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Supporting Local Implementation of the European Green Deal through a Place-Based, Participatory Approach: Methodology for a Comprehensive Analytical Framework

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Abstract: With the launch of the European Green Deal (EGD) in 2019, the European Union aims to become a global leader in the ecological transition. To implement sustainable policies at the local level, a place-based, analytical approach is a necessary prerequisite to understanding territorial specificities and adapting the EGD challenges to local conditions and opportunities. Moreover, the research acknowledges the key role of public participation and, thus, the need to construct innovative policies that involve citizens in this process. On this basis, our primary goal was to create a comprehensive, multipurpose, and non-context-specific analytical framework that could support ecological transition policies within the EGD through a place-based, participatory approach. After outlining the major features of the EGD and the place-based approach, this paper describes the steps that were taken to define the framework and select the types of data to be used. In response to the scarcity of methods adaptable to different scales, contexts, purposes, and target groups, we built upon the current studies on sustainability assessments and developed a novel analytical framework for territories ranging from municipalities to nations. This study suggests that a comprehensive, multidimensional territorial analysis—which can interpret and communicate environmental, socio-economic, and institutional specificities of territories—is decisive for bringing together local administrations and citizens, as well as meeting the challenges posed by sustainable development.

Keywords: transition pathways; citizen participation; European diversity; just transition; analytical framework

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1. Introduction

The European Green Deal (hereafter EGD), which was launched in 2019, will be one of the most important challenges for all member states in the coming decades. In her presentation speech of this new EU project, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, stressed the importance of citizen engagement as a foundation for change. In fact, when dealing with environmental issues, participation is not just an option but an absolute pre-condition for institutional policies and project success [1–3]. Moreover, behavioural change in the lifestyles and expectations of large populations is vital to the implementation of the EGD. A consensus on adopted measures has proven to be indispensable for actively involving all stakeholders in this effort [4,5].

As a result of this awareness, some of the latest calls for Horizon 2020 (H2020) research and innovation projects focus specifically on strengthening citizen engagement methods in choices regarding transition paths envisaged in the EGD. Within this framework, the PHOENIX project, which is funded by H2020 and coordinated by the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, developed the reflections and methodologies presented in this article. The project is based on the acknowledgement that long-standing participatory processes and refined deliberative methodologies are effective tools; however, they are not sufficient when it comes to achieving the most ambitious objectives regarding

ecological transition patterns. Careful attention is needed to tailor and adapt negotiations with local communities and stakeholders in various national and local circumstances with specific natural, socio-cultural, and economic contexts. Based on these premises, the main objective of the PHOENIX project is to enhance the ability of democratic innovations [6] to address challenges posed by the EGD and its key strategy is to build ad hoc processes for specific contexts while respecting their specificities. The project is trialing participatory and deliberative processes in eleven pilot areas on a national, regional, or local level in various European countries. EU policies are increasingly asserting the need to apply a place-based approach to contemporary challenges, particularly those imposed by the ecological transition process [7–9].

As stressed by Turnheim et al., "effective governance of transitions needs to be appreciative of complexity, uncertainty, emergence, and asymmetries of power, it needs to mobilise deep analysis and timely data, and involve a broad variety of actors in processes of learning, experimentation, and adaptive adjustment as new facts and perspectives become available" [10] (p. 240). In fact, the sustainable transition poses not only a significant social challenge but also a serious analytical challenge, as these complex transformations have an impact on many areas (ecological, economic, social, technological, etc.), take place as a result of a continuous struggle by actors regarding political goals and tools [11], and are influenced by multiple policies at the same time. Therefore, a preliminary phase of analysis is essential to depict the tangible and intangible features that contribute to either constraining or enabling possible pathways towards sustainability. Although preliminary assessments concerning sustainability have become increasingly common in recent decades [12–14], a review of the existing literature revealed a trend, which is partly due to the progressive sectionalisation and specialisation of geographical and regional studies, in establishing analysis methods that focus on scales, contexts, and specific topics [15–19]. Assuming that this tendency does not benefit the diffusion of such analysis methods, as it makes the adaptation to diverse settings and purposes more difficult, this research adopted a different approach. Building upon the existing research on sustainability assessments and territorial analyses, our primary goal was to create a comprehensive, multipurpose, and non-context-specific analytical framework. More specifically, we developed a methodology to define an analytical framework that could support ecological transition policies within the EGD through a place-based, participatory approach.

