



The Concept of Participatory Social Planning For Sustainable Community Development

Social Planning Reader



JULY 24, 2025
PAMOJA TRUST

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	0
2. Why Participatory Social Planning?	1
3. Frameworks for Participatory Social Planning	2
3.1. Legal and Institutional Frameworks	2
3.2. Enablers of Participatory Social Planning.....	3
3.3. Hindrances to Participatory Social Planning.....	4
4. Approaches, Tools, and Application of Social Planning	4
4.1. Application of Social Planning Across Planning Levels	4
4.2. Tools and Models for Social Planning Implementation	7
4.2.1. The Adoptive Settlement Planning Model.....	8
4.2.2. Applying Social Planning for Strategic Planning in Statutory Planning Frameworks	9
4.2.3. U-CODE: Urban Co-Design Tool.....	10
5. Conclusion	11
6. References	1

1. Introduction

Planning, as a discipline and practice, has evolved through a wide array of theories reflecting diverse worldviews about how societies function and how future outcomes can or should be shaped. From early models grounded in systems thinking and rationalism that viewed the planner as a technical expert capable of predicting and controlling urban systems, to critiques rooted in Marxism and postmodernism that challenge the very idea of a singular public interest or objective truth, planning theory has navigated both ends of a philosophical spectrum. At times, the field has embraced scientific determinism; at others, it has leaned into philosophical indeterminacy - raising fundamental questions about the role of planners, the predictability of the future, and the legitimacy of planning itself. These divergent perspectives reflect broader societal transformations, including shifts in political ideologies, governance structures, and public expectations.

To bring coherence to this complexity, theorists like Allmendinger propose that the diversity of planning thought should be either celebrated or reconciled; not to reach a singular truth, but to better understand differing perspectives. Schools such as pragmatism, advocacy, collaborative planning, and postmodernism emphasize planning as a socially embedded and discursive practice, where the role of the planner ranges from advocate to facilitator.¹ Rather than focusing solely on long-term forecasts or end goals, many of these approaches concentrate on process, inclusion, and responsiveness to present concerns. Understanding planning, then, involves not only examining its technical and predictive functions but also recognizing it as a social phenomenon shaped by context, values, and power dynamics. Through this lens, social planning becomes both a tool for shaping the future and a reflection of contemporary societal debates.

The focus of social planning is the general well-being of residents using an approach that encompasses broad determinants of health, including not only medical conditions but all resources that enhance quality of life, such as housing, employment, health care, transportation, and others. These resources relate to housing affordability, homelessness, poverty, childcare, at-risk population, public safety, and food security.² Participatory Social Planning recognizes the importance of social aspect in the planning processes. It allows the local communities, stakeholders, and marginalized groups to actively engage in decision-making during the planning process as well as during the implementation of the plan. Planning as a practice has evolved to ensure that it responds to the current and future social issues and concerns of the local communities in both urban and rural neighborhoods as opposed to the traditional planning approaches which followed a top-down approach that tends to exclude the views of the local communities. It is crucial that participatory social planning must move beyond procedural compliance and embrace genuine

¹ David. J. Connell (2010), "[Schools of planning thought: exploring differences through similarities](#)," *International Planning Studies*15(4):269-280

² David J. Connell (2009). "[Planning and Its Orientation to the Future](#)" *International Planning Studies*14(1):

co-creation with local communities. Emphasis should be placed on homegrown guidelines, integrating constitutional values such as the Right to the City, social justice, and cultural identity; to ensure meaningful engagement of all stakeholders, including vulnerable and informal groups who are frequently excluded from formal planning processes, compensation and decision-making processes during development projects.

2. Why Participatory Social Planning?

Participatory social planning is a people-centered approach to planning that involves engaging communities, especially marginalized and vulnerable groups, throughout the planning process including design, implementation, and evaluation.³ Unlike traditional top-down planning models, participatory social planning emphasizes social inclusion, transparency, local knowledge, and shared decision-making. It ensures that the voices of the people, particularly those who are often excluded, inform the planning processes, resulting in more equitable, responsive, and sustainable planning outcomes.

