

# **Autonomy, democracy and solidarity. The defining principles of collaborative civil society housing and some mechanisms that may challenge them**

Jardar Sørvoll and Bo Bengtsson

Corresponding author: Affiliation: Jardar Sørvoll, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, Norwegian Social Research (NOVA), Oslo, Norway. Postal address: NOVA, OsloMet – storbyuniversitetet, Postboks 4 St. Olavs plass, 0130 Oslo, Norway. Telephone number: 0047 93224305. E-mail address: [jarso@oslomet.no](mailto:jarso@oslomet.no)

Bo Bengtsson, Affiliations: Institute for Housing and Urban Research (IBF), Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden; Department of Urban Studies, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden. Postal address: Uppsala Universitet, Institutet för bostads- och urbanforskning, Box 514, 751 20, Telephone number: 0046 018 471 6521, E-mail address: [bo.bengtsson@ibf.uu.se](mailto:bo.bengtsson@ibf.uu.se)

## **Abstract**

This theoretical paper introduces a conceptual framework for empirical study and comparison of collaborative civil society housing (CSH). We suggest that CSH communities satisfy four criteria to a lesser or higher extent: (1) autonomy, (2) participatory democracy, (3) internal solidarity and (4) external solidarity. Drawing primarily on empirical examples from the scholarly literature on co-operative housing, we claim that all CSH communities face challenges that may lead to the erosion of these civil society criteria. We argue that such challenges are general social mechanisms that manifest themselves in various types of situations, for instance, when apartments are transferred or refurbished.

The role of housing in civil society is rarely examined at length, either in housing studies or civil society research. At the same time, there is a growing political and academic interest both in civil society in general and co-operative housing, co-housing and other forms of collaborative housing in particular (Tummers 2015a; Tummers 2016; Jakobsen and Larsen 2018; Mullins and Moore 2018). Members of such housing communities often engage not only in their own housing situation but also in social and political issues in society, thus contributing to civil society. In this theoretical article, we discuss the definition and social mechanisms of collaborative civil society housing (CSH). We use this broad concept to denote voluntary housing organizations, situated outside the domains of the state and the

private sector, which provide housing to their members while at the same time working for some external mission, within or beyond housing provision.

First, we suggest a conceptual framework for empirical study and comparison of different types of collaborative CSH communities. Building on previous research, we suggest that such communities satisfy the following four criteria to a lesser or higher degree: (1) autonomy from the state, (2) participatory democracy, (3) internal solidarity and (4) external (or political) solidarity. We suggest that these criteria by definition characterize all forms of civil society housing, from national large-scale co-operative housing organizations to local small-scale co-housing initiatives. The fourth criterion is vital to our understanding of CSH. As we will return to below, we claim that collaborative housing communities should not be considered CSH if they do not strive to realize external political goals that go beyond the immediate interests of members. Thus, we use the term CSH to distinguish analytically between different forms of collaborative housing, such as co-operatives with a strong external commitment to local communities and housing associations that are passive enclaves in society.

Secondly, based on our conceptual framework and drawing on empirical examples from different parts of the world, we argue that all collaborative CSH communities face challenges that may erode their civil society features over time. These challenges include the conflicting interests of different member categories, welfare state co-optation and the dominant capitalist logic of competition and growth. We argue that such challenges may be understood as general social mechanisms that manifest themselves in various types of situations, for instance, when apartments are allocated, transferred, or refurbished. These mechanisms underscore that CSH is vulnerable to drift towards conventional, state- and/or market-based housing provision.

This article is meant as a contribution to the scholarly literature on collaborative and civil society housing (cf. Tummers 2015a; Tummers 2016; Mullins and Moore 2018; Czischke 2018; Lang, Carriou and Czischke 2018), in the form of an expansion of the theoretical toolbox of scholars conducting empirical research. We base our conclusions on theoretical arguments based on (1) our ideal-type understanding of collaborative CSH as both providing housing in collective form to individual residents and working for shared societal goals; and (2) criteria derived from that understanding. In addition, we support our argument with reference to previous empirical research on co-operative housing and co-housing. Our aim is not give a general overview of research on these forms of housing, but use examples from the scholarly literature to illustrate our theoretically informed argument.

In what follows, we start by outlining the article's empirical and theoretical foundations. Then we define and specify the concept of collaborative civil society housing. The last main sections of the article are devoted to three social mechanisms that endanger the defining features of CSH. In the conclusion, we summarize our argument and suggest avenues for future research on collaborative housing and its role in civil society.

### **Empirical and theoretical foundations**

In recent years, the concept of *collaborative housing* has been established as an umbrella term covering different types of co-operative-, community-led-, co- and self-organized housing characterized by collaboration between residents (cf. Czischke 2018; Lang & Stoeger 2018). All CSH communities may be described as civil society collaborative housing, but not all collaborative housing projects are necessarily examples of CSH. As we will return to below, collaborative housing must have political or societal goals transcending the interests of individual housing communities to be considered CSH, according to our definition.

The scholarly literature on various types of collaborative housing contains informative and insightful contributions covering one or more relevant cases from Europe, North America, Asia and Australia (e.g. Bresson and Denefflé 2015; Chiodelli and Baglione 2014; Fromm 2012; Ganapati 2010; Hojer Bruun 2012; Jarvis 2015; Vestbro and Horelli, 2012; Tummers 2015b; Tummers 2016; Crabtree 2018; Jakobsen and Larsen 2018; Moore 2018; Thompson 2018). In the following, we draw on this empirical work in our discussion of the concept and social mechanisms of CSH. The article's main empirical illustrations are, however, borrowed from scholarly studies on the development of co-operative housing in Scandinavia. This literature is based on a vast collection of primary sources covering most of the period since 1945, including parliamentary debates, newspaper articles, government documents and the archives of co-operative housing organizations. The historical literature on co-operative housing in Scandinavia also contains in-depth analysis of the contributions and responses of relevant actors – such as residents, political elites and co-operative housing leaders – to housing market deregulation (cf. Sørvoll 2014; Sørvoll and Bengtsson 2018b). Moreover, this article expands at length on general theoretical arguments put forward in two earlier papers on co-operative housing in Scandinavia (Sørvoll and Bengtsson 2018a; 2018b).