In doing so, we answered the following two questions: (1) "What features should an analytical framework have to support the development of place-based, participatory policies for an effective implementation of the EGD?" and (2) "How can the creation of this analytical framework be reconciled with the diversity of European contexts and their specific characteristics?". In 2022, a PHOENIX research group coordinated by the University of Florence designed a novel framework to address these issues, and the methods and results of which are presented below.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the EGD framework; Section 3 outlines the place-based approach and its potential for implementing the ecological transition; Section 4 explores the existing literature on sustainability assessments and the methods to evaluate local sustainable pathways; Section 5 describes the methodology used by the project consortium to structure the analytical framework; Section 6 presents the results; Section 7 discusses implications regarding current academic debate and provides some inputs on EGD implementation; and Section 8 draws several conclusions and briefly outlines possible suggestions for future research.

2. The EGD: A European Strategy for the Ecological Transition

The EGD foresees a change of the current development paradigm aiming to transform Europe into the first climate neutral continent by 2050 [20]. Building on the recognition of the devastating impact of climate change that led to the Paris agreement in 2015, the EGD offers an opportunity to separate development from the use of resources by focusing on clean technologies [21]. Despite this background, it is important to recall that the EU's

climate policy is by no means recent. It had already developed a greater awareness of resource management in the late 1970s. However, it only established an effective strategy to reduce emissions and increase energy efficiency in 1991. Moreover, measurable targets were not set until 1997, when industrialised countries accepted the common challenge of reducing emissions of several greenhouse gases through the Kyoto Protocol [22].

While there is no doubt that this change of perspective is a unique opportunity for the EU to position itself globally as the most significant innovator in the green sector [23,24], the policy does contain several grey areas that are now being criticised, particularly by numerous recently launched environmental movements that are denouncing the political and administrative inertia regarding these issues. The first key issue is the lack of questioning of the capitalist development model, which is based on unequal relations [25] and hardly compatible with one of the transition's key objectives, namely "leave no one behind". Two other key issues are the risk that environmental inequality [26] will increase both among and within EU member states and the concern about the greenwashing phenomenon [27]. Moreover, the Just Transition Mechanism, which should reconcile the wide diversity of European contexts, remains unconvincing and the limits of EU cooperation with other countries have been revealed by the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Despite all this, the EGD to date, with all its limitations, is the only hope of successfully combating climate change. It is also important to note that the setback caused by the pandemic was followed by a phase in which the recovery plans of EU member states embraced some of the ecological and energy transition objectives proposed by the EGD. This will be an important test for its implementation.

Within this framework, it is essential to consider citizen engagement as part of the process. This is necessary for two reasons: (1) the EGD challenges involve a change of behaviour on a collective level, without which the ecological transition would be impossible and (2) this process must be understood, validated, and accepted by citizens. Moreover, involving civil society in the territories that will be directly affected by EGD policies is necessary both to "drop in place" actions that must be taken and to learn good scalable practices directly from these places. For these reasons, it is essential to go beyond the scope of representative democracy and use knowledge acquired from decades of participatory and deliberative experiences. The objective of the PHOENIX project is to design democratic innovations (participatory budgets, public debates, mini-publics, citizen assemblies, etc.) to address challenges posed by the EGD in a horizontal and multilevel subsidiarity that can reconcile an EU vision with local needs.

3. A Place-Based Approach for the EGD

The place-based approach has been established as a new paradigm of local development in EU policies [28] in response to space-blind and place-neutral models, which have been criticised for their standardisation [29] and inability to take territorial specificities into account [30], as well as their lack of integration of different public actors [31–33]. According to Barca, the three fundamental points of the place-based approach are "the place-specificity of natural and institutional resources and of individual preferences and knowledge, the role played by (material and immaterial) linkages between places, and the resulting need for interventions to be tailored to places" [34] (p. 4). Tomaney emphasises both the endogenous and participatory nature of this approach and "the ability of places to grow drawing on their own resources, notably their human capital and innovative capacities" [35] (p. 6) and, at the same time, the need for "the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders and mechanisms for identifying assets in the local economy that can be the basis for local growth strategies" [9] (p. 35). In this way, a very widespread narrative has developed, particularly in the EU, which can be summarised as "place matters" [30], or "regions matter" [32]. According to Nowakowska [36], the three pillars of the place-based approach are: (1) implementing an endogenous model of development based on valorisation of territorial capital [37]; (2) the widest possible involvement and mobilisation of local stakeholders by virtue of their knowledge of the territorial, social, and economic resources of places; and

(3) building strong integration between different areas of public action and different levels of governance (multilevel governance), with the aim of implementing integrated plans rather than individual intervention projects.

