The paradox of organizational complexity in urban development: boundary spanners' handling of citizen proposals

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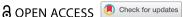
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ABSTRACT
Although local governments establish various arrangements to stimulate citizen participation, knowledge about what happens with citizens' proposals after participation is weak. To gain impact, citizen initiatives must be handled through the decision-making process. This article examines the dynamics of such handling of input from citizen participation in three different cases linked to an area-based initiative in Oslo, Norway. The study shows that different actors can play a role as boundary spanners handling citizen proposals, and how this crucial handling varies with the structural and procedural linkages between the participatory spaces and the formal decision-making processes. The study reveals a 'complexity paradox'; in cases where responsibility is shared among different sectors and levels of government, each unit represents a veto point that can hinder citizen impact, but also an entrance that can enable such impact.

Introduction

As participatory governance arrangements are spreading out among local governments in Western democracies (Hertting and Kugelberg 2018; Heinelt 2018), scholars research the conditions for citizen impact (Font et al. 2018; Newig et al. 2018). The acknowledgement that citizens' proposals must be channelled through the government's decision-making process in order to impact urban policy, has led to an interest for studying the role of system actors and system characteristics (Røiseland and Vabo 2016; Sønderskov 2019; Eckerd and Heidelberg 2020). An interest for studying the design and management of participatory arrangements is supplemented with a focus on what is happening after participation, or what Smith (2019, 577) calls 'the post-will formation stage of the political process'.

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The literature on boundary spanners (Williams 2002, 2012) emphasises the role of individual actors in linking citizens with city government. System actors can act as boundary spanners that navigate citizens' proposals through the political-administrative system (Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2016). This particularly applies to those actors that are hired as participatory managers dedicated to facilitate citizen participation (Blijleven, van Hulst, and Hendriks 2019; Thompson 2019). These employed boundary spanners constitute parts of the participatory infrastructure (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015) or the participatory experience (Font et al. 2018). They are often present at the participatory arenas, a matter that will affect their will to handle citizen proposals (Røiseland and Vabo 2016).

The possibilities for these and other system actors to act as boundary spanners are enabled by institutional factors, such as whether the boundary spanner has responsibility for the government's case handling of the issue or not, and whether the citizens' proposals are formulated as part of a participatory process that are formally linked to a subsequent defined decision-making process within city government (Røiseland and Vabo 2016). Such structural and procedural links constitutes institutional connections between the citizen participation and government decisions.

Citizens' initiatives often address cases where responsibility is shared among several sectors and levels of government. Research shows that such organisational complexity is one set of factors that makes handling of citizen initiatives through the political-administrative system a complicated endeavour. The number of veto-points a proposal must pass through (Fung 2006, 2015; Font et al. 2018) and the rigidity of public government (Reichborn Kjennerud and Ophaug 2018) are assumed to be obstacles to such channelling. Hence, organisational complexity will constrain or challenge system actors handling of citizen proposals.

This article addresses the handling of input from citizen participation in an urban development area-based initiative (ABI). Urban development initiatives affect the everyday lives of citizens, so citizens often engage themselves in these processes. This makes urban development an interesting case for studying citizen participation. Furthermore, ABI projects often encompass issues that require action or approvement by different sectors and levels of city government, such as various welfare services, physical infrastructure, and business development. Hence, initiatives must be handled through several city agencies and other units, all potential veto-points that can obstruct, oppose, or even stop the initiative. We study how actors within the political-administrative system handle citizens' proposals in such a context of organisational complexity, by investigating three cases with different formal linkages to an area-based initiative (ABI) in Oslo, Norway.

More specifically, we ask: Who are the handlers of citizen proposals? (How) do the handlers tackle the organisational complexity of the cases? And (how) does this handling vary across cases with different linkages to city government structure and process?

The Norwegian public authorities emphasise collaboration and democratic participation beyond elections (Huxley et al. 2016), and local politicians and planners alike value citizen participation (Hanssen and Falleth 2014). This makes Norway an interesting case for studying the system actors' handling of participatory input.

Our study contributes to the literature on boundary spanners (Williams 2002, 2012; Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2016) by investigating how institutional factors impact their handling of citizen proposals. By investigating what is happening with citizen proposals within the political-administrative system after participation, the study contributes with new knowledge about conditions for citizen impact on political decisions (Font et al. 2018; Newig et al. 2018; Smith 2019).

In the following we present our theoretical framework, before presenting the data and methods. In the empirical section we briefly describe the structural and political context of the ABI, before we present the findings of the three cases, and thereafter discuss the findings. The article concludes with reflections regarding how the complexity of cases impacts citizen participation and system actors' handling of citizen proposals.

