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Inclusive Maritime Spatial Planning: Stakes at the Regional Level

Marilena Papageorgiou *, Georgia Pozoukidou, Theodora Istoriou and Theoni Kostopoulou

School of Spatial Planning and Development, Faculty of Engineering, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 54124 Thessaloniki, Greece; gpozoukid@plandevel.auth.gr (G.P.); istoriou@plandevel.auth.gr (T.I.); ttkostop@plandevel.auth.gr (T.K.)

* Correspondence: marpapageo@plandevel.auth.gr

Abstract: The paper focuses on Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) and the importance of incorporating participatory democracy and inclusivity, from a region-wise perspective. Traditionally MSP is a top-down (central government) process. Most responsibilities, competencies and jurisdictions lie at the national level, with usually limited input from local or regional stakeholders. However, the growing complexity of marine activities and the need for sustainable management of the marine environment require more inclusive and collaborative approaches. In other words, it calls for a more bottom-up approach, where local and regional stakeholders are involved in a meaningful way. Drawing on the REGINA-MSP project, the study presented in this paper identifies categories of regional and local stakeholders relevant to MSP. The paper identifies seven categories of MSP stakeholders deriving from the local communities of coastal regions. Following an in depth stakeholder analysis and mapping, fishers were identified as the ones having the lowest level of engagement and degree of representativeness in the MSP process, despite being among the most traditional marine users. The general public is also considered a "weak" MSP stakeholder. Regarding regional authorities/governments (NUTS 2 level according to the EU classification), their role and voice may also need further strengthening in the—nationally driven—MSP process. Communities of Practice is a tool that may encourage and advance participation and inclusivity in MSP, especially as regards local stakeholders of coastal regions.

Keywords: maritime spatial planning; inclusive spatial planning; participatory democracy and planning; MSP stakeholders; regions; REGINA-MSP

Citation: Papageorgiou, M.; Pozoukidou, G.; Istoriou, T.; Kostopoulou, T. Inclusive Maritime Spatial Planning: Stakes at the Regional Level. *Sustainability* **2024**, *16*, 10148. https://doi.org/10.3390/su162210148

Academic Editor: Xander Wang

Received: 30 September 2024
Revised: 17 November 2024
Accepted: 19 November 2024
Published: 20 November 2024

1. Introduction

Maritime spatial planning (MSP) is about implementing spatial planning into a special category of space, namely, the sea. Since the mid-2000s, there has been growing attention on the need to extend the geographical scope of spatial planning from the land to the sea. This shift was driven by international bodies and organisations (such as the EU, the UN, etc.), in response to the global research that highlighted the serious threats marine ecosystems face from blue growth trends [1–3]. It was also endorsed by several authors in the early 2000s [4–8]. According to the EU Directive 2014/89/EU, MSP is "*a process by which the relevant Member State's authorities analyze and organize human activities in marine areas to achieve ecological, economic and social objectives*" [9]. As a process, MSP is mainly a national and a central government affair in most countries worldwide [10–12]. In other words, MSP is mainly practised through a top-down governance approach, meaning that it is directed by the state. In this spatial planning tradition, the state acts on behalf of the society for the general public good [13,14]. Moreover, the coastal states are the ones that incorporate all international policies and guidelines related to their marine area of jurisdiction.

Lately, however, there has been growing recognition of the importance of MSP in addressing specific case needs and to consider local specificities and stakeholders and, by association, to incorporate a bottom-up approach [15–17]. The interest in exploring a bottom-up approach is understandable, given that this approach has long been introduced

in land-based spatial planning, calling for plans that are not solely based on data analysis, but also on collaborative participation that encourages meaningful citizen engagement in the planning process [14,18]. Especially with the transboundary and "open" nature of the marine environment, MSP involves a multitude of actors and stakeholders, and participatory processes should be an integral part of it. In order to achieve consensus among all sectors directly related to the sea, an appropriate system needs to be established where stakeholder participation is not limited to simply collecting comments on a completed plan, but is timely, frequent and maintained throughout the process [19]. Each stakeholder is familiar with the sector in which they operate, and for such a plan to be successful, all concerns and interests must be discussed and taken into account [19]. However, it should be noted that final decision making is a more complex matter, that depends on the regimes, powers and competencies applied in each marine area and on the spatial planning tradition in place.

This (bottom-up) approach also provides an opportunity not only for the involvement of poorly heard stakeholders to express their views and concerns but also for policymakers and implementers. to work closely and in a collaborative way with the beneficiaries [20,21]. Using a bottom-up approach in the spatial planning process also helps to advance participatory democracy. According to the Council of Europe [22] participatory democracy in spatial planning emphasises the active involvement of individuals and communities in shaping decisions that directly affect their living environments and the space they interact with. Unlike representative democracy, where elected officials make decisions on behalf of the people, participatory democracy seeks to involve citizens in the development and implementation of policies [23]. By fostering shared ownership of decisions, the aim of participatory democracy is to minimise conflicts and ensure that the general common interest prevails over individual priorities [24,25]. Participation is especially important in promoting cohesive spatial development that addresses cultural diversity and sustainability. Moreover, participatory democracy in spatial planning calls for access to information and collective learning. All participants must be well informed and equally able to engage in decision making, which strengthens their ability to contribute meaningfully [26,27].