The place-based approach refers not only to the local scale but also to building consistency between projects and characteristics of the territories involved. This assumption becomes particularly strategic when implementing complex policies, such as those regarding the EGD, on various levels (e.g., from national or transregional to local) that must also be designed based on place specificities. When dealing with environmental policies that have an impact on the life and habits of citizens [38], we must take into account both the specificity of the natural and built environment and the social, economic, cultural, and historical aspects of that particular society's relationship with nature. Actually, these aspects can and must become an opportunity at the European level, as "diversity in Europe could finally become an asset: creating value from diversity not just between national countries but also between local environments (physical diversity such as population density, topographic characteristics, but also proximity to knowledge and/or trade hubs, core-periphery relationships, cultural diversity, ageing, specialisation and trade skills, etc.)" [23] (p. 11).

Moreover, taking territorial specificities into consideration, particularly their resources and vulnerabilities, contributes to implementing policies that are fitted and tailored to different contexts. The latter can help address the problem of Geography of Discontent [39] present in most peripheral EU areas, which feel excluded from the dominant EGD narrative that focuses primarily on cities, particularly those with a key role in urban innovation, and the economic development of the European Union. It is for this same reason that these areas can develop positions that are contrary to such top-down policies and interventions [40,41]. It is essential to create policies that render citizens of these areas protagonists of and not subject to the ecological transition process with all the consequences this entails. In this sense, place-based policies are an endogenous and participatory approach to EGD transformations, with an important emphasis on participatory mechanisms and a more integrated and less sectoral perspective [42,43]. These characteristics make the place-based approach a strategic tool for both the Just Transition and the avoidance of territorial disparities [28,34].

In light of all this, EGD implementation requires new contextual analysis tools suitable for this purpose. Therefore, it is necessary to define a methodology for developing a comprehensive analytical framework that can illustrate the territorial elements that play a key role in the ecological transition. The PHOENIX project conducted this task in the first phase of its implementation, precisely because the structuring of participation processes cannot be separated from the studying and understanding of context specificities.

4. Meaning and Assessment of Sustainability

In order to structure an analytical framework aimed at supporting EGD implementation, we conducted a review of the recent body of research and studies regarding sustainability and the criteria for its assessment. This allowed us to understand which aspects are important to consider in the construction of the framework that is the subject of this paper.

Sustainability assessments, also referred to as integrated assessments or integrated appraisals, are ex ante processes aimed at predicting the potential effects of an activity prior to its implementation, as well as ex post evaluation techniques [12,44]. Over the past two decades, defining these methods has become indispensable for providing a scientifically sound basis to assist policymakers in both identifying priorities and vulnerabilities and validating implemented policies [13,45]. However, the selection of the aspects that must be included in such analyses posed several challenges.

Firstly, although there is a consensus on the broad meaning of sustainable development, how this translates into sustainability assessment has been debated. Among the most widely accepted definitions, the one proposed by the Brundtland report [46] highlights a multidimensional concept of sustainability, as it links the human and biophysical, the present and future, and the local and global perspectives [47]. A popular approach to

unravelling this complex nexus is to interpret sustainability at the point where the social, economic, and environmental dimensions intersect [14,48,49]. This three-pillar approach takes advantage of expertise, datasets, and institutional structures, and has been used extensively to frame sustainability assessments. However, some scholars have argued that it tends to separate the three aspects and undermine the integrated, multidimensional concept of sustainability. Thus, the use of cross-cutting, principle-based categories (i.e., socio-ecological integrity, intergenerational equity, and resource maintenance) has been proposed by several authors as an alternative for framing more integrated analyses [14,47]. For example, Vandevyvere [50] identified five impact categories for the evaluation of cross-cutting project sustainability, namely, governance, economic performance, socio-cultural performance, healthy living, and environmental performance.

Secondly, sustainability assessments often focus on specific geographical contexts [15,51] and specific issues, such as energy [16], food systems [17], water management [18], and mobility [19]. This hinders the ability to draw general conclusions that could inform a multipurpose, comprehensive analysis, such as the one this paper addresses. Furthermore, there are many types of approaches that range from qualitative to quantitative, with the latter being the most commonly adopted solution.

For example, major international organisations have proposed sets of national statistics and socio-economic data to build frameworks that measure the sustainability of countries [45,52,53]. These frameworks usually divide data in relation to the three pillars mentioned above, sometimes with the addition of a category dedicated to the description of the institutional context. Alternatively, other studies propose more complex indicators summarising the sustainability performance of a territory, such as its ecological footprint, green city index, and environmental performance index [48].

