population (15 to 64-year-olds) has increased by approximately 59%, the older population (65-year-olds and over) having increased by a little over 52%.



Source: Author, based on the information provided by the National Institute of Statistics

Figure 2. Weight of children's population among the Braşov administrative units, in 2023.

Tărlungeni is a very young village, demographically speaking, with a percentage of old population of a little over 10% and a young population that represents almost a quarter of the entire mass of inhabitants. The ageing index has decreased during the 2011–2024 period, from 0.48 to 0.44, making this village an exception, given the general tendencies reported not only in Romania, but in the entire Europe (Grundy, 2017, pg. 11–18).



Source: Author, based on the information provided by the National Institute of Statistics

Figure 3. Evolution of the weight of the young population (0–14 ani) in the total population, over the 2011–2023 interval.

The statistical data shows that the population of Tărlungeni is increasing, based on both natural causes and migration. As previously noted, the natural growth rate of the population in Tărlungeni has followed an upward trend over the 2011–2023 period. The highest natural growth rate was registered in 2018, when Tărlungeni had a birth rate of 22.18 (*total births of 222 in raw numbers*) and a mortality rate of 9.49 (*95 deaths registered in Tărlungeni in 2018*). The trendline illustrates a general tendency of increase of the natural growth rate. In 2023, the natural growth rate was 10.67, with a birth rate of 17.78 and a mortality rate of 7.11.

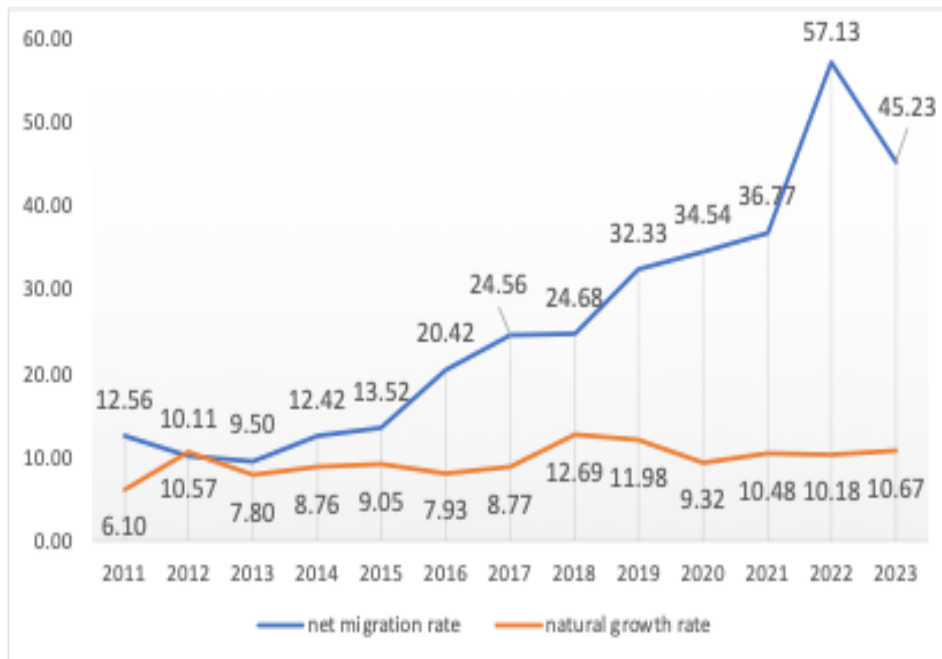
The main cause for the increase in the number of inhabitants in Tărlungeni during the last thirteen years, though, is the net migration rate. The trendline for the

2011–2023 time period suggests a rapid increase in population through internal migration. In 2022, Tărlungeni recorded the highest number of new arrivals. Thus, 883 people have relocated to Tărlungeni that year, while 195 people have left the village. The majority of in-migrants originated from the city of Braşov, reflecting a broader suburbanization dynamic whereby small peri-urban settlements in the vicinity of Braşov are increasingly integrated into suburban hinterland.