Participatory democracy calls for active public engagement and participation that can take various forms. According to the Handbook on Territorial Democracy and Public Participation in Spatial Planning, public participation can involve constructive collaboration with planners and authorities, enriching the planning process, but may also include negative reactions against proposed plans. The effectiveness of participation is evaluated differently by each participant, based on their initial objectives. Ideally, public participation should balance effectiveness and democracy, ensuring outcomes that satisfy as many stakeholders as possible. To achieve consensus among competing interest groups, planning authorities must develop new strategies and techniques [23,26]. Specifically, the use of new technologies and deliberative techniques allows for a more inclusive and reflective process, ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered [24,25]. In this democratic framework, planners act as facilitators, ensuring fairness and transparency. By integrating public involvement throughout the entire planning process, from conception to implementation and evaluation, participatory democracy not only improves the quality of decision making but also reinforces the legitimacy and sustainability of spatial policies [28].

Furthermore, participatory democracy is directly linked to the concept of inclusivity, a relatively new concept in spatial planning (e.g., [29–31]). In the spatial discourse, inclusivity refers to the right of citizens to equally enjoy and have access to all urban amenities, primarily in close proximity to their place of residence [21,32,33]. However, through the lenses of participatory democracy, inclusivity can also relate to governance and the level of stakeholder participation and involvement in the planning process [34,35]. Indeed, the European Charter on Participatory Democracy [27], highlights the need for inclusive, transparent processes where all voices are heard, allowing people to express their concerns and needs. Nevertheless, even though there are many tools (e.g., workshops, questionnaires, interviews, etc.) to collect stakeholders' views during the planning pro-

cess, and some methodologies on how to achieve advanced participatory democracy and develop stakeholder engagement (e.g., [36,37]), research in the context of MSP has yet to be conducted.

Considering the above, this paper addresses the issues of participatory democracy and inclusivity in maritime spatial planning (MSP). While these elements have been studied more systematically in terrestrial planning [23,27,32,38,39], particularly at the local scale such as urban planning, this paper shifts the focus from the national to the regional/sub-national level (NUTS2 level according to the EU classification). In doing so, it challenges the hitherto top-down approach that most countries worldwide have conceived and implemented in MSP [11,12].

The paper presents part of the outcomes of the EU-co-funded REGINA-MSP project, which explored ways to boost the role of regions and regional stakeholders and to strengthen their voices in nationally driven and top-down MSP processes. The outcomes presented here explicitly focus on MSP stakeholders deriving from the local communities of coastal regions. Following a project-wise methodology (presented in Section 3), Section 4 defines the spectrum of relevant MSP stakeholders at the regional level, and critically discusses issues regarding their interest and power in the MSP process. Going one step further, Section 4 also places emphasis on the "weak" regional MSP stakeholders. It identifies these stakeholders and critically discusses their weaknesses. The aim of the paper is to contribute to the debate on MSP and how this relatively new process can keep pace with terrestrial spatial planning in terms of participation and inclusiveness, especially at the regional scale.

2. About the REGINA—MSP Project—Objective and Tasks Related to Regional Stakeholders

REGINA-MSP ("Regions to boost National Maritime Spatial Planning") is a two-year project (November 2022 to October 2024) co-funded by the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFAF). The overall objective of the research project was to provide solutions and guidelines on how to boost the role of regions in their countries' MSP decision-making and implementation processes, drawing from the fact that in most EU countries MSP is a nationally driven process and a central government affair.

Eight (8) study regions were used in the project (Figure 1), deriving from five (5) EU countries (France, Spain, Italy, Greece and Ireland). The consortium of the project included 8 main partners and 2 associated ones, namely: Centre d'études et d'expertise sur les risques, l'environement, la mobilité et l'aménagment (CEREMA, FR), Service hydrographique et océanographique de la marine (SHOM, FR), Agencia Estatal/Consejo superior de investigaciones científicas (CSIC, ES), University College Cork (UCC, IR), Consorzio per il coordinamento delle ricerche inerenti al Sistema lagunare di Venezia (CORILA, IT—with two affiliates partners: Consiglio nationale delle ricerche -CNR- and Università IUAV di Venezia), Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences (PUSPS, GR) and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH, GR).

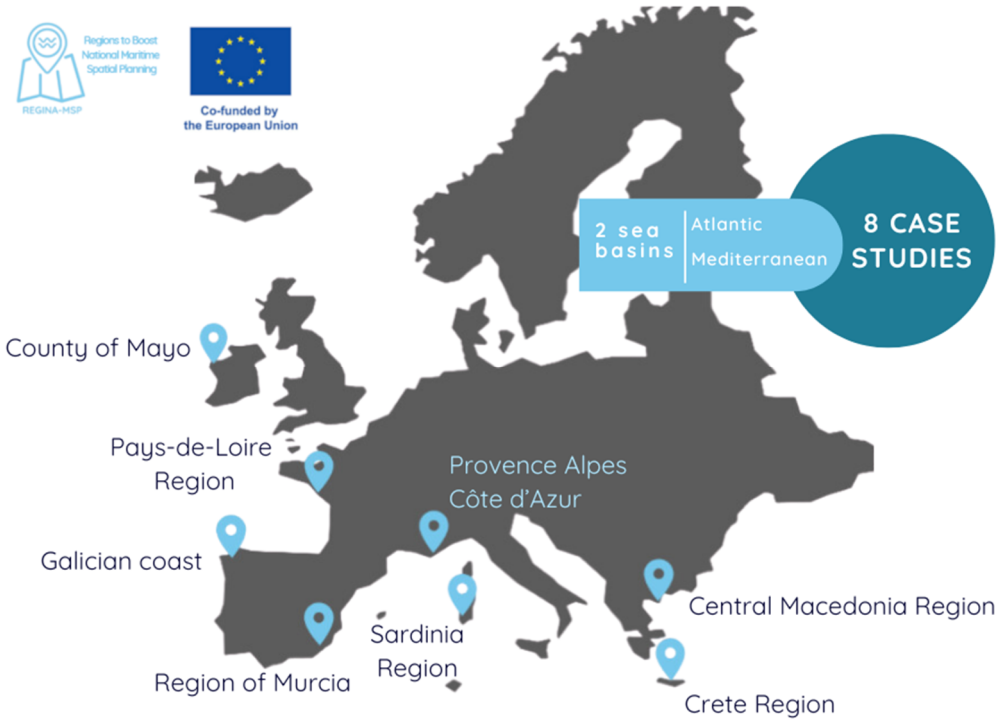

Figure 1. REGINA-MSP case study regions—NUTS 2 level EU classification (Source: REGINA-MSP 2022–2024 [40]).