Many collaborative housing communities are either co-operatives or co-housing units, or even both simultaneously – as illustrated by several Danish co-housing communities established in the 1980s (Jakobsen and Larsen, 2018). It follows that these forms of housing are also good candidates for fulfilling the criteria of CSH. We regard 'co-operative housing'

as a term denoting a tenure situated between home-ownership and rental housing based on collective ownership and residents' control over their individual dwellings. It is customary to distinguish between rental- and homeowner housing co-operatives. In the former, members rent dwellings from a co-operative they own together, in the latter, members to a higher or lesser extent have individual rights associated with homeownership. This may include selling their shares and apartments to the highest bidder (Cf. Cecodhas Housing Europe and ICA Housing 2012; Crabtree 2018; see Sørvoll 2014, for historical examples of different housing co-operatives). Co-operative housing exists throughout much of the world, and is of particular importance e.g. in Sweden, Norway, Poland, the Czech Republic. In these countries, co-operatives represent between 10 and 20 per cent of the housing stock. In absolute numbers, co-operatives are most frequent in Poland, Germany and India with more than 2 million co-operative dwellings in each country. Whereas the co-operative housing sector has a significant relative presence in Germany and particularly Poland, the 2.5 million co-operative dwellings registered in India in 2011 was less than one percent of the housing stock (Cecodhas Housing Europe and ICA Housing 2012).

Taking our lead from a special issue of *Urban Research and Practice*, we define *co-housing* (and corresponding terms in other languages) as 'initiatives where groups of residents collectively create living arrangements that are not easily available in the (local) housing market' (Tummers 2015a, 2). Co-housing is generally characterized by shared facilities and private apartments, democratic governance and collaboration between residents (Fromm 2012; Chiodelli and Baglione 2014; Sandstedt and Westin 2015). There are also more demanding forms of collaborative housing, e.g. so-called intentional communities, sometimes defined as 'a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working co-operatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values' (Christian 2003, xvi).

On a world scale, co-operative housing and, even more so, co-housing, are relatively modest sized phenomena (cf. Chiodelli and Baglione 2014). Although the importance of CSH in housing provision differs between countries, the fact that tens of millions of people all over the world live in housing units that potentially may fulfil the CSH criteria makes them a worthy topic of study and reflection. Moreover, collaborative housing with civil society characteristics is considered by some as a reaction and potential counterweight to ills plaguing contemporary urban life, such as alienation, social isolation, limited democratic participation and influence, unsustainable carbon footprints, unaffordable housing and neoliberal housing policies (cf. Lang and Novy 2014; Marckmann, Gram Hansen and Haunstrup Christensen

2012; Jarvis 2015; Tummers 2015a; Thompson 2018). Thirdly, due to its relatively high demands on collaboration between residents, collaborative housing and in particular CSH communities are presumably also ideal places to observe and analyse the mechanisms of collective action in housing (cf. Bengtsson 1998; 2000).

In this article, we use the terms like co-operative-, collaborative- and co-housing to describe existing forms of housing in different countries. Due to the challenges of ‘tenure translation’ (Ruonavaara 1993), it is admittedly demanding to compare housing communities across time and space. A strict social constructionist interpretation of the ‘tenure translation’ problem implies that it is fundamentally flawed to compare housing forms across nations or different historical settings. According to this way of reasoning, a ‘category such as “owner occupation” would denote such a bewildering variety of nationally-specific tenure forms having little in common that it would confuse rather than clarify’ to construct a homeownership typology for use in comparative analysis (Ruonavaara 1993: 6). The same argument may be applied to collaborative civil society housing. In our view, however, it is possible to construct broad categories that travel reasonably well across different contexts. Although all real-life housing forms have historical and national particularities, it is nonetheless fruitful to speak of core characteristics that define the boundaries between types of housing and make comparisons meaningful (Cf. Ruonavaara 1993; 2005).

In what follows, the theoretical concept of social mechanism informs our comparative perspective. ‘Mechanism’ is a contested concept, and there is no consensus amongst methodologists concerning definition and empirical applicability of the term. In this article, we see mechanisms as *regular and causally productive patterns* of actions and interactions, meaning that they help explain certain outcomes (cf. Bengtsson and Ruonavaara 2011; 2017). What is more, to ‘be generalizable, a mechanism implies portability, that the pattern discovered in one context can be identified in others (Bengtsson and Hertting 2014, 710; cf. Elster 1998, 45). Social mechanisms can be seen as stochastic or probabilistic alternatives to general causal laws, and are thereby consistent with the non-deterministic concept of causation. In the words of McCullagh (1998, 178), ‘causes tend to produce effects of a certain kind, but that [...] tendency can be offset by other tendencies at work in the situation’. This means that social mechanisms do not create effects in a deterministic, teleological manner, but rather tend to produce certain outcomes if not countered by actors or structures in a given historical context.

### **Civil society housing defined and specified**

In very general terms, civil society housing can be defined as a specific form of indirect collaborative ownership (Karlberg and Victorin 2004) in which a housing estate is owned or otherwise controlled by its residents (owner-occupiers or tenants), the specificity of CSH being that residents also share some societal goals beyond the direct management of the estate. Although the meaning of civil society is contested and numerous different definitions have been suggested, the idea that civil society actors try to affect politics and society at large is at the core of the concept – and probably the main reason for its central role in the academic and political discourse of the last decades. As Foley and Edwards (1996) remind us, there are two different versions of the concept. One version puts special emphasis on the ability of associational life to foster patterns of civility in the actions of citizens in a democratic polity. The other version portrays civil society as a sphere of action that is independent of the state and capable e.g. of energizing resistance to tyrannical regimes (Foley and Edwards 1996, 31). Both understandings, however, emphasize the political role of civil society. In that vein, we see civil society housing as *non-governmental organizations and institutions that both provide housing to members and work for some shared societal goal beyond members' individual interests*. Such shared societal goals of CSH may concern either housing or other spheres of society. Without external goals, e.g. with a condominium or a co-operative working only in the direct individual and collective interests of residents, we would have a case of indirect ownership but the concept 'civil society' would not be applicable. This noted, however, our ambition is not to demarcate the conceptual boundaries of collaborative CSH in a narrow way, but to provide a framework or set of theoretical lenses for empirical research, enabling characterization and analysis of real life housing communities and comparison between them.