Theoretical framework

Citizen participation will generate proposals, either recommendations or demands for government action. In order to link 'what participants say [. . . .] to what public authorities [. . . .] do?' (Fung 2006, 69), the citizen proposals must be channelled through the various stages of the decision-making process. This channelling or handling of the proposals are affected by the structural and procedural linkages between citizen participation and government decisions.

Who are the handlers of citizen proposals?

Studies of interactive and collaborative governance identify boundary spanners among public administrators and politicians; that is, actors who span the borders between citizens and government (Williams 2002; Blijleven, van Hulst, and Hendriks 2019), and often act as navigators who 'guides the [citizen] initiative through the administrative system' (Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2016, 484–485). Administrative offices or civil servants that have a formal responsibility to facilitate and arrange citizen participation will probably have a formal or informal obligation to channel the citizen proposals through the

system. However, the fact that these officers are often low-ranked civil servants might constrain their possibility to be successful handlers (Williams 2012; Blijleven, van Hulst, and Hendriks 2019). Their access to top-level civil servants, such as the chief executive officer, might be important to secure citizen influence. Other civil servants, whether they are street-level professionals or higher-level bureaucrats, might also handle citizen proposals. They are often obliged to consult citizens when preparing propositions for political decisions, giving them a formal obligation to handle citizens' proposals.

Even elected politicians can be handlers of citizen proposals. In Norway, the concept of 'ombudsman' is used to describe how politicians address concerns and positions of individual citizens or citizen groups and ask for administrative action. Sønderskov (2019, 324) argues that 'the ability to make contact with citizens and listen to them (is a) crucial aspects of being a politician'. Hence, both individual politicians and public administrators can pick up inputs from citizens outside institutionalised, formal arrangements and processes, and bring them (back) on the policy agenda. A politician can do so to demonstrate responsiveness and increase his or her chances of re-election. A street-level bureaucrat can do so in order to achieve quality improvements or budget increases for the service. But both types of actors can also do so simply because they believe the proposal represents a good solution to the problems they face.

How are citizen proposals handled?

Handling of citizen proposals through the political-administrative system is often a complicated endeavour. When citizen proposals address cases in which responsibility is shared among several sectors and levels of government, the proposals must pass various agencies, departments and committees that function as 'gate keepers' (Easton 1965) or veto points. These veto points control which information, concerns and proposals that pass through, either they are able to stop the proposals, or they can oppose or recommend them. These agencies and departments are dominated by different professional expertise and different organisational cultures. They are also subordinated to different hierarchical chains of government through annual operational plans and budgets. To get access into such plans and budgets, citizen proposals must compete with the ambitions of elected politicians, internal inputs from bureaucrats and input from other external stakeholders.

The literature on citizen participation often focuses on how the multitude of veto-points constrain or hinder citizen impact. For example, Font et al. (2018, 631) identified the tendency for 'cherry picking' citizen proposals and 'clearly listen[ing] selectively to inexpensive demands that reinforce their preferences and existing ways of working'. Participatory designs that avoid or limit system veto points are favoured (Fung 2006, 2015)

However, we argue that the relationship may be less straightforward. Guidance through a complex political-administrative system implies horizontal policy management, which can be achieved either from the top down or from the bottom up (Peters 2006). First, the handlers can instigate enforced action through hierarchical means. In this case, the handlers' ability to mobilise superior, central-level politicians or administrative leaders is important. Second, the handlers can try to achieve persuasion and anchoring from the bottom up by convincing the different veto points to allow the proposal to pass through to the next stage (Williams 2012; Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2016). The handlers' ability to identify and organise allies and to argue and bargain becomes important. This requires perseverance (Fung 2015, 520). A third way of handling is to manage the citizens expectations (Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2016) by warning against proposals that are not realisable due to financial, institutional, political, or other reasons.

The paradox of organisational complexity

Organisational complexity implies that both the number of potential boundary spanners from within the government and the number of possible entrances into the political-administrative system increase. Moreover, such entrances are often accessible through means other than city-initiated, formal participatory channels that we normally associate with participatory governance (Hertting and Kugelberg 2018). Lobbying, media, and mobilisation are channels that influence public policy through activating mechanisms of representative democracy, not participatory democracy, but proposals from participatory arrangements can be promoted through these channels. Fung (2005) used the concepts of deliberative activism and advocacy activity to describe the role that civil society organisations or media can play in promoting citizen initiatives. Hence, and paradoxically, organisational complexity may represent veto points that can hinder citizen impact, but it may also constitute more entrances that make impact more possible.