The arrival rate in 2022, in Tărlungeni, was 72.50, while the departure rate was 15.35. Therefore, the net migration rate in 2022 was 57.15, the highest value registered yet. In 2023, the net migration rate was reported at 45.23, which is the second highest value reported in the interval we have analyzed.

AMENITIES AND COMPLEMENTARY FUNCTIONS

As previously stated, Tărlungeni is rapidly becoming one of the most attractive villages in Braşov County. With a population growth that has been rapidly increasing over the last few years, both naturally and through migration trends, Tărlungeni benefits of a substantial work force and a very numerous young population (*the 0–14 population in Tărlungeni represents approximately 25% of the total population of the village*).



Source: Author, based on the information provided by the National Institute of Statistics

Figure 4. Comparative evolution of the net migration rate and the natural growth rate of Tărlungeni population, during the 2011–2023 time period.

From an economic perspective, according to the statistical data, the economy of Tărlungeni is powered especially by APEMIN ZIZIN S.A., the company that produces the mineral waters so well-known, at national level. However, Tărlungeni is very much influenced also by the proximity to the city of Braşov.

In 2023, Tărlungeni registered a total of 1,237 companies, accounting for approximately 1.50% of the total companies in Braşov County. Their combined turnover was estimated at 557.6 million euros, representing 0.72% of the County's total turnover, while the net profit generated amounted to approximately 73.2 million euros (1.14% of County total). The total number of employees working in the companies of Tărlungeni was 1,237 people, corresponding to around 1.50% of the County's workforce.

Based on data such as fiscal value, number of employees and profit perspectives, the main activity of Tărlungeni are *the manufacturing industry*, followed by *retail*. Most of the inhabitants are employed in the manufacturing industry, retail, and constructions and as previously mentioned, the main economic agent in this village is APEMIN ZIZIN S.A.

The attractiveness of Tărlungeni is visible in the increasing number of residential units in the area, especially starting with 2016. The number of housing units became highly increased over the past few years, with the highest number of new houses being reported in 2021 (*335 houses were built that year*). In 2023, the National Institute of Statistics mentions that 333 new housing units were built in Tărlungeni during that year.

As we have mentioned, the number of children in Tărlungeni has been increasing over the past years. Thus, the statistical data indicates an increase in the kindergarten children (aged 3 to 5) from 419 pupils in 2011, to 480 pupils in 2016, to 749 pupils in 2024. The number of school-aged children (between 6 and 14 years old) has been increasing from 1,142 people in 2011, to 1,256 people in 2016, and to 1,879 people in 2024.

As noted earlier in the study, Tărlungeni has four schools operating in five buildings (the Tărlungeni school functioning in two buildings). Each of these schools is associated with one of the subdivisions of Tărlungeni: Tărlungeni, Zizin, Purcăreni, and Cărpiniş. The Tărlungeni school is the largest, accommodating approximately 580 students and operating in two buildings, one located in Tărlungeni and another in Zizin, the latter schooling Hungarian pupils. The Zizin school, commonly referred to as the Roma school, has a student population of approximately 373 pupils and is situated in proximity to one of the largest disadvantaged communities in Tărlungeni.



Source: *Tărlungeni Town Hall*

Figure 5. Map illustrating the spatial distribution of disadvantaged communities in Tărlungeni.

According to the data provided by the Tărlungeni Town Hall, two main disadvantaged communities have been identified within the settlement and its constituent villages. Their relative locations within the village are presented in the image above. As shown, the largest disadvantaged community is situated in Zizin, in close proximity to the building that has been selected to be converted into a **cultural and educational center for the community**. This disadvantaged community is estimated to be of approx. 1,500 – 1,700 persons, all of whom are Roma people. As illustrated earlier, the Roma community situated in this southern part of the village is also spread on the other side of the Zizin river, in a small group of houses. According to the information provided by the Town Hall representatives, this community, accounting for approximately 12%–13% of the village's total population, does not hold legal tenure over the land it occupies. Thus, it represents not only a disadvantaged group, but also a case of informal and precarious housing. The majority of children residing in the area are enrolled in the Zizin school unit, which, according to the statistical data for 2021/ 2022 academic year, counted around 373 students, predominantly of Roma ethnicity.