Among the many tasks that were undertaken in the project, two were specifically dedicated to thoroughly addressing the engagement of local and regional stakeholders in MSP. The first task focused on mobilising stakeholders at the (sub)regional level, with a series of local workshops organised in each of the participating regions. The second task employed the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP). (A Community of Practice (CoP), as defined by Andringa and Reyn [41], "*is a meeting place where professionals share analyses, inform and advise each other and develop new practices [. . .]. A CoP goes further than communities of interest and informal networks because it has a collective task*". Moreover, "*A CoP may emerge 'bottom-up' from a problem perceived by marine stakeholders or experts, or more 'top-down' as a conscious attempt to create new linkages between disconnected actors. It may also emerge from a mix of both. . .*" [42]. In the context of MSP, CoPs can be used as a means of improving knowledge sharing among authorities and specialists to strengthen the integration of the opinions and concerns of stakeholders). This concept was used as a means to build and advance transnational and cross-regional cooperation among regions and regional stakeholders at the EU level and beyond. The implementation of the second task was led by the AUTH team. For this task, three successive and interlinked international workshops were conducted (in Greece, Spain and France) (Figure 1). The target audience of these workshops included mainly representatives from coastal (regional and local) authorities participating in the REGINA-MSP project, but also from regions beyond. Additionally, where possible, efforts were made to include less heard and poorly represented stakeholders in the MSP debates.

The structure and topics of each workshop followed an interlinked and sequential process, with each session, and then each workshop, building upon the findings and discussions of the preceding one. This continuous approach ensured a coherent progression of ideas, allowing for deeper exploration of the research themes over time, while the tools utilised throughout the international workshops were carefully distributed across the sessions. To ensure ethical compliance and transparency, all workshop participants provided informed consent before participation. The consent process outlined the objectives and purpose of the workshops, as well as the tasks and tools involved. Participants were assured of confidentiality and participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time.

3. Methodology and Tools Employed

As mentioned in the previous Section, the research performed by the AUTh team regarded a regional MSP stakeholders analysis, with a particular focus on the "weak" ones, who for the purposes of this study (REGINA-MSP project, 2022–2024 [40]) were considered those "*who are not organised strongly at a national and European levels and thus, who do not benefit from experience sharing and are poorly heard in MSP debate and consultation*". The research used selected methods, tools, and processes that were implemented before and during the three international workshops presented in Figure 2. Figure 3 presents the methodological steps and tools used in the framework of the three international workshops.

18–20 October 2023 Thessaloniki, Central Macedonia (Greece)	***"The need for a cross-regional CoP in MSP"*** **Aim:** Addressing the intricate nature of multi-level governance and the need for increased participatory democracy in MSP as well as the value for the regions in joining a CoP that will help boost their role in national MSP.
6–8 February 2024 Vigo, Galicia (Spain)	***"Simulation of a cross-regional MSP CoP"*** **Aim:** Focusing on the simulation of a CoP among Regions providing them with tools to determine the necessary elements required for the establishment of a CoP alongside the opportunity to further understand its inner workings through a specific topic.
19–21 March 2024 Nantes, Pays de la Loire (France)	***"Drafting a roadmap for a cross-regional CoP"*** **Aim:** Formulating a roadmap for an inclusive, cross-regional and structured CoP that would assist in overcoming obstacles related to the participation of MSP stakeholders (deriving from coastal regions).

Figure 2. The structure and topics of the three (3) international workshops dedicated to the emergence of a cross-regional MSP Community of Practice (Source: processed by the authors).