Our broad definition of CSH may be specified in different ways. Inspired by Read (2008) and building on Sørvoll and Bengtsson (2018a), we suggest that CSH communities should satisfy the following criteria to a larger or lesser extent: autonomy, participatory democracy, internal solidarity and external (or political) solidarity. These four criteria are meant to capture the essence of CSH, a form of housing striving for resident participation, collective power and the realization of values transcending the economically utilitarian.

The analytical framework that we suggest for the empirical study of CSH comprises the definition and the four criteria presented above. Our definition and criteria largely correspond to the ideals of co-housing suggested by e.g. Chiodelli and Baglione (2014), Jarvis (2015) and Tummers (2015b). The criteria and the general framework partly rest on normative values derived from a generally positive understanding of civil society. That,

however, does not preclude a critical perspective; precisely because ‘democracy’ is a positive value, the concept of democracy can be used to criticize existing democracies, and the same goes for our CSH concept. Moreover, the first two criteria – autonomy and participatory democracy – should be seen as logical prerequisites for the realization of meaningful internal and external political solidarity (cf. below). Our definition and criteria are, however, not extremely demanding. We suggest that only a minimum level fulfilment of each criterion (autonomy, participatory democracy, internal and external solidarity) should be required for a housing community to qualify as CSH. Although the definition is partly based on positive values we may still have diverging opinions on specific forms of CSH, e.g. the external political solidarity of a certain housing community may concern issues that are politically contested. Thus, Chiodelli and Baglione, who are not blind to laudable features of co-housing, also point to the risk of ideological, social and ethnic homogeneity amongst residents and low levels of integration with the rest of society (Chiodelli and Baglione 2014, 26–27; see also, Jakobsen and Larsen 2018).

### **Autonomy**

First of all, CSH communities are *autonomous* or self-governed – both legally and *de facto*. Autonomy is a precondition for the realization of other CSH traits, such as participatory democracy. In his article on Chinese homeowner associations Read states that autonomy ‘from the state or other powerful actors is essential if organizations are to express their members’ desires rather than twist or divert them’ (Read 2008, 1244). When conducting empirical research, it is important to be conscious of the complex, changing and varied relationship between self-organised housing communities and the state. Some are kept at arm’s length, some are heavily favoured through subsidies and legal privileges, and others are state controlled to the point where it is reasonable to question the reality of organizational autonomy. The autonomy of CSH communities varies both across and within political regimes. In authoritarian states, such as Communist China, some housing communities ‘afford residents significant space in which to meet, debate, take action at their own initiative, and manage their neighborhoods in a democratic fashion’ (Read 2008, 1241). However, others are ‘stymied, inactive, or unrepresentative, whether because of repression or internal disarray’ (Read 2008, 1241).

### **Participatory democracy**

Second, CSH communities are governed through the participation and cooperation of their members. Thus, *participatory democracy* is essential to the concept of CSH. It is customary to regard associations as sources of social capital and civic virtue, nurturing mutual trust, collective norms and powers of public deliberation (e.g. Putnam 1993). CSH communities, like other civic associations, are also potential ‘schools of democracy’ enhancing political skills and levels of political participation (e.g. Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). If residents do not attend meetings, do not influence decisions and have only a very limited sphere of power, ‘participatory democracy’ may be nothing but an empty phrase. Without a reasonably well functioning participatory democracy, it is difficult for housing communities to contribute meaningfully to civil society as a collective. If the leader or a small group of members *de facto* make all decisions with little involvement from ordinary residents, housing communities will not provide a setting for the nourishment of members’ powers of public discussion and other democratic virtues (cf. Read 2008). Moreover, autocratic or oligarchic decision-making means that a collaborative housing community’s engagement with society is not a product of the collaborative deliberation of members. Thus, a housing community with autocratic features should not be considered collaborative CSH.

Unfortunately, the character and quality of participatory democracy in housing communities has rarely been studied empirically (see Bengtsson and Svensson 1995 and Jensen, Kirkegaard and Pedersen 1998 for earlier examples). However, the possible avenues of relevant enquiries are many. Researchers could for example map the democratic participation and influence of members in the different stages of a housing community’s life. In real life collaborative housing communities, this may vary significantly from case to case. For instance, in Swedish and Norwegian co-operative associations, residents have no influence in the planning and production stages, only in the management of existing housing estates. In other housing communities, such as many co-housing initiatives across the world, future residents are heavily involved in the planning and production process (Fromm 2012; Chiodelli and Baglione 2014; Jarvis 2015).

Given that participatory democracy is a precondition for speaking about collaborative CSH, the content and depth of this democracy is definitely a topic worth exploring. Relevant questions include: What topics are addressed in the communities’ democratic institutions? Are meetings devoted to discussions of political issues of national or local significance, or are they primarily arenas for resolving the community’s immediate administrative and economic concerns? How many people attend meetings, and what are the tangible outcomes of their deliberations?



Another interesting line of research is the role of CSH as ‘schools of democracy’. The democratic interaction e.g. in co-housing communities is often more intense than in most types of associations, and this may enhance political skills and participation even more. Such a relation between CSH activities and political participation was observed in research on co-housing in the U.S. (Poley 2007; Berggren 2013; 2017). It would be interesting to compare these findings with similar studies in other countries and on other forms of collaborative housing, including housing co-operatives.