Participatory Social Planning is aimed at achieving various objectives including:

- i. To ensure that diverse stakeholders, including women, youth, minorities, and the poor, have a say in decision-making and ownership of the planning process.
- ii. To build the capacity of local communities and vulnerable groups to identify their own issues and priorities, and contribute actively to the development of solutions of their neighborhood
- iii. To align planning interventions with the real needs and aspirations of the community, increasing the legitimacy and efficiency of outcomes.

According to the UN-Habitat 2020 report on enhancing planning through participatory approaches, plans developed with community input are more likely to be accepted, implemented, and maintained, enhancing their sustainability.⁴ This approach ensures that planning responds to the actual social issues and needs of the local community and the vulnerable and marginalized groups. It enhances social cohesion enabling the community members to benefit from their social capital and shared ownership of the neighborhood's development agenda which gives a sense of communal responsibility on the achievement of the development goals and aspirations.

The justification for participatory social planning lies in both democratic principles and practical benefits. In contexts of rising inequality, displacement, climate change, and urbanization, top-down planning often fails to capture the lived realities of affected communities. Participatory social planning responds by democratizing power and knowledge, ensuring that social development is not only about delivering social services but about recognizing people's rights,

³ Sebunya, J., & Gichuki, A. (2024). The Impact of Participatory Planning on Sustainable Development: A Literature Review. *Journal of Strategic Management*, (4), 1-9.

⁴ UN-Habitat (2020). Enhancing Urban Planning through Participatory Approaches <https://unhabitat.org>

agency, and capabilities. It also aligns with global frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (especially SDG 11 and SDG 16), which call for inclusive, participatory, and sustainable human settlements and institutions.⁵

Social concerns are frequently embedded as secondary considerations within Environmental and Social Impact Assessments, resulting in insufficient focus and operationalization of social risks, vulnerabilities, or community aspirations. Since most social issues are not captured during this assessment, they are always left out during the planning process leading social gaps in the implementation of the plans. Social aspects like property-based compensation, experiences and needs of minorities and marginalized groups like informal settlers are well captured in the participatory social planning process.

3. Frameworks for Participatory Social Planning

Kenya's legal and institutional frameworks offer a solid foundation for participatory social planning, rooted primarily in its Constitution and supported by several key statutes, including the Physical and Land Use Planning Act 2019 (PLUPA), County Government Act 2012, Urban Areas and Cities Act 2011, Community Land Act 2016, and Land Act 2012. These frameworks aim to ensure that governance and planning processes are inclusive, transparent, and responsive to citizen needs, thereby enabling public participation in social planning.

3.1. Legal and Institutional Frameworks

i. Constitution of Kenya

The Constitution of Kenya (2010) is the supreme framework, mandating public participation, environmental stewardship, and social justice as central pillars of governance. Article 174(c) explicitly emphasizes devolving power to enhance citizen participation in decision-making affecting their lives. Article 10 enshrines participation and inclusivity as national values, while Article 63 elevates community land rights, obliging county governments to hold unregistered community land in trust for identified communities until formal registration is achieved.⁶

ii. Physical and Land Use Planning Act (PLUPA), 2019

PLUPA devolves land use planning to county governments and requires that spatial and physical plans at all levels incorporate public participation. The Act mandates preparation of development plans in a transparent manner with community consultation as a prerequisite for approval.⁷ This legal requirement reinforces the participatory approach in planning land and social infrastructure, ensuring that the planning process is consultative, integrating community inputs and reflecting the local social realities.