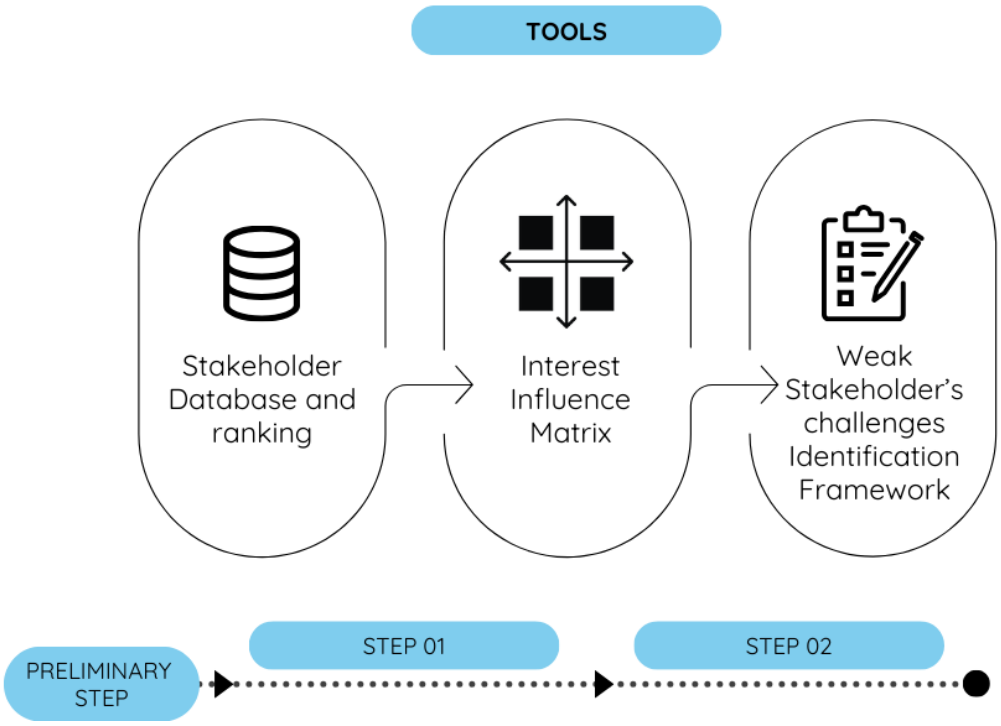

Figure 3. Steps and tools used for stakeholder identification (Source: processed by the authors).

Before taking the main methodological steps of the research, a preliminary step was necessary. This (preliminary) step included compiling a list of local stakeholders deriving from the 8 coastal regions participating in the REGINA-MSP project. This list was prepared by the case study leaders, who were instructed to classify stakeholders from their coastal regions into broad categories based on their roles and relevance to the MSP process (for more info see Section 4.1). These lists were also put to the test during the workshops, for feedback both on the broad categories introduced and on the degree of stakeholders' inclusiveness.

As regards the main methodological steps used throughout the international workshops, these are as follows:

STEP 1: Stakeholder analysis: This analysis consisted of i. the creation of stakeholder databases, ii. the ranking of stakeholders according to their engagement and representation during the planning process, and iii. the mapping of stakeholders with the use of a power and interest matrix (Figure 4). In this step, Tools 1 and 2 were used (see below).

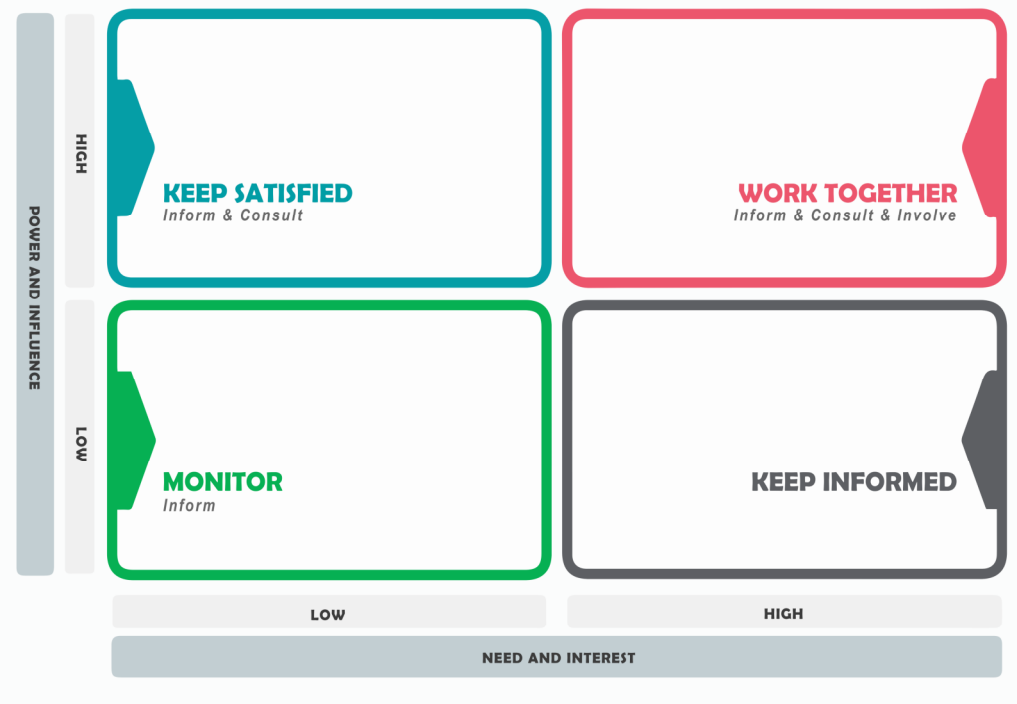

Figure 4. Interest–influence matrix template as used in the cross-regional workshops (Source: [42]).

STEP 2: Identification and engagement of poorly heard stakeholders: Building on the results from the previous matrix, this step focused on the stakeholders with low power. These stakeholders were identified and further examined by the participants through an identification framework (Figure 5), which guided them to reflect on the type of weaknesses and the reasons for the limited representation of these groups in MSP processes. In this step, Tool 3 was used (see below).

As regards the tools that were utilised during the workshops and throughout the two abovementioned steps, these are as follows:

TOOL 1—Stakeholder database and ranking: A Stakeholder Database was used first. It refers to a document containing all stakeholder information across the different pre-established categories [43]. Here, it consisted of an organised collection of information about authorities, groups, and organisations involved in or affected by MSP, created by each participating region. The tracking of stakeholders' interests, influence and contact details in the database can aid in promoting effective communication, engagement and management, while supporting inclusive and informed decision making [43]. Building on the stakeholder database created by the partners from each participating region, participants were also asked to perform an initial stakeholder classification [44]. In essence, MSP stakeholders

were ranked on a scale from 1 to 3 according to their degree of representation and level of engagement in MSP.