It is possible that there are systematic differences between housing communities based on different tenure forms concerning the depth, content and frequency of democratic participation. In short, one may hypothesize that owner-occupiers on average are more concerned with their interests as individual property owners, whereas tenancy is – all other things being equal – more compatible with a more radical ‘prefigurative politics’ (cf. Cornish et. al. 2016). The latter implies a deeper and more intense participatory democracy aiming to prefigure ‘the democratic and egalitarian relations desired of a future, more just society’ (Cornish et. al. 2016, 116).

### **Internal and external solidarity**

Third, CSH communities are characterized by *internal solidarity* between residents, meaning that the community’s collective goals transcend the private interests of individual residents. A certain level of internal solidarity based on mutual self-interest is probably a prerequisite for well-functioning collaborative housing. Solidarity and fellowship between residents are for instance crucial for the common work (e. g. gardening, cooking and maintenance) so central to many collaborative housing communities (Sørvoll and Bengtsson 2018b). Even though CSH is frequently characterized by lofty ideals of sharing, participation and social justice, it is also based on pragmatic self-interest and strictly internal solidarity between members. For instance, Tummers (2015a, 1) wisely notes about co-housing that it ‘is a pragmatic action to overcome economic constraints and housing scarcity, to organize busy time-schedules and avoid social isolation’.

Fourth, according to our definition, members of CSH communities do not limit their solidarity to their fellow residents; they also strive to influence society by external activities, public debate and direct influence over government policy. We see such activities as expressions of *external or political solidarity* in line with the scholarly literature’s understanding of civil society’s political function (cf. Foley and Edwards 1996). In Read’s words, a ‘key idea behind civil society is that associations pluralise the broader socio-political

world, balancing and restraining other concentrations of power' (Read 2008, 1245). There are several examples of CSH communities participating in public life and acting as counterweights to the state and private business interests. In Sweden and Norway, large co-operative building and management organizations were part of the social democratic housing movement in the post-war years, struggling for power with business interests, liberal-conservative parties and their allies in the media (Sørvoll 2014). Currently, the national co-housing associations of countries such as the United States, Great Britain and Australia are trying to promote the cause of collaborative housing in the public debate (Cohousing Association of the United States 2016; Cohousing Australia 2016; UK cohousing network 2016).

Whereas the criteria of autonomy, participatory democracy and internal solidarity are frequently fulfilled by all forms of collaborative housing, external solidarity transcending the interests of individual housing communities is the key criterion for deciding whether a certain housing community should be seen as CSH or not. The character of the external solidarity may however differ from community to community. Some collaborative housing communities have wide boundaries of external solidarity centred on issues of national or global concern, such as environmentalism, feminism or economic justice. Others give priority to a more limited external solidarity, focusing primarily on the well-being of local communities (Sørvoll and Bengtsson, 2018b; cf. Stjernø 2004).

Many contemporary co-housing projects seem to share broadly similar external, societal aims, and are therefore good candidates for fulfilling our CSH criteria. According to Chiodelli and Baglione (2014, 23), 'cohousing communities stress values such as solidarity, inclusion, *social activism* and mutual support'. Bresson and Denéfle (2015, 12) state that the French co-housing communities they studied generally were 'united by common values of autonomy, sharing, solidarity, *involvement in the community*, and good management of resources'. Co-housing communities, moreover, often seek to *promote ways of life compatible with feminism or environmentalism* (Marckmann, Gram-Hansen and Haunstrup Christensen 2012; Vestbro and Horelli 2012; Tummers 2015a). Some co-housing projects are explicitly non-speculative, *developing new models of collaborative ownership* (cf. Droste 2015; Tummers 2015b). Thus, they have something important in common with limited equity co-operative housing in the United States and elsewhere, in which transfer prices are controlled to ensure low costs for future residents (Saegert and Benitez 2005). [All italics in the quotations in this paragraph are ours.] The latter is an example of external solidarity with

other housing consumers by sacrificing personal economic gain for the greater good of general housing affordability.

Community land trusts (CLT) in Britain and the USA are also examples of collaborative housing organizations aiming to produce affordable housing opportunities, not for a select few, but for the entire population of an area (Cf. Engelsman, Moore Rowe and Southern 2018; Moore 2018; Thompson 2018). The external solidarity of community land trusts is evident in Thompson's general characterization of this form of housing in a recent scholarly article:

CLTs are a form of collaborative housing established and governed voluntarily by communities to develop and manage homes but also other assets of community value, such as social enterprise, food growing or cultural activities, for long-term community benefit (NCLTN 2018). They take property off the market and make it permanently affordable by setting rents based on average local incomes rather than market value (Thompson 2018, 1).

Thompson's emphasis on community benefits and permanently affordable housing illustrates that CLTs are – at least in theory – classic contemporary examples of civil society collaborative housing with external, societal aims.

In actually existing housing communities, however, life is more complex than what is possible to convey in the illustrative quotes conveyed in the last paragraphs. For instance, there may exist competing and conflicting solidarities at different levels, e.g. between internal solidarity among residents and external solidarity between residents and community members. There may also be conflicts between different external solidarities: e.g. between national solidarity, implying adherence to government housing policy or social justice, and global solidarity related to the environment or to cosmopolitan political ideologies. To keep abreast with social reality, empirical research should aim to move beyond descriptions of the stated aims of collaborative housing communities. Instead we should examine to what extent these aims – be they non-speculative, ecological, feminist or a combination thereof – are honoured in practice, and look both for competing and overlapping solidarities.

### **The ambiguous demarcation line of civil society housing**

In practice, it may sometimes be difficult to distinguish collaborative CSH communities from forms of housing best understood as belonging to the private or public sector. The precise demarcation between public, private and civil society housing provision is not unambiguous. Some housing communities are hybrids, containing at the same time public, private, and civil society features (cf. Mullins, Czischke and Van Bortel 2013). In some cases, such as Sweden

and Norway, co-operative housing has successively taken on characteristics of private condominium associations. Since the 1990s, providers of co-operative housing in Sweden and Norway to a large extent adopted profit maximising at the expense of their former commitment to internal and external solidarity (Sørvoll and Bengtsson 2018a). Moreover, Chiodelli and Baglione (2014) note that co-housing units share many similarities with gated and non-gated private residential communities, including membership governance and shared facilities.