The second disadvantaged community is in Tărlungeni, in the northern part of the village. This is a smaller community, estimated at around 500 to 700 inhabitants and all of them are also part of the Roma population. The children that

live here are students of the Tărlungeni school unit, counting in 2021/ 2022 a total of 79 Hungarian students and 501 Roma students.

THE PARTICIPATORY PROCESS AND DERIVED OUTCOMES

This research has a mixed methodology, consisting of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Its practical orientation has been focusing on assessing Tărlungeni community's needs, problems and necessary amenities within the framework of oriented participation (Fung & Wright, 2003, pp. 15–18). Thus, the project of repurposing an abandoned building into a **cultural and educational center for the community** constituted the basis for enabling such participation. To this end, the authors of the study – as sociologists involved in the study on behalf of the funding company and in collaboration with the public administration – initiated a public consultation process, comprising a public debate and a dedicated questionnaire, aimed at identifying the perceived need for such an amenity in the community and, subsequently, the main activities desired by the population.

One of the most important traits of the structure of the population in Tărlungeni is *its ethnic diversity*. Thus, the population of Tărlungeni is divided almost equally into Romanians, Hungarians, and Roma people. During these debates, all three ethnic groups were present, contributing equally to the development of the idea of a Cultural Center in their community.

At a social level, the discussions with the members of the community have revealed two different approaches. On one side, the public discourse of the population was oriented towards *not having any social tensions among the members of the community*. Members of the community that participated at the discussions specified several times that there are no social problems in Tărlungeni and that the three ethnic groups coexisted peacefully. On the other hand, though, the discussions have revealed the fact that, even though there were no tensions or problems among the three ethnic groups, *the interaction between them is very limited*. As a result, it is relatively clear that most of the population doesn't interact with members of the other ethnicities, although they are living in the same administrative area, sometimes even as neighbors. "My daughter can't play with our neighbor's daughter because they don't speak the same language. They are both very small [around 4 years old], but we are Romanians, and they are Hungarians. I remember one time, each of them was in their own courtyards and they were looking at each other and waving, but they couldn't play together because of the language issue", one of the mothers invited to the focus group told us. A later explanation revealed the fact that the Hungarian students start learning Romanian only in school, once in first grade [*when children are already around six or seven years old*].

From a social inclusion perspective, it has been observed that students belonging to the Hungarian ethnic group are taught in separate classrooms. They

are instructed by different teachers and follow a distinct curriculum delivered in the Hungarian language. In this context, language represents a key factor contributing to this form of educational segregation, which is often institutionally justified. Romanian is taught as a secondary language in this framework. Thus, when reflecting on the local educational system, two Hungarian teachers indicated that, although the overall number of students has increased in recent years, the number of Hungarian students remains relatively low. “We have only 79 Hungarian students in Tărlungeni, at the moment”, says one of the teachers from the Tărlungeni school. The statistics received from the school units in Tărlungeni revealed that the number of Hungarians students has slightly increased during the past three years, from 68 students in 2019/2020, to 71 students in 2020/2021, and to 79 students in 2021/ 2022. The only Hungarian school section is in Tărlungeni Village, the other three school units – Purcăreni, Zizin, Cărpiniș – only having Romanian and Roma students enrolled in their programs.

Roma students are enrolled across the Tărlungeni, Zizin, and Cărpiniș school units, with the highest numbers recorded in Tărlungeni school (501 students), followed by Zizin school (373 students) and Cărpiniș school (158 students). With the exception of Tărlungeni – where both Roma and Hungarian students are present, albeit in separate school units – the Zizin and Cărpiniș schools serve exclusively Roma pupils. In 2021/2022, the Zizin school unit reported 373 students, all of whom were Roma, while the Cărpiniș school unit recorded 158 students, similarly, composed entirely of Roma pupils.