⁵ Sustainable Development Goals, 2017

⁶ Constitution of Kenya 2010

⁷ Physical and Land Use Planning Act, 2019

iii. County Government Act (CGA), 2012

The CGA institutionalizes public participation at the county level by requiring counties to create and operationalize structures for citizen engagement, including public forums, consultative committees, and mechanisms that facilitate continuous involvement of communities in governance and social planning processes. Counties also have the responsibility to build the capacity of their citizens to effectively participate in these processes.

iv. Urban Areas and Cities Act (UACA), 2011

This Act obligates local authorities to develop integrated development plans (IDPs) with mandatory citizen participation, particularly addressing urban social infrastructure, housing, and service delivery issues.⁸ It advances participatory governance in urban planning to ensure inclusiveness and response to the social issues affecting the community.

v. Community Land Act (CLA), 2016

The Act recognizes community land rights and requires communities to prepare Community Land Use Plans (Article 19) through participatory processes.⁹ The planning involves community mobilization, adjudication, mapping, and collective decision-making, allowing marginalized groups to have a say in land management and social resource allocation on community lands.

vi. Land Act, 2012

The Land Act complements participatory planning by providing mechanisms for adjudication and registration of land rights, facilitating community involvement in land governance, and ensuring inclusive decision-making about land use that affects social livelihoods.

3.2. Enablers of Participatory Social Planning

The strong legal framework, reinforced by the Kenya Policy on Public Participation (2023), demands active, meaningful participation at all government levels with clear guiding principles.¹⁰ The existing planning laws provide explicitly for the involvement of the community members including the minorities and marginalized groups during the planning process to ensure that planning responds to the existing and anticipated social issues.

The constitutional creation of county governments has decentralized decision-making, bringing planning processes closer to the people and enhancing accessibility and responsiveness. The Community Land Act further gives mandate to the community to be the pioneers of community land use planning to ensure that the planning process is bottom-up and responds to the actual social, economic, cultural, and environmental issues affecting the community.

⁸ Urban Areas and Cities Act 2011

⁹ Community Land Act 2016

¹⁰ Kenya Policy on Public Participation, 2023

The coordination among the national government, county governments, and local community governance structure, as well as the collaboration with civil society and non-state actors, enables community engagement and involvement in the participatory social planning process.

3.3.Hindrances to Participatory Social Planning

Multiple agencies (e.g., National Land Commission, County Governments, MDAs, and Urban Institutions) have overlapping planning roles, causing delays and confusion in participatory social planning processes.

Many counties and urban institutions lack adequate technical, financial, and human resources to facilitate meaningful participation or to process public inputs effectively during the participatory social planning process.

Despite legal provisions, some public participation processes are superficial, serving more as formalities without genuine engagement or influence on decisions. Some community members attend public participation forums for financial support to respond to their immediate social issues but forget to give their issues and ideas that could improve their socio-economic status in the long run.

Power imbalances, exclusion of marginalized groups, and local elite capture undermine equitable participation during the participatory social planning process. This inhibits some sections of the community from giving their issues and recommendations for inclusion in the planning process.

4. Approaches, Tools, and Application of Social Planning

4.1. Application of Social Planning Across Planning Levels

How and when social planning should be implemented in development interventions is not limited. This can be done from large scaled to medium scaled and the smaller scaled interventions. This is traced back to the argument that any development action ranging from community-level neighborhood plans to mega infrastructure developments i.e. roads, Affordable Housing Programs, to the contemporary Local Physical and Land Use Development Plans and plans as big as the County Spatial Plans and the National Spatial Plans all need to be people-led. Practitioners' views of plans and programs need to move beyond functionality, aesthetics, and policy conditions to deeper, more people-centered, justice-driven, and future-facing planning approaches. Social planning therefore seeks to respond to the issues of space, inequality, governance and assigning meaning and identity of citizens to become fully productive members of the society. These were remarks shared by Steve Ouma at a meeting convened on deepening social planning in academia, community and practice, convened by the Civil Society Urban Development Platform.