The problem of distinguishing between CSH and private, market-based alternatives underscores that it is wise to analyse and evaluate housing communities across all the four criteria mentioned above. Again, what demarcates CSH from other forms of housing – and what actually makes such communities qualify as ‘civil society’ actors – is the commitment to *both* internal and external solidarity transcending the economic utility of individual residents.

The four criteria are of different character, and failure to live up to them has different consequences. It is actually difficult for members of a small CSH community to secure the *autonomy criterion* by themselves. In practice, of course, autonomy will never be total; a CSH community is always to some extent dependent on general legal and market conditions of housing provision. On the other hand, residents’ collective control of their housing estate should in most cases guarantee some degree of autonomy.

The *democracy criterion* – as with democracy more generally – can be discussed in terms of minimum vs. optimum (Plotke 1997) or thin vs. strong (Barber 1984). Even in democratically well-functioning CSH communities, sometimes only a minority of the members may be active at general meetings and elections, or in more intense forms of participation and deliberation, e.g. as board members. Still, a more modest level of participation, together with institutionalized social norms of participation and deliberation among residents, is much preferable in terms of democracy to a situation where most or all residents are passive and the estate is in practice run and managed by a large umbrella co-operative organization – or even a private firm. In such cases of ‘sham democracy’, civil society housing would not be an appropriate label.

A similar argument about minimum and optimum levels is valid for the *criterion of internal solidarity*. Again, shared and resilient norms of solidarity may be more important – and a more realistic ambition – than full participation and active solidarity from all members at all times (cf. Bengtsson 2000). And again, without some minimal level of internal solidarity we should not accept a housing community as collaborative CSH.

The *criterion of external solidarity* is the most complex and multifaceted of the four, not only because political solidarity may concern different types of political goals, e.g. related to non-speculation, sustainability, gender, global justice etc. This criterion can sometimes be realized by managing estates and dwellings in ways consistent with the CSH community's political goals on housing provision (e.g. non-profit or sustainability). In that case, internal solidarity may promote external solidarity simultaneously. Other, more missionary, external goals may include promoting the ideas of CSH, or other political causes, in public debate and society at large. Without some element of external solidarity, as mentioned, a housing community that lives up to the other three criteria may be labelled 'indirect ownership' or even 'collaborative housing' but not 'collaborative civil society housing'.

### **Summarizing the conceptual argument so far and introducing three social mechanisms of CSH**

To summarize our conceptual argument, we suggest that CSH should be defined as non-governmental organizations and institutions that both provide housing to members and work for some shared societal goal beyond members' individual interests. They can be studied and evaluated with reference to four criteria: autonomy, participatory democracy, internal solidarity, and external or political solidarity. Although the precise demarcation line may sometimes be ambiguous, many co-operative housing and co-housing units, as well as other forms of collaborative housing such as community land trusts, satisfy all these criteria to a smaller or larger extent. Since they share many traits, related to the four criteria, it should be fruitful to study these forms of housing under one conceptual roof, in relation to the four criteria and the potential tensions and conflicts between them. Of course, this does not mean that researchers should turn a blind eye to significant differences between forms of CSH. In fact, one advantage of a common framework is that it makes it possible to pinpoint and analyse differences within a consistent perspective in empirically informed comparative studies.

In the following analysis, we suggest three social mechanisms related to our model of collaborative CSH. We call them (1) 'the conflicting interests of different member categories', (2) 'welfare state co-optation' and (3) 'the dominant capitalist logic of competition and growth'. Each of them may over time lead to the break-up of CSH communities, or at least the erosion of one or more of the CSH criteria. As we will return to below, the mechanisms of 'conflicting interests' and 'the dominant capitalist logic' can lead

to the erosion of internal and external solidarity, while the mechanism of ‘welfare state co-optation’ primarily threatens the autonomy and participatory democracy of CSH communities.

All three mechanisms have been observed in empirical studies of Swedish and Norwegian co-operative housing (Sørvoll 2014), but, since they are in potential conflict with the four CSH criteria, they should be relevant – and worth exploring empirically – in other CSH contexts as well. For each mechanism, we first present some empirical illustrations borrowed from research on co-operative housing, mainly but far from exclusively from Scandinavia, and then go on to discuss the potential relevance of the mechanism for other forms of CSH with the aid of the scholarly literature on collaborative housing. Thus, the following theoretical discussion seeks to illustrate how our analytical framework may enlighten empirical research on CSH and collaborative housing in general.

### **The mechanism of conflicting interests between different member categories**

In general terms, the mechanism of ‘conflicting interests between different member categories’ may be formulated in the following manner: The conflicting interests of different categories of members may lead to the dissolution of CSH communities, or at least the erosion of internal and external solidarity, if not countered by other mechanisms, actors or structural developments.

First of all this mechanism should be related to the general challenge of all CSH communities to sustain member cooperation over time. Such co-operation in housing estates has been discussed in terms of ‘tenants’ dilemma’ (cf. Olson 1971 on collective action in general). The dilemma is simple: Whereas all tenants benefit from the results of cooperation and fellowship, it is in their individual self-interest to be non-participating free riders. However, if all tenants act in accordance with immediate self-interest, their housing estates and living environments will suffer (Bengtsson 1998; Ruonavaara 2012). In practice, despite the theoretical relevance of the tenants’ dilemma, co-operation between residents is sustained in many real life housing communities, often supported by social norms. Bengtsson reconstructed the institutionalization of co-operation and collaboration in 26 Swedish housing estates. One conclusion was that what Elster (1989) has called the social norm of utilitarianism (‘I take part if it is needed and I can contribute to the collective good’) was essential to keeping co-operation resilient. Moreover, Elster’s more contract-like norm of reciprocity (‘I take part if others take part’) had a large role to play for collaboration precisely

in the co-housing estates included in the study (Bengtsson 2000). Analytically, ‘solving the tenants’ dilemma’ comes before solving – or avoiding – conflicts between different member categories, but in practice conflicts between member groups may also threaten social norms of taking part in democratic decision-making and common work.