As described earlier, the social segregation in the four school units of Tărlungeni is clearly visible in the statistical data. In neither of the four school units, we cannot find all three ethnicities studying together. The Tărlungeni school has both Roma and Hungarian students, but in separate buildings of the same school, the Purcăreni school has only Romanian students and Zizin and Cărpiniș schools have only Roma students enrolled.

THE PERCEIVED PROBLEMS OF TĂRLUNGENI

During the survey, the participants were asked to identify the main problems they perceive in Tărlungeni through an open-ended question, allowing for unrestricted responses. Thus, a large percentage of respondents indicated that the most pressing issues relate to **road infrastructure and public transport**. A total of 40.87% of respondents identified this aspect as problematic. Within this category, the participants referred not only to issues related to road infrastructure, for cars as well as for pedestrians. One respondent mentioned “Lack of asphalt and street lighting on the side roads”, while others nominated “the lack of pedestrian crossings or the lack of sidewalks” as problematic and unsafe for the population.

A specific problem was mentioned by one of the respondents, related to the Izvor Neighbourhood in Tărlungeni. “There is no transportation from Izvor Neighbourhood to the schools in Purcăreni and Tărlungeni”, which is causing difficulties for the children that live in that specific area.

The second most frequently reported issue concerns the **lack of activities for children and young people**, as well as the **insufficient playgrounds** in Tărlungeni. There were many respondents mentioning this aspect, but one of them formulated it more sharply: “People have no reasons to spend time in Tărlungeni”, says this participant, while another respondent mentions that “there is no cinema, sports hall where you can exercise after classes....”.

The participants to the study specified that they would like to be able to get involved in *activities that can reunite all three nationalities*, as they feel that **traditions and customs are being lost** and the members of the three ethnic groups – Romanians, Hungarians, and Roma people – don’t interact with each other. However, when asked if they feel, in any way, excluded or rejected by the community, the members of the Roma community mention that they sometimes feel that they are not welcomed to some of the activities. “Yes, the fact that we are Roma people means that sometimes we are treated with indifference and oftentimes, our problems are not being heard”, said one of the participants in this study. At the same time, other participants reported instances of *racial and social discrimination*. Notably, all respondents who raised issues related to discrimination belonged to the Roma community in Tărlungeni, a pattern that is also reflected in the survey responses. Additionally, 5.57% of the respondents underlined *the education of the members of the community* as key concern. Within this category, nearly a quarter of the responses referred to behavioral aspects associated with members of the Roma community.

The analysis reveals a certain gap at community level, especially between the Roma population and the other two ethnicities. Participants at this study mentioned that the Roma population is a slightly different category, *below the level of the other members*, sometimes not completely integrated or accepted by the other ethnic groups. On the other hand, the relation between the Romanians and Hungarians is also marked by certain fractures, caused not by their culture or social behavior, but by the language itself, especially during the first years of their lives.

CONSIDERATIONS OF THE PARTICIPANTS REGARDING THE NEED FOR AN INCLUSIVE CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL CENTER IN TĂRLUNGENI

Although the social disparities in Tărlungeni don’t clearly generate tensions among the three ethnic groups, Hungarians, Romanians, and Roma people, there has been identified a significant fracture and lack of interaction at community level, that generates the risk of loss of traditions, customs, and an imminent risk of

lack of interaction at the community level. The population of Tărlungeni comprises three different communities that need to be brought together by a **common social bond**.

When asked about **the perception regarding the need for an inclusive cultural and educational center in Tărlungeni**, in both focus groups and surveys, community members have mentioned that this is a **very useful investment in the future of this community**. During the discussions in the first focus group, one member of the Roma Community that is very much involved in the integration of the Roma population in the community, has mentioned that she sees this investment as a *House of friendship* that will help *cultures merge*. Other members of the community, participants to this first focus group, emphasized that a Cultural and Educational Center is very much needed in Tărlungeni, as most of the activities families involve their children into are taking place in Braşov.