Cross-regional workshops
for the emergence of a Community of Practice (CoP)
Task 4.3

2nd CROSS-REGIONAL REGINA-MSP WORKSHOP
Vigo, 6- 8 February 2024
Simulation of a cross-regional MSP Community of Practice (CoP)
Session 2. "Building a CoP: Community – Who?"

Task 3: Identification of MSP weak stakeholders based on the CoP topic(s) selected in Session I

Group	
Weak Stakeholder	
Please explain briefly (in bullet points): Why is this stakeholder selected, why the stakeholder is important to the CoP and why does their underrepresentation affect the CoP	

Rate the following ASPECTS based on your perception of each stakeholder's challenges/barriers to engage in the MSP process – using stickers in red, yellow, and green

1. Communication and access to information **Communication:** The format of communication is important for exchanging information and knowledge between stakeholders and decision-makers. **Access to information:** Stakeholders may not have adequate information in an appropriate format and language, using concepts that they understand about the policy, the process, or the substantive issues to participate effectively.	
Direct communication with the national MSP competent authority and the decision-makers	
Indirect communication with the national MSP competent authority and the decision-makers through other channels	
Communication with the regional authority	
Access to information about MSP (in general)	
Access to information about maritime spatial Plan when drafted	
Language barriers (technical or other)	
Other:	

Cross-regional workshops
for the emergence of a Community of Practice (CoP)
Task 4.3

2. Capacity Stakeholders may not have the knowledge, understanding, and skills for effective participation either as individuals or as representatives.	
Sea/ocean literacy	
Know-how in MSP issues	
Computer literacy	
Alliances/Networks with other stakeholders	
Other:	
3. Technology Stakeholders may lack access to technology and tools.	
Access to PC/computer/materials	
Access to online tools and platforms	
Other:	
4. Resources Stakeholders may not have adequate financial and other resources to engage in consultations.	
Financial resources	
Human resources (number of members, experts among the members)	
Formal/legal recognition of the stakeholder	
Other:	
5. Other Challenges (please indicate if there are other challenges not mentioned above and peculiar to the stakeholder examined)	

Figure 5. Identification framework of the challenges/barriers of weak stakeholders.

TOOL 2—Interest–influence matrix: The second tool used (Figure 4) was for stakeholder mapping. This strategic framework assesses stakeholders based on their power to influence a process and their level of interest in its outcomes [45]. A map template was provided, and the participants categorised the stakeholders identified via previous tools. Four categories emerge: (a) stakeholders with high power and high interest, they are likely to be decision-makers and have the biggest impact; (b) stakeholders with high power and low interest; while they may not be interested in the outcome, they possess power or authority, so it is important to maintain their satisfaction; (c) stakeholders with low power and high interest, they may lack power but hold a strong interest and can often be very helpful; and (d) stakeholders with low power and low interest, they exhibit limited interest but keeping them informed enhances transparency [43,45,46]. The "weak" stakeholders are part of the two latter categories.

TOOL 3—Identification framework: As a third tool, an identification framework in the form of a questionnaire was used to be filled out in groups. This framework included both closed-ended and open-ended prompts along with a colour rating section [47]. The objective was to explore further the challenges and barriers faced by the "weak" and least heard regional stakeholders, following their identification, and to gain deeper insights into the factors limiting their engagement in MSP processes.

All workshop inputs were analysed qualitatively, to gain a comprehensive understanding of participant perspectives. These insights were documented in internal project reports [48–50], with each report providing a detailed summary of the discussions and findings.

Based on the abovementioned, Section 4 presents the outputs of the research methodology and the international workshops, focusing on identifying key participants in the MSP debates and participatory processes. It highlights the inclusion of "weak" stakeholders and strategies to keep them engaged and informed about MSP in their local seas.

4. Results

4.1. Who Should Participate in MSP—Focus on the Regional Stakeholders

According to the Directive 2014/89/EU for establishing a framework for Maritime Spatial Planning, "*the management of marine areas is complex and involves different levels of authorities, economic operators and other stakeholders. In order to promote sustainable development in an effective manner, it is essential that stakeholders, authorities and the public be consulted at an appropriate stage in the preparation of maritime spatial plans [. . .]*" [9]. A key challenge in this issue is that for many years, the research on inclusiveness in MSP was focused on identifying suitable participants, rather than understanding how they could be integrated into a successful participatory process and how their engagement could enhance the process [38]. Moreover, stakeholder theory is a combination of diverse perspectives derived from various interpretations and applications in fields, such as business ethics and corporate social responsibility, strategic management, corporate governance and finance [44]. Recently, it has become increasingly prevalent in the field of environmental governance and particularly in maritime spatial planning [51].

Pomeroy and Rivera-Guieb [52] defined stakeholders in marine spatial planning as "*individuals, groups or organizations of people who are interested, involved or affected (positively or negatively) by marine and coastal resources use and management*". In the same study, a broad range of stakeholders involved in MSP were identified and classified into four distinct groups. The first group consists of resource users, like fishers, community-based fisher groups, and oil and gas exploiters [52,53]. The second group encompasses government stakeholders across multiple levels, including international, national, regional and local authorities [52,53]. The third and fourth groups include other stakeholders and change agents. The category of other stakeholders involves civil society members, equipment builders, community members, boat owners/builders, fish traders, businesspeople or community-based groups [52,53]. Finally, change agents such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academic and research institutions, development agencies and donors play a significant role. These actors are seen as catalysts for change, serving as intermediaries between communities and external institutions, including governments, the general public and businesses [52]. In short, Pomeroy and Rivera-Guieb [52] introduced a series of criteria to distinguish between different types of stakeholders that included their existing rights to marine and coastal resources, the continuity of relationship with the resource (e.g., comparing resident fishers with migratory fishers), the degree of economic and social reliance on the resources, the compatibility of the interests and activities of the stakeholders, as well as the present or potential impact of the activities of the stakeholders on the resource base.