Housing communities based on individual ownership may be more vulnerable to the mechanism of ‘conflicting interests’ and drift towards market-based housing. The argument is that residents are more likely to prioritize their interests as individual consumers over commitments to internal or external solidarity, if their housing units are possible to mortgage and sell on the free market. As noted by Cooper and Rodman, members of non-profit rental co-operative housing associations have ‘no equity or other financial interests in the property. Unlike owners of condominium apartments [...] they are not concerned by resale values’ (Cooper & Rodman 1990, 49). Moreover, drawing on previous empirical research and theorizing (Pierson 1996; Tranøy 2000; Sørvoll and Bengtsson 2018a), we argue that ownership of individual housing assets is a tangible and easy to grasp advantage for CSH homeowners that may favour economic self-interest over altruistic concern for others or more abstract civil society ideals – such as environmentalism or social justice. These theoretical claims are well worth exploring in empirical studies of homeowner co-operatives, as well as other forms of collaborative housing, that are also often based on some form of individual ownership of private apartments (cf. Bresson and Denefflé 2015; Jarvis 2015; Droste 2015; Engelsman, Rowe and Southern 2018; Jakobsen and Larsen 2018).

To be sure, some form of discord or disagreement between members of housing communities is to be expected from time to time. Most of these disputes are probably of little consequence for the long-term development of CSH communities. During the course of a community’s life, however, situations arise that may foster conflicts of a more serious, even fatal, nature. Arguably, the mechanism of ‘conflicting interests between different member categories’ is triggered in certain contexts, for example when apartments are transferred, when buildings are refurbished, or when housing market deregulation opens up new opportunities for members. In these situations, the vital economic interests of members are at stake.

For decades, *apartment transfers* were at the centre of the conflict between different member categories in Swedish, Norwegian and Danish homeowner co-operatives. The concept of external solidarity between different groups on the housing market – such as tenants, the homeless and co-operative residents – was central to the co-operative movement in Scandinavia for large parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Price regulation on co-operative shares was

a central feature of this external solidarity. In short, co-operative leaders and activists supported price limits out of concern for members and potential members wishing to acquire a co-operative home, but also for ideological reasons. The goal was to ensure access to decent housing for moderately paid groups, and prevent what was regarded as speculation at the expense of non-resident members and outsiders, such as tenants in the private rented sector. Thus, the Scandinavian co-operative movement was originally not only built on internal solidarity between resident and non-resident members, but also on external solidarity with all groups on the housing market, and a political ideology of non-speculation in housing (Sørvoll 2014; Sørvoll and Bengtsson 2018b).

However, in all three Scandinavian countries economic self-interest eventually trumped internal and external solidarity. Price controls on co-operative shares were abolished in Sweden (1968) and Norway (1980s), partly as a result of pressure from co-operative homeowners eager to reap the benefits of individual economic freedom (Bengtsson 1992; Sørvoll 2014). Most spectacularly, residents wishing to break the chains of price regulation terminated many co-operative associations in the Norwegian ‘revolt from below’ of the 1970s. Critics claimed that this was a flagrant breach of the principle of solidarity between different groups on the housing market, signalling the triumph of egotism over social housing provision based on cooperation, participation, and community (see Sørvoll 2008). It is now open to question if co-operative housing in Norway and Sweden should still be seen as a form of CSH. The criterion of external political solidarity is hardly satisfied, and the internal solidarity between resident and non-resident members was gradually left behind for the unmitigated prioritization of the economic interests of individual co-operative homeowners (cf. Sørvoll and Bengtsson, 2018a).

Consider also the case of Danish co-operative housing (*private andelsboliger*). In the early 1980s, co-operative housing was re-launched as a form of ‘social homeownership’ – said to combine the freedom and security associated with homeownership and the affordability characterizing public rented housing. However, external, limited-profit solidarity came under pressure from the late 1990s. Much like the ‘revolt from below’ in Norway of the 1970s, residents terminated or sold their associations to recoup the full value of their home on the market (Sørvoll 2014). Whereas many co-operative associations in Copenhagen consciously kept transfer prices lower than the government price ceiling, this changed after the millennium when most associations voted to increase prices to the legal maximum. Not surprisingly, many commentators and scholars interpreted this development as constituting the end of Danish co-operative housing as a non-commercial alternative (Ladefoged



Mortensen and Seabrooke 2008; Hojer Bruun 2012). Again, goals associated with civil society housing – such as, external solidarity based on ideological commitment to limited-profit housing – gave way to the goal of maximizing the individual gains of current residents (Sørvoll and Bengtsson 2018b).

The historical record of Scandinavian co-operative housing – including the termination of housing associations and the erosion of external solidarity – arguably suggests that CSH communities based on homeownership are vulnerable to erosion of external solidarity and drift towards conventional market-based housing. In all three countries, the conflict between different member categories ended with the triumph of homeowner members over the generally feeble opposition from the non-resident members and outsiders that stood to profit from cheap second-hand apartments. This may, at least partly, be understood as the result of the social mechanism of conflicting interests between different member categories. The co-operative homeowners' protests against price regulation 'drew strength from the simple objective of market prices and the tangible asset of the cooperative home, the promise of a cheap co-operative dwelling in the future was more uncertain and less tangible for non-resident members' (Sørvoll and Bengtsson 2018a, 14).