Within the survey, residents of Tărlungeni were asked to identify, based on their own needs and those of their family members, the key facilities or services they consider necessary but currently lacking in the commune. Approximately 60% of respondents identified the need for **sports facilities**, while slightly over 50% of them mentioned the need for **playgrounds for children**. A further 46% emphasized the need for **parks and green spaces**. The question also included an open-ended option, through which approximately 9% of participants expressed interest in additional activities, such as **arts, theatre, music, dance, painting, and craft-based activities**.

In the first weeks of 2023, when the survey was being conducted, most of the population of Tărlungeni was aware of the intention of the authorities to create a cultural and educational center in their village. Thus, 62.7% of the participants mentioned that they were informed, and they knew about this project. When asked about the perceived need for such an investment, on a scale from 1 to 5 (*where 1=not necessary, 5=extremely necessary*), **the perceived need for a cultural and educational center in Tărlungeni obtained a total value of 4.27**, which equals a **very highly perceived need for the implementation of this project**. During the discussions, the inhabitants not only showed openness to the implementation of the project, but also a very strong willingness to engage in the process of making it happen. Thus, **the participatory process** emerged, starting from the design ideas to the implementation.

The level of support for the project among residents is considerable. When asked about their willingness to engage in the organization of various activities, 72.5% of respondents to the online survey provided affirmative responses. Furthermore, some participants indicated a conditional willingness to contribute, depending on the announcement of specific activities.

PARTICIPANTS' PERSPECTIVE ON FUTURE ACTIVITIES
WITHIN THE PROPOSED CULTURAL CENTER



Source: Photo taken by the authors

Figure 6. The abandoned building that is considered for conversion into a cultural and educational center.

The inhabitants of Tărlungeni were asked to describe the way in which they imagine the future activities that will take place in this future **cultural and educational center**. Some participants at the three focus groups mentioned that they see this place as a *house of friendship*, where people of all three ethnicities could meet and participate in different activities together. Other participants mentioned that the future center will be a place that gives the three ethnic groups the opportunity to know each other through activities such as *history and traditional music and customs*.



Source: Designed by the authors based on the proposals of the respondents

Figure 7. Activities imagined by the inhabitants of Tărlungeni during the second focus group

Table 1

List of activities imagined by the inhabitants during the consultations

	First Team	Second Team
Ground floor	Sports area (modern dances, various sports, traditional dances)	Sports Area (with changing rooms, offices, and sanitary facilities)
	Events hall	
	Museum / Exhibition Area	Museum
	Social interaction spaces	
	Local NGO Headquarters	
	Educational area (courses and training activities)	
First floor	Music hall	Creative studio for music and the study of different instruments
	Library	
	Workshops (painting, crafts, sculpture)	Modular space for different recreational activities for children
	Outdoor terrace	

Source: *Designed by the author based on the proposals of the respondents*

During the survey, most of the participants mentioned they would like to be able to have *educational activities and games* for the children in Tărlungeni. Other participants mentioned the willingness to be involved in *sports activities* and different types of dancing lessons.

During the second focus group, the participants were asked to imagine the activities that might take place in the future cultural and educational center in Tărlungeni, using the sketches of the building and some sticky-notes. The enthusiasm of the participants was doubled by the fact that most of them had never visited the building and had never known how it looked on the inside. The older participants, however, did recall the fact that there used to be a bar, a pharmacy (*on the ground floor*), and a clothes store (*on the first floor*) there. The participants split into two groups, generating two sets of proposals. The first group suggested, for the ground floor, activities such as **educational activities of foreign language learning, music, or history of the three ethnicities**. Furthermore, this group proposed that the ground floor should shelter the headquarters of a local NGO. Another proposal was oriented towards sports **activities such as dancing, different sports, and traditional dances**. This group also proposed **socializing activities**, in relation to the courtyard and outside space. The second group mentioned a smaller number of activities than the first one, underlining instead that they would like to have **sports activities** and **a museum** on the ground floor of the building.