Several new assessment tools have recently been proposed [10,54]. When considering the urban scale, they highlight the importance of such local aspects such as urban form, service delivery, mobility, and local governance [55,56]. Governance, and more generally the institutional and political context and its related challenges, seem to be particularly important in understanding the transition towards sustainable, low-carbon societies [10]. Notably, some of these studies include qualitative and participatory methods that support a social and environmental analysis [57,58]. In particular, Čiegis and Gineitienė [58] emphasise the role of such aspects as social justice, local democracy, local government, and public engagement. In brief, notwithstanding the variety of purposes, approaches, and priorities, there is a consensus in the literature that sustainability is a multidimensional concept and its assessment must encompass and connect the social, economic, environmental, and institutional domains. Indeed, the totality of these aspects determines the resources, vulnerabilities, and opportunities that should be steering local transition pathways.

The analytical framework that we designed highlights the multifaceted nature of sustainability and suggests that, when dealing with such wide-ranging and context-specific policies as those involved in the EGD, the analytical phase should embed this complexity and be as comprehensive and nuanced as possible. Moreover, an analytical framework capable of supporting a place-based ecological transition needs to represent the local dimension without disregarding the deeply interconnected and multiscalar dimension of sustainability. In fact, the analysis should portray the main territorial features, address cross-cutting issues and policies, and take into account the institutional and political factors at various levels. In this regard, the topic of participation stands out for its potential relevance in the context of the EGD. These general findings, along with other meaningful insights regarding methods and data used in previous studies, have informed the following steps.

5. Methodology: Structuring the Analytical Framework

The process used to develop the methodology for defining a comprehensive analytical framework that supports EGD implementation consisted of three steps. The first step was to select the categories to be included and the type of data to be considered for each aspect investigated. The second step aimed to make data collection more efficient and involved a

method based on building an evidence-based map used by the consortium to narrow down the dataset and tailor it to specific contexts depending on their relevance and availability. The third step involved selecting and processing maps and infographics to complete the analysis and make the results more accessible to the public and non-experts.

Step 1—Identification of Categories and Data Types

Based on what emerged from our review of the literature, we have chosen the main categories for the framework. Three of them covered the environmental, socio-economic, and institutional context. In addition, a miscellaneous group addressing cross-cutting challenges was included. After establishing the main structure of our analytical framework, we used the following methodology to define the dataset to be included in each category. Firstly, a collective process involving the varied expertise within the PHOENIX consortium (i.e., political and social scientists, geographers, anthropologists, psychologists, and urban planners) served to identify all the data needed and to refine the categories. Each partner proposed "key questions" highlighting the most relevant issues and helped narrow down the fields of investigation. Secondly, each research partner proposed data according to their field of knowledge. As the data list gradually emerged, we added several sub-categories to organise the four broader categories. The approach adopted involved the use of quantitative and qualitative data, as well as primary and secondary data. The logic used was to collect secondary qualitative and quantitative data to obtain general information and primary qualitative data to expand existing information and fully grasp the aspects that required a deeper understanding. This has allowed for a more comprehensive, place-based analysis.

Step 2—Evidence-based map method applied to quantitative data selection

The second step regards the selection of quantitative secondary data. This type of data, which included statistics and indicators, was deemed especially relevant to depict the socio-economic context and to assess environmental conditions. However, the selection of such data proved to be quite challenging. Indeed, data relevance and availability are highly dependent on geographical area, administrative level, and specific territorial characteristics. Some data are only available for larger administrative units (e.g., countries), yet they can be useful to outline the general framework in which municipalities (LAU1), provinces (NUTS3), and regions (NUTS2) operate. This is particularly true for issues that cross administrative borders, such as energy production and food supply chains. In addition, the PHOENIX project needed to address different issues in different areas, leading to an extensive list of potentially useful data. As a result, it became evident that we needed to narrow down the dataset and tailor it to specific contexts.

To address this issue, the consortium developed a specific method to support this work phase, which was the creation of an evidence-based map, also referred to as an evidence-gap map [59,60]. Each dataset was first associated with the collective evaluation of its potential relevance and then with its estimated availability for various administrative levels, both of which ranged from 1 (low) to 3 (high). On this basis, it was possible to obtain a clearer picture of the most useful data for each administrative level and, thus, optimise data collection. To reduce disciplinary biases and take full advantage of the multidisciplinary project consortium, data relevance evaluation was conducted by working collectively on a spreadsheet. Research partners assessed their need to collect each dataset on a scale from 1 to 3. They could also choose not to make an assessment regarding any matters beyond their competence. The evaluation results were averaged and then paired with an estimated availability of the data, which generated a table in which irrelevant and inaccessible data could be easily identified. While this process has been used specifically for the objectives of the PHOENIX project, it could be replicated whenever a battery of data has to be streamlined to increase data collection efficiency, particularly in highly interdisciplinary contexts. Table 1 illustrates the structure of the evidence-gap map.