Following a similar approach, Twomey and O'Mahony [51] formed three general categories of stakeholders in MSP and marine governance. These include government decision-makers at various levels (such as ministries, state agencies, municipalities and local government), commercial or industry stakeholders representing key marine sectors operating in the area, and civil-society stakeholders consisting of the research community, citizen and community-based organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and conservation groups.

Building on these foundational approaches, the study behind this paper places emphasis on the identification of MSP stakeholders, deriving from coastal communities and regions. As argued in the introductive Section, the reason behind this focus relates to the fact that successful implementation of national MSP depends on the acceptance of regional/local governments, stakeholders and communities. This focus is also critical, if a bottom-up approach needs to be adopted, in favour of more participatory democracy and inclusiveness in MSP. After a comprehensive stakeholder analysis and mapping, seven overarching categories were established, ensuring consistency at the top level across all case study regions, along with specific subcategories (Figure 6):

1. Public Sector referring to (a) central government operating at a national level, (b) central government operating at a regional level and (c) local governments (regional authorities and municipalities).

2. Research and Educational institutions operating at a regional level including (a) Research Institutions, (b) Universities and (c) Technology and Innovation Centres.
3. Local Port Authorities.
4. Private sector and Professionals such as (a) Associations/Federations, and (b) Companies/professionals of the maritime sector.
5. Non-governmental organisations and societies, environmental associations and foundations.
6. Informal groups of citizens.
7. The general public.

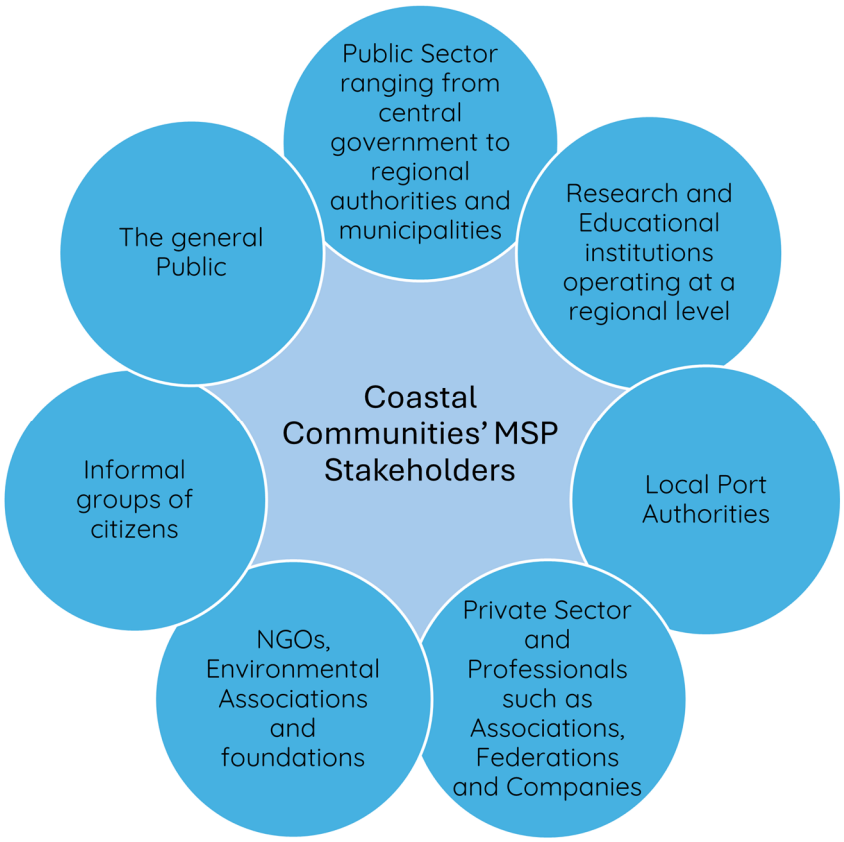

Figure 6. MSP Stakeholder groups from a regional perspective, Source: (REGINA-MSP 2022–2024 [40]).

Following the in-depth stakeholder analysis performed in this research, the private marine sectors of aquaculture, maritime tourism, maritime transport and fishing were considered the most important fields for stakeholder participation in MSP. The working groups observed that the involvement and representation of different stakeholder groups in the MSP process are significantly influenced by their operational scale or liability area, whether national, regional or local. Moreover, the willingness of all the stakeholders' categories to participate in MSP affairs is greatly influenced by the legal form and profile of the stakeholder (i.e., regional/local government, associations, NGOs). One factor that became apparent during the workshops is that MSP tends to be nationally driven, thus limiting discussions at the regional level.

The above outcomes of the research are fully aligned with the existing literature. Often included groups are commercial and recreational fishing, aquaculture, shipping, marine protected areas (MPAs) and energy production [19]. For this reason, part of the stakeholder analysis is to identify all the key stakeholders with an interest in the planning and management of the maritime environment and classify them as primary, secondary or tertiary stakeholders according to their stake in the area or its resources [19,54]. While the involvement of diverse stakeholders is crucial for effective MSP, challenges such as

conflicting interests and governance fragmentation can complicate the planning process. Effective stakeholders' participation can also be severely undermined in the case of insular communities and areas of management [17], as well as in cases of transboundary MSP initiatives, where stakeholders may derive from different countries and/or also from international bodies.