Conflicts between member categories are also found in CSH communities based on renting, although they may be of a different nature. In an article on discord in a Canadian housing co-operative, Cooper and Rodman (1990) stress that some sources of conflict are absent in rental co-operatives. There are no disagreements about exchange values in these housing communities since residents are not allowed to sell or barter their apartments on the free market. However, over time discord may develop between different categories of members concerning issues such as landscaping, budgeting and building refurbishment. Cooper and Rodman emphasize that these conflicts are nurtured by residents occupying different 'structural positions in the housing market' (Cooper and Rodman 1990, 44). In the non-profit rental co-operative they studied, the tenants' positions in a conflict about a budget proposal were largely determined by 'consumption-class position, in this case in terms of people's relation to the housing market' (Cooper and Rodman, 1990, 53). Tenants receiving rent subsidies or expressing a long-term commitment to the co-operative were more likely to vote for increased user charges, compared to residents paying full rent or seeing themselves leaving the co-operative in the medium or short run (*ibid.*).

In the rental co-operative that Cooper and Rodman studied, the budget conflict arose in a context where the co-operative's buildings needed refurbishment. Individual economic interest clashed with the long-term needs of the housing community. Thus, both in CSH

communities based on renting and homeownership, internal solidarity between members may be threatened by individual economic self-interest, as well as conflicts between members with different values or positions in the housing market. However, it is still worth testing the hypothesis that internal and external solidarity is most vulnerable to erosion in CSH-communities based on individual ownership of apartments. Latent conflicts of interests connected to the value of real estate on the market, may for instance lead homeowners to give priority to individual economic gain over external commitment to affordable prices for outsiders.

In co-housing communities, the type of conflicts discussed above may often be of a somewhat different character. Given that most co-housing projects only have current residents as members, there is typically no latent conflict between resident and non-resident members within a certain community. On the other hand, all co-housing projects will sooner or later face challenges connected to apartment transfers and property maintenance. Thus, we argue that all collaborative housing communities are potentially vulnerable to the mechanism of ‘conflict between different member categories’, which could potentially lead to the erosion of the civil society principles of internal and external solidarity, and in the end even threaten the autonomy and survival of the CSH community

There are evidently social, demographic and physical life cycle aspects of the mechanism in question. Collaborative housing projects may originally consist of members similar in economic, social and political background – even sharing an ideological commitment to collaborative housing. Furthermore, in the first years of a new community’s life, buildings need little maintenance and few apartment transfers occur. This will, however, change over time. Once the mode of co-operation between original members is institutionalized and new members move in, tension may arise between groups with different interests, values and traditions. Increasing diversity in terms of members’ economic, social and ideological positions may lead to growing disharmony and conflict between groups of members, which in turn may undermine internal solidarity.

The life cycle aspects of the mechanism of ‘conflicting interests between different member categories’ is a potential source of so-called path dependent change. Path dependence is a theoretical concept usually mobilized by social scientists to make sense of institutional stability. In urban and housing studies, the sources of path dependent stability includes the durable structure represented by physical dwellings, financial mortgage institutions and the cultural and emotional significance of family homes for individuals (cf. Bengtsson and Ruonavaara 2010; Blackwell and Kohl, 2018). However, the life cycle aspects of the

mechanism of ‘conflicting interests’ highlights that potential sources of path dependent change are also inherent in housing communities. The ageing of physical buildings and the entry of new residents as apartments change hands are inescapable features of the long-term development of collaborative housing communities. Thus, conflicts threatening internal or external solidarity – or indeed both – are latent sources of path dependent change.

Consider a realistic but purely hypothetical collaborative housing project controlling second-hand apartment prices for the sake of housing affordability in a local community (cf. Thompson 2018). This commitment to external solidarity with outsiders may work perfectly well in the first decades, but may increasingly be challenged because of the influx of new residents with less commitment to CSH principles. At the same time, conflicts around monthly fees and collective maintenance activities may grow over time and endanger internal solidarity as buildings decay and the need for financial resources and human labor increases.

### **The mechanisms of ‘welfare state co-optation’ and ‘the dominant capitalist logic of competition and growth’**

We discuss the CSH mechanisms of ‘welfare state co-optation’ and ‘the dominant capitalist logic of competition and growth’ under the same heading, since we see them as two forms of external pressure on the civil society principles of autonomy and participatory democracy. There is a case to be made that quantitative success of a certain form of housing is dependent on one of two factors – on one hand considerable government patronage, on the other hand market-based support from consumers (or a combination of the two). Government support or market-based appeal may over time lead to the more or less forced adoption of ideas and practices borrowed from the public or the private sector at the expense of the defining principles of civil society housing.

The mechanisms of ‘welfare state co-optation’ and ‘the dominant capitalist logic of competition and growth’ can both be seen as generalized adaptations of Bengtsson’s theorization on the successful expansion of co-operative housing in Sweden after 1945. According to Bengtsson, the co-operative organizations grew on the back of both the state’s ‘social housing policy’ and appeal to consumers. He adds that ‘economic and political success has a price in terms [...] of cooperative values’ (Bengtsson 1992, 89).

As regards the *mechanism of welfare state co-optation*, and perhaps somewhat ironically, collaborative housing has often been particularly successful where the state has exerted strong influence. This includes countries as different as social democratic Norway and Sweden, communist Poland, and post-war India – where co-operative housing thrived in the

decades preceding the Second World War (Coudroy de Lille 2015; Ganapati 2010; Sørvoll 2014). According to Ganapati (2010), the different fate of the co-operative housing movements in Sweden, India and the United States is at least partly explained by their respective relationships to the state. Whereas co-operative housing sectors were established in all three countries in the interwar years, it only proved successful in Sweden and India – where it was heavily promoted by the state after the Second World War.

As suggested above, advocates of CSH must be wary that there is often, or perhaps always, a price to be paid for state-led success – although it may sometimes be found well worth paying. The mechanism of welfare state co-optation is causally productive when the state exerts power in a way that abolishes or weakens the autonomy, participatory democracy or bonds of solidarity within CSH communities. In countries where co-operative housing was heavily favoured and subsidized after 1945, governments expected something in return. For instance, in Poland, Sweden and Norway local authorities allocated a sizeable proportion of new co-operative housing until the 1990s, at the expense of queuing co-op members (Sørvoll 2014; Coudroy de Lille 2015). Thus, local government infringed on the self-government and the scope of membership activity in co-operative associations, and consequently weakened their civil society principles – such as the autonomy, participatory democracy and self-help ethos (‘internal solidarity’). This illustrates one of the classic dilemmas of CSH: whereas the state can be a powerful ally, its patronage is not free of charge. In an article on the history of co-operative housing in Poland, Coudroy de Lille highlights this predicament of state patronage in an interesting way:

The position of cooperatives with regards to the state was ambiguous and brought them power but also paralysis: on the one hand, they occupied a dominant position in the housing economy (in urban areas at least) and received high state subsidies. On the other hand, they were in competition with stronger actors at the local level, whose interests were constantly supported by the state, such as industrial complexes or local administrations (Coudroy de Lille 2015, 22-23).