Table 1. Model of the evidence-gap map showing data relevance and availability for different administrative levels.

Data	Relevance Low/Medium/High	Low Availability 🔴 Medium Availability 🟡 High Availability 🟢		
		LAU 1-2	**NUTS 2-3**	**NUTS 1**
Data 1	Low	🔴	🟡	🟢
Data 2	High	🟢	🟢	🟢
Data n	Medium	🟢	🔴	🔴

Step 3—Maps and infographics

To fully describe the human–nature relationship, the abovementioned qualitative and quantitative datasets were supported by a cross-cutting spatial analysis that led to the creation of maps and graphic content. The overall aim was to present complex information in a concise and accessible format and to provide both a general geographical overview and spatial description of fundamental territorial and social characteristics. The maps were created using QGIS software (version 3.26.2), based on data available at national, regional, and local levels. The following datasets were used: Copernicus, Natura 2000 (N-2000), Nationally Designated Areas (NDA), Corine Land Cover (CLC), and the Climate Change Knowledge Portal. NUTS administrative levels were taken as a reference to create the maps [61]. As a result, three sets of maps were produced. The scale used ranges from NUTS 3 to NUTS 2, as municipal borders were deemed too small to fully analyse the territory and its surroundings.

Moreover, to further describe the geographical and socio-economic contexts and highlight relevant environmental aspects, two additional sets of infographics were produced. The first illustrates data and statistics regarding population, citizenship, GDP structure, education, and employment. The second focuses on GHG emissions, oil dependency, and sustainable energy production. As this information is not always available for all governmental levels, the data refer to administration units ranging between LAU 1 and NUTS 1, depending on the type of data. The Eurostat dataset has been used whenever possible.

6. Results

The methodology outlined in the previous section gave rise to the structure of the analytical framework shown in Table 2. It is composed of four main categories, which in turn are divided into sub-categories. For each of these, a set of quantitative and qualitative data is intended to answer the specific questions listed in the second column. The first category is "Environment", which covers the physical features of the territory, as well as the main traits of its climate, biodiversity, and landscape. The second category is "Socio-economic Context", which aims to depict the main characteristics of society and economy, paying special attention to ecological behaviours, marginalised groups, and gender equality. To respond to the need for a more integrated and cross-cutting analysis, we have included the third category "Towards Carbon Neutrality", which expresses how well a given context is equipped to meet the major challenges of the ecological transition. While the first two categories are more conventional and compartmentalised, the third has been conceived as a transversal data group that examines territorial responses to relevant EGD issues (e.g., energy production, food supply chain, mitigation and adaptation strategies, waste treatment, etc.) in terms of private and public actions. Finally, following the assumption that the ecological transition cannot succeed without citizen engagement, we thought it important to include the fourth category "Culture of Participation", which outlines the main

institutional features, norms on public participation, and relevant experiences regarding citizen engagement.

As already noted, the data included ranged from quantitative to qualitative and were derived from both primary and secondary sources. This approach was meant to bring together the bluntness of quantitative information with the versatility of a textual component. While some sub-categories are supposed to be described exclusively by using existing information, others require new data from interviews. The "Data" column of Table 2 shows how each sub-category matches with different types of data. More specifically, primary data was derived from semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders, including policymakers and public officials, as well as representatives from trade unions, NGOs, economic groups, and social movements. Selection of these individuals was based on relevance, responsiveness, inclusiveness, and gender balance [62]. Secondary data consisted of qualitative and quantitative information obtained through desk research from documents, governmental reports, scientific articles, and publicly accessible datasets. Each sub-category presents qualitative data gathered through desk research that establishes baseline information and outlines the issues. This narrative is supported by quantitative secondary data, consisting of indicators and statistical information. While desk research was employed throughout the report, interviews focused only on issues that could be difficult to comprehend solely through secondary information and, thus, required a more in-depth understanding.

Table 3 lists the sets of maps that were created. The first set focuses on morphology and natural resources, including information on altimetry and protected areas. The second displays ecosystems (e.g., urban, agro, forest, shrubs, fresh water, etc.), percentage of sealed soil, and temperatures and precipitation from recent decades. The third set contains a population density map and an anamorphic map showing the most and least inhabited areas of the territory. All maps were conceived to represent administrative scales larger than NUTS 3.