In short, the research results highlighted the importance of mapping and analysing local communities of coastal regions. These steps are crucial for MSP, as they involve reevaluating traditional categories of exclusion and hard-to-reach groups, while considering the interactions of all community groups with MSP-related initiatives. In addition, mapping stakeholders provides an opportunity to identify the most relevant community members, providing key insights to shape the MSP priorities in the regions.

4.2. Identifying the "Weak" Regional MSP Stakeholders

Inclusiveness and active involvement are essential in MSP to create support from the community, promote justice, incorporate local knowledge, foster a sense of ownership, ensure transparency and trust, develop connections, enhance skills and increase understanding of environmental concerns [55,56]. The degree of stakeholder participation and public engagement regarding the task at hand may vary in MSP. It can range from providing information and conducting standard consultation processes with opportunities for feedback, to direct involvement in decision making and implementation [57]. Thus, it is crucial to timely answer questions of why, who, how and when to include stakeholders in MSP to enhance the process [58]. When designing participation processes, it is essential to carefully consider both the equity of representation and the equity of impact [59].

However, in any participation process, there are inherent power dynamics and imbalances that can be reinforced if they are not taken into account, perpetuating existing group dynamics and marginalisation [58,59]. Bonnevie et al. [58] argue that MSP has received criticism for its tendency to legitimise undemocratic goals set by powerful, politically favoured groups instead of involving stakeholders in actual decision making. Social aspects are often overlooked in favour of economic values and power with less attention to certain ecological considerations [56]; therefore, stakeholders like small-scale fisheries, local communities, indigenous groups and environmental organisations are often identified as weak stakeholders in MSP.

Building on the above considerations, this study attempted to identify "weak" stakeholders located in coastal regions. In the framework of this research (REGINA-MSP, 2022–2024 [40]) weak stakeholders were considered those "*who are not organised strongly at a national and European levels and thus, who do not benefit from experience sharing and are poorly heard in MSP debate and consultation*". Following this, among the different types of stakeholders located in coastal regions, three stakeholders were found to be less heard in the MSP debates and consultation:

1. Fishermen are among the sea users facing significant pressure and losses due to the growing competition for maritime space from an increasing number of marine activities. Despite their long-standing role as traditional marine users, fishers are often underrepresented in MSP processes, having limited involvement and representation.
2. The general public seems to be among the less heard groups in MSP. However, it was widely acknowledged that local communities and citizens could offer valuable resources for gaining a deeper understanding of the local marine areas through citizen science, and their expectations and needs can be incorporated into maritime spatial plans.
3. Regional governments/authorities in many countries experience modest involvement in MSP. There are, however, some exceptions where robust MSP consultations occur, mainly in countries with autonomous regions in terms of administrative power. Consequently, there is a keen interest among coastal regional and local governments in enhancing their engagement in national MSP and participating in the decision making concerning their local seas.

Overall, the challenges and obstacles faced by the least heard and underrepresented stakeholders seem to revolve around three specific issues. The first pertains to the channels of communication and access to information. These stakeholders face further challenges due to the limited access to relevant information and language barriers, which exacerbate their difficulties in participating effectively. Additionally, navigating complex bureaucratic processes and understanding technical details often prove overwhelming for many, further impeding their involvement in MSP processes. The second issue relates to the capacity of stakeholders, as many, especially the "weak" ones, lack MSP expertise. The third issue concerns resource availability. Many stakeholders often lack the financial and human resources necessary to participate in MSP, further hindered by limited access to essential technology and tools. To facilitate the effective engagement of underrepresented stakeholders in MSP, addressing these three key factors is crucial to ensure meaningful participation in all stages of the MSP process.

Finally, the active involvement of fishers in MSP is critical, as it helps preserve traditional fishing methods that embody local knowledge, cultural values, and sustainable practices [60,61]. Similarly, involving regional and local governments is essential to achieve successful implementation of national MSP as well as acceptance of regional/local governments, stakeholders and communities. This focus is also critical, if a bottom-up approach needs to be adopted, in favour of more participatory democracy and inclusiveness in MSP. In general, including "weak" and less-heard stakeholders in MSP processes is vital to ensure their concerns are considered in the planning and management of sea and coastal zones.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Maritime spatial planning is mainly a national and a central government affair in most countries worldwide. Therefore, exploring a region-wise approach in MSP was original and significant. Having this focus, the REGINA-MSP project and the study presented in this paper challenged the top-down governance and planning approach of MSP and placed emphasis on the regional scale and on the subnational level.

Adopting a region-specific approach in MSP is critical. It builds upon the growing need for a bottom-up and a multi-scalar approach in MSP. Bottom-up approaches have significantly enhanced spatial planning by fostering community-driven, inclusive processes that prioritise local needs. For example, following the earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, residents were engaged through participatory design methods to envision a rebuilt city that would reflect community values and aspirations. Accessible workshops and public discussions encouraged citizens to contribute ideas and learn from the experiences of similar cities, leading to a recovery plan with 70 projects rooted in local priorities [62,63]. Similarly, research by Mens et al. [64] highlights the effectiveness of bottom-up planning in the Netherlands, where community involvement created more substantial impacts than traditional top-down approaches. By leveraging policy opportunities and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders, the participatory methods used in these case studies contribute to innovative spatial planning solutions that benefit multiple actors, influence municipal policies and encourage sustainable partnerships for shared goals.

An example of how a bottom-up approach in the marine management context was more successful than the initial top-down approach can be found in Chile. As described in Gaymer et al. [65], the Motu Motiro Hiva Marine Park (MMHMP) was entirely created with a top-down approach (by NGOs, scientists and the Chilean Parliament and Government) with no consultation from the local stakeholders and communities. This made the implementation of the MPAs' plans impossible as the local communities and stakeholders felt overlooked. To solve the issue, a different approach (with heavy consultation and training) was followed, resulting in full acceptance by the communities and their active participation in the implementation of the plan.