On the question of development of spatial plans meant to guide development, the place of social planning approaches are a non-negotiable if one's aim is to ensure that communities own the plans and follow the planning guidelines set thereof. Otherwise, this leads to the question that a FAO

expert indicated in the guidelines for developing land use plans that, *“Land use planning is as much a matter of public education as of land use zoning and regulation.”* The FAO staff went on to say, *“There are a lot of regulations here for example, forest conservation, fisheries that are flouted with the connivance of the officials who are supposed to enforce them. Regulations have to be publicly accepted if they are to work. There aren’t enough policemen to go around imposing unwanted regulations in rural areas.”* This acceptance if unpacked means adoption of people-centered processes in the development of land use plans. So, if the plans targeted to guide planning are non-inclusive, what we see are zoning regulations that are followed by paper and where enforcement measures, which Kenya is quite missing on, are not put in place the zones procedures are not adhered to.

In projects or programs-based planning and development interventions, key concerns are raised on the origin of the conception of the proposed projects, the extent to which the proposed programs meet the people's needs, and the levels of communities’ involvement in the identification of the projects. Think about the case scenario of the Affordable housing Project or the Express Way project. A key question that could be asked would be, would a social planning approach have cured the many questions that arose during the construction processes and the implementation phases of the two projects? at what point were the citizens meant to be involved? was this supposed to be during the project conception stages, the pre-feasibility stages, the feasibility stages, the designs stages down to the implementation or was this in a utopian model meant to be throughout the processes?

To conceptualize how different planning approaches intersect and how social planning can be implemented at the different scales of planning, it’s helpful to view them as operating at different scales and with different entry points, but with potential overlaps in participation, data, and outcomes. As shown in the following two conceptual synthesis scenarios.