The mechanism of welfare state co-optation can be related to theories about democratic corporatism that highlight the institutionalized ties between some privileged organizational actors and the state. Corporatism can be seen as an exchange of power between organizations and the state. According to influential theories of corporatism, however, it is in principle not possible for consumer organizations (unlike e.g capital and labour) to acquire a bargaining position with real power in relation to the state (Offe 1985; Williamson 1989). This is one

way of understanding the Polish co-operatives' limited autonomy and influence, as discussed by Coudroy de Lille.

Crabtree (2018) also notes the influence of the state on the rental co-operative sector in Australia. We see Crabtree's analysis as a clear illustration of the mechanism of welfare state co-optation, as she illustrates the weakening of internal solidarity – or shared concerns with different social objectives – as a result of the state's overriding focus on housing affordability:

Cooperatives form around shared concerns or objectives, such as housing particular cultural populations or geographic/demographic cohorts. However, all residents must meet income limits stipulated by the government, and consequently, affordability concerns can trump other objectives in the rental cooperatives. This can undermine their behaviour as intentional communities, or as communities with shared concerns other than access to affordable housing. This lack of common social purpose beyond affordability can present challenges to the daily governance and management issues for which the cooperatives are responsible (Crabtree 2018, 23).

Whereas the mechanism of welfare state co-optation may be set off in a situation where the state sees CSH as a means to fulfil goals related to affordable and effective housing provision, *the mechanism of the dominant capitalist logic of competition and growth* may be mobilized by a CSH organization's internally initiated market activities. (In real life, both mechanisms may be at work simultaneously as in the Swedish case.) Like state-led expansion, the struggle to maintain market-based appeal to consumers will lead to the erosion of civil society principles, unless countered by actors or structures present in a given social context. In a situation where growth, or at least maintaining existing market shares, is the main objective, internal and political solidarity may take a back seat for CSH leaders. This is illustrated by the history of the co-operative housing movements in Norway and Sweden. The primacy of economic success was one of the main reasons why co-operative housing leaders in Sweden and Norway backed the abolishment of price controls, previously so central to the co-operative movement's ideal of external, non-profit solidarity between different groups on the housing market. In short, by offering homeowner-members the lure of capital gains – just like other housing companies – they hoped to stay competitive in the market (Sørvoll 2014).

Our examples above come from countries where co-operative housing represents major shares of the housing stock. However, the two mechanisms outlined above should also be of some relevance to CSH with a more modest position in national housing provision, including co-housing communities. It is difficult to imagine a housing community that is completely isolated from state and market influence. Just to mention two examples, rehabilitation of the estate and recruitment of new members are usually more or less dependent both on local authorities and on the prevailing market situation. In particular, both

mechanisms should be highly relevant to all expanding CSH communities – e.g. based on some form of external solidarity – regardless of whether their growth is state or market led.

### **Concluding remarks: avenues for future research on collaborative housing and CSH**

In this article, we have suggested an analytical framework for empirical research on civil society housing (CSH) based on a definition of CSH and some social mechanisms that may potentially threaten the four criteria of civil society housing discussed above. It is our contention that the scholarly literature on collaborative housing – that contains a number of valuable descriptive and interpretive case studies (cf. Tummers 2015a; Tummers 2016; Mullins and Moore 2018) – is in need of more theoretically informed studies and comparative analysis. This theoretical paper seeks to contribute towards this end: research structured around our four CSH criteria and mechanisms that can weaken them has the potential to illuminate general challenges to the long-term development of collaborative housing communities with ambitions to influence civil society across capitalist societies. In turn, such studies may inform both collaborative housing research and practice.

Our discussion of the social mechanisms of CSH has largely referred to previous research on co-operative housing. So far, there has not been much corresponding critical research done on other forms of collaborative housing, focusing on mechanisms that may weaken or destroy the ideals of such communities. We hope that our article will inspire further empirical exploration of the principles, possibilities and potential threats to civil society housing, both within specific systems and comparatively between models and countries. The three social mechanisms we have put forward are arguably highly relevant for most forms of collaborative civil society housing. For instance, some sources of path dependent change potentially triggering the mechanism of ‘conflicting interests – such as the ageing of buildings, the transfer of apartments and the entry of new residents -- are unavoidable features of the historical trajectory of all collaborative housing communities. In addition, ‘welfare state co-optation’ or adopting the capitalist logic of competition seems to be important prerequisites for CSH success. That said about the merits of our theoretical contributions, this article is a first attempt to conceptualize CSH, and we are certain that further empirical research in different national and institutional contexts may provide input also to the development, specification and possible reformulation of our theoretical model.

Future comparative and single-case research on collaborative housing will surely also identify new general social mechanisms relevant and portable to other contexts. One promising strand of research in this respect examines collaboration and partnerships between

collaborative housing communities and professional housing providers, such as housing associations in the United Kingdom, Austria and France (cf. Czischke 2018; Moore 2018). While collaborative housing projects may depend on other organizations for access to capital, expertise and political legitimacy to prosper, the cost of partnership with professional actors may be a dilution of the original aims of the housing community. For instance, there is a potential tension between the local emphasis of collaborative CSH communities and the more general focus on affordable housing of professional housing associations (Moore 2018). Future studies could presumably identify new and interesting mechanisms of CSH by further probing the consequences of partnerships between collaborative CSH communities and professional organizations.

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