Lastly, the maps are accompanied by two sets of infographics (Table 4), the first presents socio-economic data and the second presents GHG emissions and energy production. Depending on availability, the data may refer to smaller or larger administrative units, as shown in the "Scale" column of Table 4. An example of the above-mentioned graphic content can be found in the Supplementary Materials, where the maps and infographics created for the analysis of the Italian region "Emilia-Romagna" have been uploaded.

Table 2. Structure of the analytical framework. The X indicates the type of data included.

Categories	Key Questions	Sub-Categories	Data		
			Qualitative	Quantitative	
			Primary	Primary	Secondary
Environment	What are the main morphological characteristics of the area? What are the main watercourses and water basins? What are the main natural resources? In what quantity? How are they distributed?	Morphology, water systems, and natural resources		X	X
	What is the climate of the area? How is climate change affecting the context?	Climate and biodiversity	X	X	X
	What are the main types of settlements? What is the degree of urbanisation? What is the land consumption trend?	Landscape and urbanisation		X	X

Table 2. *Cont.*

Categories	Key Questions	Sub-Categories	Data		
			Qualitative	Quantitative	
			Primary	Primary	Secondary
Socio-economic context	What are the general characteristics of society?	Social overview		X	X
	What are the general population habits in terms of eating, mobility, energy consumption, and waste separation and collection?	Ecological behaviours	X	X	X
	What are the main marginalised groups?	Marginalised groups	X	X	X
	What is the condition of women in society and institutions?	Gender equality	X	X	X
	What is the economy of the area based on? How is wealth distributed in society?	Economic overview	X	X	X
	What is the role of agriculture, fisheries, and livestock in the area economy and food self-sufficiency? Is the food industry relevant? Is there any organic farming present?	Primary sector		X	X
	Are industrial activities relevant for the area economy? What is the amount of imported and exported goods? Are tourism and recreation relevant economic sectors for the area?	Secondary and tertiary sector		X	X
Towards carbon neutrality	What are the main laws protecting the natural environment at a national level?	Environmental protection	X	X	X
	Where are the most polluted areas? How is waste treatment managed?	Environmental degradation and waste treatment		X	X
	Is the ecological transition creating conflicts in society?	Socio-environmental conflicts	X	X	X
	What are the main energy sources? What is the amount of energy produced on the national and/or regional level?	Energy production		X	X
	Do principles of circular economy apply to the food supply chain? Are local food supply chains being developed or supported? How important is their role?	Food supply chain		X	X
	What are the existing strategies, programmes and practices aimed at mitigating climate change and reducing carbon emissions?	Mitigation and adaptation strategies		X	X
	Are there citizens and/or associations involved in activities aimed at raising environmental awareness?	Contribution of individuals and grassroots movements to social change	X	X	X

Table 2. *Cont.*

Categories	Key Questions	Sub-Categories	Data		
			Qualitative	Quantitative	
			Primary	Primary	Secondary
Culture of Participation	How does the political system work? Is it a federal or centralised system? What are the main political parties and how are they positioned with regard to environmental policies?	Political overview	X	X	
	Is there a specific normative framework for participatory processes? Do other forms of participation exist?	Normative framework	X	X	
	What are the most relevant experiences of participatory and deliberative practices? What different types/methods of participatory and deliberative processes have already been used?	Participatory and deliberative practices	X	X	
	Are there specific strategies adopted to enhance women's participation? Were children, young people, and future generations included in participatory and deliberative processes?	Inclusion of future generations and minorities in participatory and deliberative processes	X	X	
	Did participatory and deliberative processes use digital tools?	Digital tools for citizen engagement and open data	X	X	

Table 3. Content of maps.

Map Sets	Content	Type of Content	Scale
Morphology and natural resources	Altimetry	Map	>NUTS 3
	Protected areas (nationally designated areas and Natura 2000)	Map	>NUTS 3
	Percentage of plain (<200 masl), hilly (200–800 masl), and mountainous (>800 masl) territory	Infographic	>NUTS 3
	Percentage of slopes (0–10%, 10–20%, 20–35%, >35%)	Infographic	>NUTS 3
	Division of protected area surfaces by type of protection (NDA and N2000)	Infographic	>NUTS 3
Environment and climate	Ecosystem typology (urban, agro, forest, shrubs, freshwater, and marine)	Map	>NUTS 3
	Sealed soil	Map	>NUTS 3
	Ecosystem typology percentage	Infographic	>NUTS 3
	Sealed soil percentage for each ecosystem typology	Infographic	>NUTS 3
	Precipitation in mm from 1950 to 2020	Infographic	>NUTS 3
	Annual temperature (minimum, maximum, and average) from 1950 to 2020	Infographic	>NUTS 3
Population density and distribution	Population density and infrastructures (below average, average, and above average)	Map	>NUTS 3
	Population anamorphosis	Map	>NUTS 3

Table 4. Content of infographics.