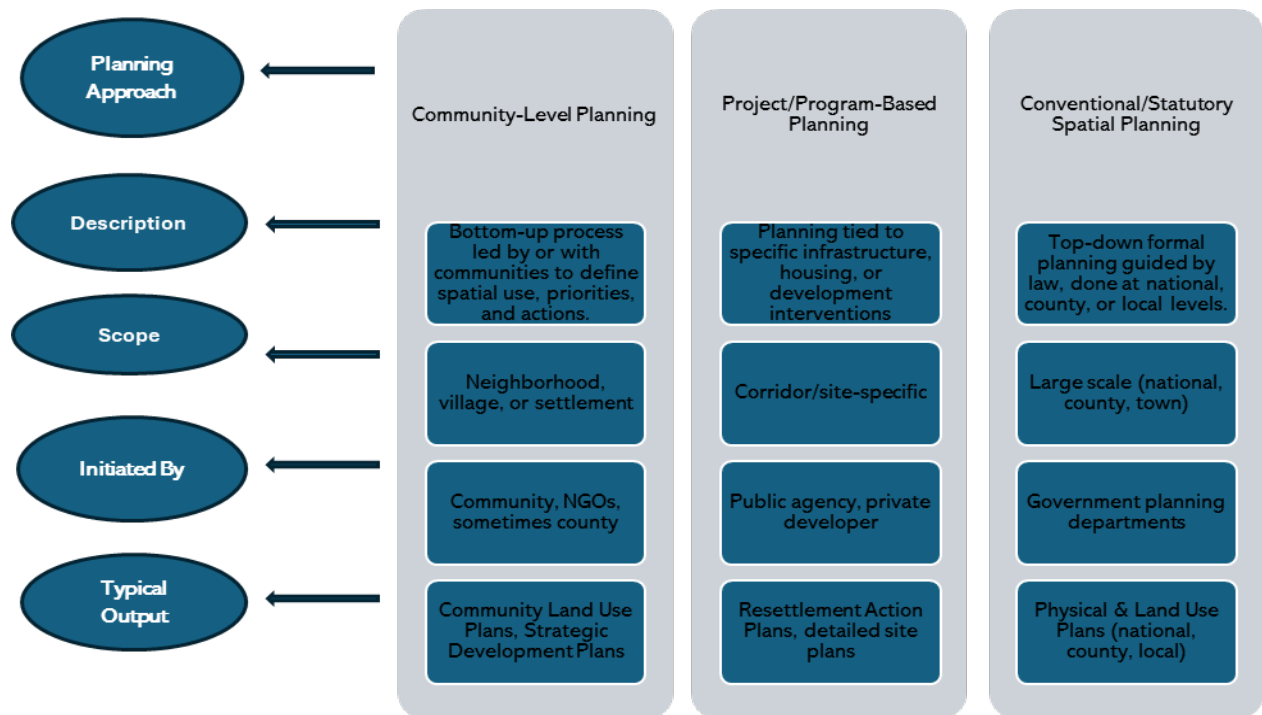


Figure 1: Levels of Planning

Scenario 1: Interlinked Planning

In this scenario, which, through social planning approaches, community-led development plans can inform statutory plans, i.e. the Local Physical and Land Use Plans with the real time local data. A project or program planned i.e. a housing project by the government can integrate community inputs drawn from Community Development Plans developed. Proposed projects in a Community Development Plans/ Community Land Use Plan, i.e. housing projects or a specific road project can inform a housing project or a road project. The same process also aids in implementation alignment of community priority needs and realization of the visions of the statutory plans, i.e. a water project proposed through a community strategic plan can become a vehicle to implement priorities in both community strategic plans and county development plans. Community experiences from plans implementation or projects implementation can inform statutory plans revisions and updates.

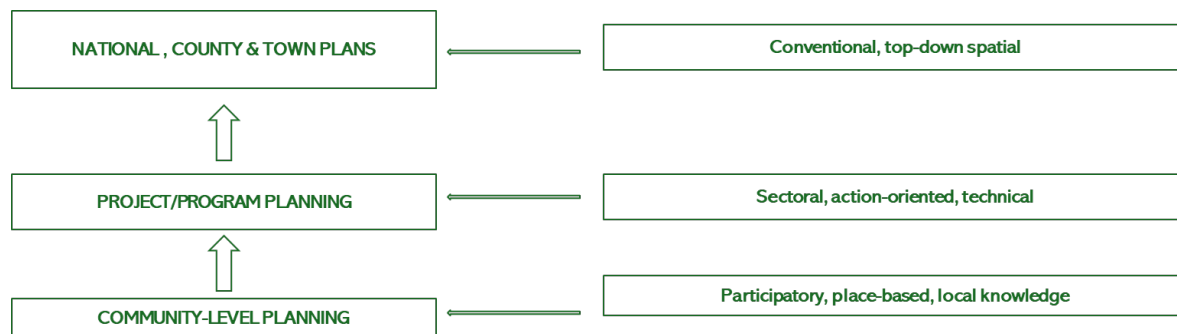


Figure 2: Interlinked Planning

Scenario 2: Independent Social Planning Across Scales

In the second scenario, social planning is applied individually at each of the different scales of planning. Social planning leads to community-defined visions and ensures inclusion of marginalized groups in spatial decisions and through its process it can result in generation of Community Land Use Plans or Social Development Plans as it was in the first scenario. At project/program level planning processes i.e. for a road, housing, water projects, through social planning, practitioners can be able to interrogate the relevance of interventions on the people and ensure that the designs of projects if found feasible for development based on community acceptance, do not produce social harms i.e. exclusion or displacements. At the County or national level spatial planning scales, social planning can be used to embed structural equity in spatial governance.

Therefore, whatever level the planning process is being undertaken, social planning in whatever context it was implemented has its space because planning is a combination of interlinked layers that could be described as following

4.2. Tools and Models for Social Planning Implementation

So how does one undertake the actual social planning, with the background understanding that there is a space for social planning at different scales and levels of planning for interventions. Certain methodologies/models and tools have been developed over time to justify that a process was done using a social planning approach. One of such models that was put into practice through a collaboration between the CSUDP, Pamoja Trust and the Symbio- City approach is called the ASPM which incorporates the use of an innovative land tool called STDM and the Symbio City Planning Approach. The other tools that will be described in this reader are the Strategic Planning Framework developed under the Utafiti Sera Urban Governance House, Kenya convened by Pamoja Trust and the U-CODE Co-design Platform developed by CSUDP in collaboration with FES and Technical University in Dresden.