Adopting a bottom-up approach in MSP is critical for another reason. It works in favour of participatory democracy and inclusiveness, which are key objectives and parameters in spatial planning. It also works in favour of promoting citizen science

and addressing the data gaps related to the marine space. According to the REGINA-MSP project (and parallel research that addressed data gaps at the regional level) [66] inconsistencies in the MSP data regarded mainly maritime safety (such as surveillance and security) and data that concern the location and corridors of certain species (benthic, birds, megafauna, etc.), boat anchorage locations, and small fleet and recreational boat spatial distribution. Most of these data are hard to find in geoportals. However, they usually constitute knowledge that is acquired by local and regional stakeholders, especially the "weak" and less-heard ones in the MSP process.

Having this in mind, the research presented in this paper, placed emphasis on regional stakeholders (deriving from the local communities of coastal regions), arguing that their involvement in the MSP process is crucial as they can ensure that local needs and specificities will be addressed. This guarantees, in turn, the successful implementation of a maritime spatial plan. Involving regions and local stakeholders and communities is of great importance and has long been practiced in the terrestrial spatial planning processes. In the sea, however, the groups of coastal communities and stakeholders significantly differ from the ones in land-based spatial planning. Local and regional stakeholders affected by MSP derive solely from insular and coastal communities. More or less, they fall into the same stakeholder categories as in terrestrial spatial planning. However, they have never engaged collectively in participatory processes that directly affect their daily lives and communities. Moreover, certain key MSP stakeholders (e.g., fishers, aquaculture farmers etc.) were usually excluded from land-based planning participatory procedures for being non-relevant (stakeholders). As a result, they usually have low experience in participatory procedures. Also in the case of MSP, it is very common for local communities to have to respect rules deriving from international bodies and institutions.

Examples of international management bodies and institutions include the IMO (setting navigation rules and specific protection zones such as the PSSAs, the MAR Special Areas, etc.), the UN (which, beyond the UNCLOS, sets rules through the designation of EBSAs, etc.), etc. Moreover, depending on the region/basin, more international requirements may exist from the same of other institutions. In the European seas, for example, such requirements derive from the ICCAT for the large pelagic species in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, the GFCM for fisheries in the Mediterranean, the ACCOBAMS and SPAMIs for the marine mammals, etc.

Identifying and engaging all relevant stakeholders affected by MSP is a new task for all coastal communities and regions. However, another important task is to reach and engage the "weak" and less-heard regional MSP stakeholders. According to the results of the research presented in this paper, the stakeholders falling into this category are fishers, although they constitute the most traditional users of the marine space, and great experts in citizen science related to sea matters. On the other hand, as regards regional and local authorities (the other weak stakeholder identified), they can play the intermediary between central government decision-making centres and local communities. This is why it is very important to advance their MSP knowledge base and to involve them even more in marine governance and MSP participatory procedures. Moreover, regional and local authorities are already experienced in participating in land-based spatial governance schemes and participation procedures. This can be repeated in the case of MSP. For example, they can be permanent members of official MSP consultation schemes, ad hoc MSP Committees, or permanent MSP Committees. They can also initiate participatory procedures in their region.

Having as an objective to boost the role of regions and advance participatory democracy and inclusiveness in MSP at the regional level, the REGINA-MSP project also explored the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP). As a concept (and a tool), it is newly practised; therefore, existing experience is minimal. Very few MSP CoPs exist (e.g., the MED-MSP CoP for the Mediterranean, the eMSP CoP for the Baltic Sea and the North Sea). Given their recent establishment, it is too early for them to serve as case studies or consider them as pilots. However, a common expectation is that Communities of Practice can prove beneficial at the regional level, boosting the role of regions and local communities in MSP.

These CoPs can be cross-regional at the national level (i.e., among regions within the same country, sharing the same sea and being part of the same maritime spatial plan). They can also be cross-regional at the international level (i.e., among regions across different countries that either share a common international border or not). Promoting international and cross-border cooperation among regions is essential, and CoPs can probably serve this objective.

Finally, with the use of tools like stakeholder mapping, workshops and the creation of CoPs, the project demonstrated the potential for coastal regions to take a more active role in shaping the future of marine environments. By addressing communication barriers and building capacity and ensuring access to resources, MSP processes can evolve into more democratic frameworks, empowering regions and communities to contribute meaningfully to maritime spatial planning and marine policy development.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization and supervision, M.P.; methodology, formal analysis, resources, writing—original draft preparation and writing—review and editing, M.P., G.P., T.I. and T.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research presents outcomes deriving from the EU REGINA-MSP project, which was co-funded by the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund—EMFAF (GA number nº 101081219).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The survey that was conducted was part of international workshops carried out as part of an EU research project. It was not a separate task. The authors confirm that all procedures performed in this study followed the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. As far as our Institution is concerned, it has listed this EU project among those not subject to IRB approval.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study after the research procedure and objectives of the study were explained in simple, clear language. Participants were reassured that the data collected would be confidential and would be used for research purposes only. It was clearly explained that participation in this study was voluntary, and the participant had the right to withdraw at any time without any deprivation. Precautions for COVID-19 were taken. Any measure for personal data protection was also taken according to DPO instructions.

Data Availability Statement: The results presented in this paper are based on qualitative research, questionnaires and other material that was handed out during the workshops of the project. The filled-in material is included in three project reports that are not publicly available. No statistical analysis was performed.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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