Infographic Sets	Data	Scale
Socio-economic data	Population trend (last 20 years)	>LAU 1
	Population by age groups (0–14 years, 15–64 years, and >65 years)	>LAU 1
	Citizenship (analysed area, EU 27, and non-EU)	NUTS 1
	GDP by sector (agriculture, industry, and services)	NUTS 3
	Education (up to lower secondary, upper secondary, and tertiary)	NUTS 1
	Employment by age (from 15 to 24, from 25 to 54, and from 54 to 65)	NUTS 1
GHG emissions and energy production	Greenhouse gas emissions by source sector	NUTS 1
	Energy consumption by energy source	NUTS 1
	Share of energy by sources	NUTS 1
	Share of renewable sources	NUTS 1

This extensive array of information offers an exhaustive understanding of the tangible and intangible variables at play in the ecological transition process, presented in an accessible manner to benefit both experts and non-experts. Despite being primarily conceived as a multipurpose method to conduct preliminary analyses to support EGD implementation, these findings ultimately tap into a broader discussion about how similar analyses can improve our ability to understand and communicate the current territorial challenges. The next section summarises the novel features of the analytical framework and discusses its implications for academic debate.

7. Discussion

The aim of this study was to develop a methodology to define a comprehensive analytical framework that could support ecological transition policies within the EGD through a place-based, participatory approach. The methodology was developed under the auspices of the H2020 PHOENIX project, which studied eleven pilot areas ranging from national to regional to municipal. This research fills a gap in analytical methods by providing a specific methodology that can be adopted in many diverse situations where it is necessary to take multiple levels and topics into account. We created this methodology to attempt to answer the first question, namely "What features should an analytical framework have to support the development of place-based, participatory policies for an effective implementation of the EGD?".

The following are the main innovative elements proposed by this paper:

- Transcalarity: The proposed analytical framework uses a transcalar approach, meaning that it considers local, regional, and national levels. Therefore, it avoids the trend found in the literature to propose frameworks relative to scales, topics, and specific contexts.
- Multidisciplinarity: We have involved scholars and practitioners from various disciplines in the definition of the analytical framework to ensure the creation of a multidisciplinary structure that reflects the multifaceted nature of the ecological transition [47,54]. This was possible through collective work that employed various types of expertise to develop the framework and then selected the most important data through the use of the evidence-based map method.
- Integrated quantitative and qualitative data: We have overcome the limitations of an exclusively quantitative reading by including qualitative social research techniques, such as surveys and interviews with key actors [62,63], to provide a deeper and more contextualised understanding of the secondary data. This strategy also reveals the conflicting interests and divergent perspectives of actors regarding the governance of complex processes.
- Culture of participation: We have added the theme of participation to our analysis, particularly regarding institutional culture (e.g., regulations, methods used, successful

experiences, etc.). While this component is rarely included in analyses observed in the literature, assessing the propensity of a territory to adopting participatory or deliberative approaches is crucial to promoting effective policies regarding the EGD [57,58].

- Intersectionality: From a "Just Transition" perspective, our primary and secondary data collection has taken into account such variables as poverty, gender, ethnicity, and culture of origin, both to obtain the most comprehensive socio-economic framework possible and to determine the impact of the EGD on marginalised groups and, thus, mitigate any resulting conflicts.
- Communication: We used infographics and maps to achieve a balance between presenting complex data and delivering a communicative document. In fact, the type of analysis proposed can generate useful content for research purposes, inform policy-making, and disseminate valuable insights to local communities.