4.2.1. The Adoptive Settlement Planning Model

ASPM model, is a social planning approach that whose piloting was spearheaded by three organizations across 13 informal settlements in Kenya that is the CSUDP, Pamoja Trust and the Council of Governors. The model recognizes and tends to the logic within urban spaces, identifies the actors within these spaces, their needs and their complementary and contesting socio-spatial relationships. It appreciates that urban space exist based on a certain logic i.e. the informal spaces. This kind of planning positions urban residents as experts in their own rights- of their needs and solutions to these needs. Mr. George Wesonga, in his description of ASPM indicates that the concept emphasizes three key features: community adaptation, planning adaptation and governance adaptation. The ASPM provides a tool for the informal settlement communities to project their development aspirations through consensus driven social plans that are used for negotiations in the urban planning regime of the Counties with intention to influence the Urban Integrated Development Plans (UIDP). Through consensus mechanisms, the communities identify their priority development aspirations which are then used for negotiations during the annual budget preparation processes. Within the ASPM is the application of the Social Tenure Domain Model(STDM) developed by the Global Land Tool Network, a tool that supports the collection of communities social and spatial information. Following its implementation several informal settlements were able to develop the community plans and, in this year, Pamoja Trust implemented the participatory process in the development of 6 Community Development Plans under the KISIP 2 program across three counties. The ASPM encompasses the following steps.

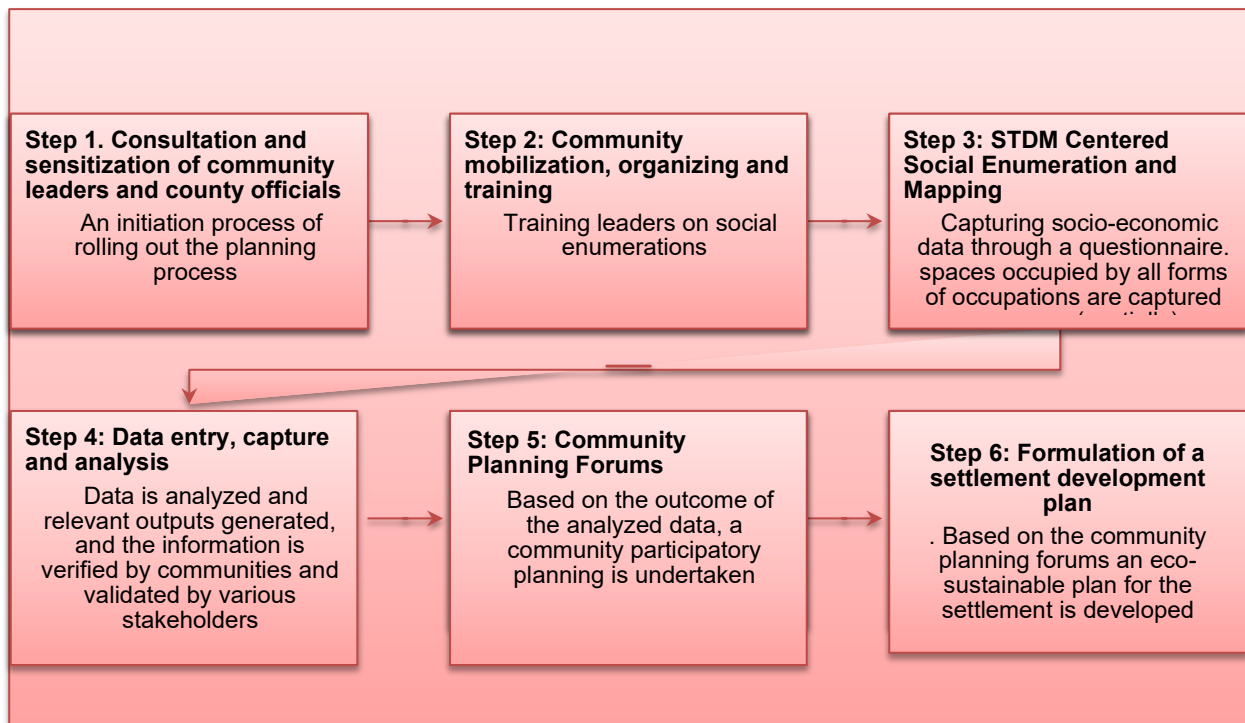


Figure 3: ASPM Implementation Process. Source: Building Adaptive Urban Informal Settlements 2018 (CSUDP & Pamoja Trust)