For the first floor, the first group proposed activities such as **a library, music hall, a versatile studio for craftsmanship, sculpture, painting, and other activities**. Furthermore, the group mentioned a socializing space at the first floor, in the form of an outside space such as a terrace. The second group envisioned a **creative studio for music and the study of different instruments**, as well as **a modular space for different recreational activities for children**.

CONCLUSIONS

The outcomes of participatory processes are not always directly observable in material or immediate terms; therefore, it is essential to critically assess the process itself. In this context, the question arises: **can Tărlungeni be considered a successful case of induced participation?** This, in turn, prompts a broader inquiry into the criteria that define a successful participatory process. Participation should be understood not primarily in terms of measurable outputs, but as part of a process that creates space for citizens' voices to be expressed. While such processes do not automatically translate into influence (Cornwall, 2008), they play a crucial role in fostering civic engagement and community development by enabling citizens to participate in public decision-making. In this case, "empowerment" is a key component of induced participation: although the initiative and the design of the process originate from the institutional level (local administration), the deliberative space – and, potentially, decision-making capacity – is situated at the level of the community.

Regarding the boundaries of our research, we did not intend to draw an overview of participatory theory or practices, but rather to explore how the concept of induced participation can adapt to the case of urban planning in Tărlungeni, a village that aims to overcome the effects of social segregation. Especially in the case of socially segregated communities, such as Tărlungeni, marginalization is a vicious circle. On one hand, marginalized groups are the ones affected by social factors such as poverty, low level of education, and spatial factors, such as lack of basic infrastructure (education, health, sanitation). On the other hand, marginalization is an outcome of self-exclusion, which is a consequence of poor physical and social living conditions (Cornwall, 2008). Self-exclusion might mean lack of confidence to express ideas; it might mean skepticism about one's opinion being taken into consideration or it might mean lack of resources to think about anything other than one's immediate survival issues. We have seen throughout the article that there are a plethora of social and demographic factors that enhance cooperation between citizens. Mansuri and Rao acknowledge that coordination of civic action (participation) is affected by the state of collective identity, which, in the case of Tărlungeni, is fragmentary, due to the social segregation of the ethnic groups (Mansuri & Rao, 2013, p. 69).

One limitation of a participatory process is the slow pace of implementation, often resulting from the need to navigate complex bureaucratic procedures and financial constraints before plans can be translated into concrete interventions. The case of Tărlungeni also reflects this pattern. Three years after the completion of the participatory process, the building remains in the same condition as at the outset of the consultation. Although, during the consultation phase, plans were being made for community members to collectively clean and organize the courtyard – an outdoor area of approximately 700 sqm – by the summer of 2023 these actions were not carried out. In December 2025, when asked about the status of project

implementation, representatives of the Local Council indicated that progress had been hindered by recent political developments in Romania, limited funding, and internal political misalignments within the Tărlungeni Town Hall.

This, however, is the second time a building is proposed to be converted into a Cultural Center in Tărlungeni. The first time, the project was dropped because of the rapid increase of the number of children in the village, which meant that the targeted building had to be allocated to one of the schools, in order to accommodate other classrooms. This time, the building is still disused and in continuous degradation, making it even more difficult for the community to understand the lack of urgency for the implementation of the project. Numerous studies highlight the constant fractures between public administrations and citizens in Romania (Acasandre, 2020), the case of Tărlungeni being no different. It indicates, once more, that bureaucratic actions and political tensions, more often than not, delay implementation which eventually leads to disappointment of the population and mistrust in the political actions.

The social segregation in Tărlungeni has not yet been overcome, as it remains a complex and sensitive issue, requiring sustained, multi-dimensional interventions in collaboration with community members. Although the participatory process may have temporarily fostered a shared awareness among residents – highlighting that, despite cultural, behavioral, and linguistic differences, they hold similar expectations from local authorities – this momentum was not maintained. In the absence of concrete follow-up actions, these expectations have gradually diminished, and the community continues to evolve along its existing, largely organic trajectories.

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