While the methodology we have presented did achieve our main objectives, we have noted that it has several limitations. Firstly, while the proposed analytical framework aims to be effective at different scales, the understanding of some aspects requires an approach that contextualises the local dimension in a broader picture. This is the case where municipal, regional, national, and even global dynamics intertwine, such as the food supply chain, energy supply, and legal frameworks. Consequently, to fully interpret the complexities of different territories and their contexts, it is essential to take into account a certain degree of flexibility with respect to administrative boundaries. Secondly, we must stress the difficulty of including the element of time into our analytical framework. Although the ecological transition is very urgent, many of the processes needed for its implementation, such as changing individual habits, require exceedingly long time periods. This aspect certainly remains the most challenging. Furthermore, despite our efforts to build an analytical framework that is as comprehensive as possible, we were unable to include an analysis of the effective governability of some processes [10], such as those regulated by market logic or requiring a critical mass to have a real impact (e.g., changing personal behaviour). Lastly, another aspect that could be included in an analytical framework is the "interplay between the inertia of existing socio-technical systems and the emergence of novelty" [10] (p. 240). It would be appropriate to introduce a socio-technical analysis that helps to problematise and explain the inertia of established configurations as sets of mechanisms, including structural and institutional factors and agency (i.e., resistance of powerful actors), which oppose the introduction of innovative policies. It is also worth noting that the proposed framework has been conceived with the European context in mind, hence adapting it to other contexts would favour territories with comparable socio-economic and institutional features. Thanks to our recognition of these limits, we argue that there is a need to reframe the territorial analytical approach when dealing with the challenges of EGD implementation, as the methodology presented in this paper suggests.

Regarding the second question, namely "How can the creation of this analytical framework be reconciled with the diversity of European contexts and their specific characteristics?", this framework proposes a compromise between comprehensiveness, consistency, scale diversity, and heterogeneity in data availability. We attempted to deal with the problem by considering a wide array of data, including socio-economic indicators, geographical data, and interviews with relevant stakeholders. Moreover, the evidence-gap map was specifically aimed at facilitating the evaluation of large datasets [59,60]. This strategy, along with the use of a multidimensional approach, was intended to improve adaptation to different contexts and to provide a solid basis for understanding both the challenges and opportunities inherent in the transition pathways of a territory. However, it is important to note that, while the framework is versatile in terms of scale, this versatility somewhat hindered our ability to fully account for the effects that sociopolitical processes occurring at smaller and/or larger scales can have on the territory being analysed. This can be particularly true when, for example, smaller administrative units pursue ambitions in contrast with regional or national programmes, or vice versa. Future improvements

or adaptations of the proposed framework might consider addressing this aspect. Other possible suggestions for future improvements include enhancing the focus on political timeframes, collective attitudes, and desired scenarios.

Along with informing practitioners and local administrators, the proposed analytical framework is also intended to be a useful tool for the dissemination and communication of current territorial challenges. In this regard, using maps and infographics can serve as an effective and accessible way to convey information about a specific territory. As this analytical work will be the foundation for the subsequent research phases of the PHOENIX project, there will be an opportunity to test the effectiveness of this approach. The consortium, which includes practitioners and local administrations in eleven pilot territories, will be engaged in the co-design process of some participatory policies related to the EGD. Sharing the outcomes of preliminary analyses, which are based on the structure presented here, and validating them with the assistance of citizens will be the first step of this process. Further research in the near future will illustrate the co-design process and its evaluation.

8. Conclusions

As noted, EGD implementation requires the adoption of policies that both advance a paradigm of sustainable development and use a participatory, place-based approach. The first step to understanding how to respond to these challenges is to build an analytical framework that describes territories based on the following three aspects: (1) physical, social, economic, and institutional specificities; (2) positioning with respect to the sustainable pathway; and (3) a culture of citizen participation in the creation of public policies.

The purpose of this study was to develop a methodology to create a comprehensive analytical framework that includes these three aspects. The primary objective has been achieved, albeit with the recognition of three main limits: (1) the need to contextualise the local dimension into a broader picture due to the influence of national and global dynamics on the local territories; (2) the difficulty of taking the element of time into account in the framework; and (3) the lack of a socio-technical analysis to problematise the inertia of established configurations as sets of mechanisms, institutional factors, and agency that counteract innovations.

Although this analysis was related specifically to the PHOENIX project and its goals, this paper also aims to contribute to a broader body of research focused on how territorial analyses can aid the achievement of possible transition pathways and how they can support an open decision-making process in support of this transition. In this sense, its main contribution is the inclusion of public participation among the main categories and the emphasis on the need for diverse types of data and sources to reflect the complex nature of sustainability. Further research could be devoted to tackling some of the abovementioned limitations by adjusting the categories or the type of data to better align with different contexts and needs.

It is clear that the ecological transition must be accelerated and that citizens and local governments must be involved in this process. To achieve these goals, it is essential to improve methods and tools for analysing, envisioning, and co-creating future transition pathways tailored to the specific needs, priorities, and possibilities of each of the EU territories.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su152015098/s1, Maps and infographics created for the analysis of the Emilia-Romagna Region Pilot.

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