4.2.2. Applying Social Planning for Strategic Planning in Statutory Planning Frameworks

The Strategic Planning Framework was developed under the Utafiti Sera House on Urban Governance to illustrate how a social planning approach can be integrated into the development of strategic plans within conventional planning processes. The framework outlines specific techniques that can be applied at each stage of the planning cycle to ensure that the process remains community centered. It also articulates the core values that should guide the planning process throughout. Furthermore, the framework illustrates the expected outcomes of a strategic planning process informed by social planning principles. Its application is relevant for the development of Integrated Urban Development Plans (IUDPs) at the municipal level and can equally be adapted for planning at other levels.

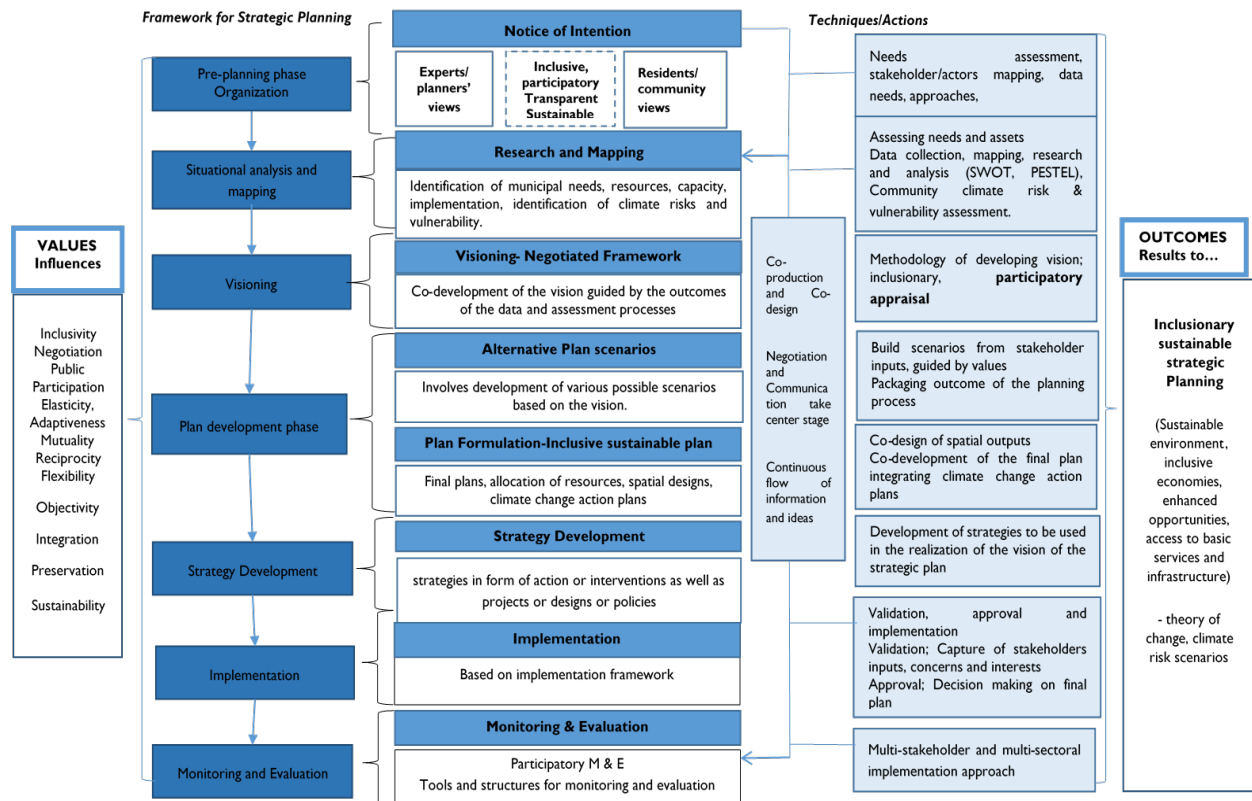


Figure 4: Strategic Planning Framework. Source: Utafiti Sera House

4.2.3. U-CODE: Urban Co-Design Tool

CSUDP in collaboration with FES and Technical University in Dresden, Germany developed an innovative co-design platform that enables communication between large numbers of people and professional experts. The tool is designed to use the public's creativity, to gauge public opinion and to derive urban design and planning ideas from the communities participating in the process. The community uses the social planning tool to collect data on the settlement and resultantly identifies the priorities of a community and ultimately translate the vision for their settlements into a 3-D design . UCODE has been applied in KMC village in Nakuru county. In the context of KMC village, about 85% of the community's members participated in the process and are now proficient in using the tools to prioritize and plan for interventions in their areas. The community from this process was also able to develop a 3D design plan for their settlement that will continuously enable them to lobby for implementation of development interventions from the government agencies. The process of implementing U-CODE is as follows.

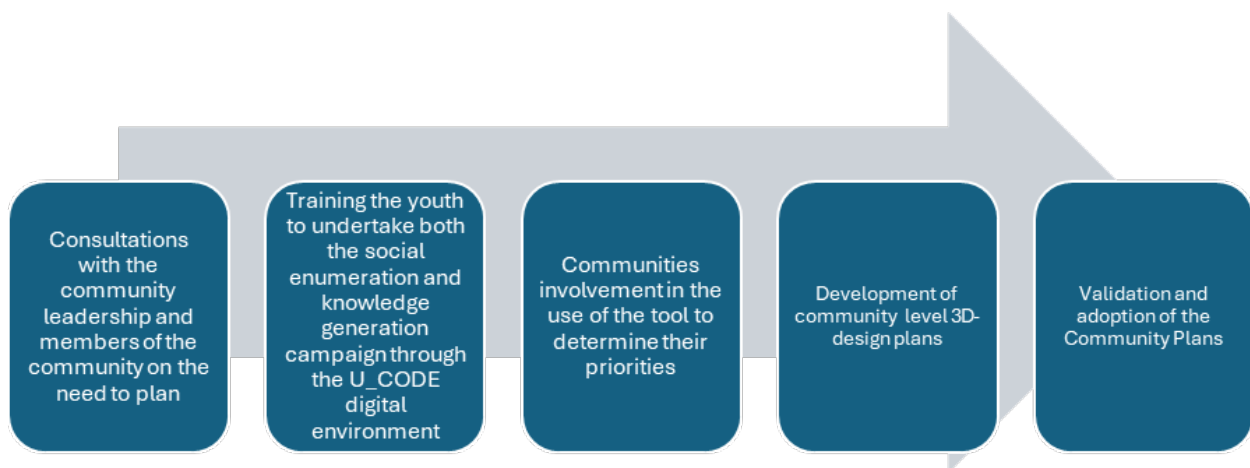


Figure 5:U-CODE implementation process. Source: Nakuru's pathway to vision 2050; A Just, Livable and Prosperous City



Photo 1 :KMC community plan. Source: Nakuru's pathway to vision 2050; A Just, Livable and Prosperous City

5. Conclusion

As demonstrated throughout this reader, social planning is not merely a participatory add on but a transformative approach that redefines how communities shape, co-own, and benefit from development. It is key that practitioners start to reflect on the planning approaches they implement and utilize local expertise to come up with practical and realistic plans that reflect the aspirations of local citizens. Social planning is a platform that allows for mutuality and reciprocity between the communities and professional and promote the view of people as active agents of change rather than passive beneficiaries.

In the Kenyan context, where informal settlements, exclusion, and governance gaps persist, social planning offers a framework for justice-oriented, inclusive, and adaptive development. Whether at the level of community-led initiatives, project interventions, or county spatial plans, its application is both urgent and possible.

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