As indicated above, the institutionalisation of participatory governance (Lowndes, Pratchett, and Stoker 2006; Hertting and Kugelberg 2018; Geissel and Hess 2018) and a participatory infrastructure (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015) is often identified as important. We consider institutionalisation of participation to be a crucial condition that help us understand the dynamics of handling processes. Formal roles and linkages (Williams 2012; Røiseland and Vabo 2016; Geissel and Hess 2018) connect the participatory arena with the decision-making system. Citizens are asked to provide input, designated officers are responsible for considering the input, and the input is connected to a decision-making process. The situation is different from a case that is citizen-initiated and not linked to formal decision-making processes. In such situations, active citizens themselves must mobilise politicians or administrators. Hence,

they can influence who handle their case. In cases involving multiple sectors and levels of government, they can address various types of actors and seek support from different parts of government.

In this study, we explore the who's and how's of handling in three cases that differ regarding the structural and procedural linkages between citizen participation and city decision-making. First, a city-initiated process, where employed boundary spanners are responsible for facilitating citizen participation and for the following decision-making process. Second, a city-initiated process with formal procedural linkages to a following decision-making process where the employed boundary spanners have no formal responsibility. Third, a citizen-initiated case with no formal linkages to predefined decision-making processes. We ask the following questions:

First, who are important handlers in these cases? We expect that the employed boundary spanners play a more important role in the first case of strong structural and procedural linkages, while political and administrative leaders will play a stronger role in the last case of weak linkages. They might be mobilised by citizens or by the employed boundary spanners.

Second, how are the proposals handled? What characterises the decisive handling activities where citizen proposals are channelled through a complex organisational structure? We expect that handling by arguing and bargaining plays a more dominant role in the first case with strong institutional linkages, while hierarchical command and control will be more conspicuous in the last case of weak likages.

Methods and data

We study the handling of citizen input in three different decision-making processes dealing with urban development of the Tøyen area in Oslo. The cases are selected following a 'diverse cases' strategy (Seawright and Gerring 2008). In all three cases, citizens have gained some impact on decisions, while the structural and procedural linkages between citizen participation and city decision-making processes vary. First, the case of the annual ABI programme plan for 2019 has strong structural and procedural linkages to the ABI-office. Second, the upgrading of the Tøyen square case has procedural linkages to a planning process led by the city level environmental agency. The third case, the closure of Kolstadgata street and the expansion of the school yard of Tøyen elementary school is weakly linked to city governmental structures and processes.

We trace the mechanisms that link citizen proposals to city government decisions. We explore whether and how actions made by handlers within the system can constitute such mechanisms. Furthermore, we explore whether and how their handling is linked to advocacy activity of interest groups or activists among the citizens.

The data sources are documents and interviews. We have analysed case documents such as administrative reports and propositions, consultation reports (if relevant), and council- and committee-meeting minutes (proposals and decisions). These were obtained from the city- and city-district web-pages and through the open-government portal 'elnnsyn'. A list of relevant documents is presented in the appendix to this article.

We, furthermore, conducted 22 interviews with a total of 27 people (four elected politicians, nine civil servants, nine citizen representatives and five private consultants). These are actors that had an important role in one or more of the cases, identified either through the case documents, interviews or a media search at Atekst, covering the period between 2013 and March 2019. (Atekst is a media archive from Retriever, a company in media monitoring and analysis in the Nordic region). One city level agency relevant for the Kolstadgata case refused our invitation. Beyond that, we covered all the most relevant groups of actors. A list of informants is presented in appendix.

We asked the informants about their involvement in the relevant case(s) during and after citizen participation, and their perception of citizen partici-pation and impact in the case(s). We also asked the politicians, public man-agers, and consultants about their handling of citizen proposals, and the citizen activists about their perceptions of such handling.

Most interviews were conducted during the spring of 2019, while three supplementary interviews were carried out early 2020. The semi-structured interviews were recorded, and the transcriptions or detailed notes were coded. The documents, and interviews are analysed using a thematical approach.

Oslo city government and the Tøyen agreement of 2013

In Oslo, municipal authority is shared between a city-level government and 15 subordinated city district governments. The city government is led by an elected council, headed by the mayor. The executive authority is performed by a city government (cabinet) composed according to a majority principle, and hence accountable to the city council. The city government is comprised by a city governing mayor and (for the time being) seven vice mayors. The city level administration is organised in departments, each led by a governing mayor or vice mayor. Several city-level agencies are subordinated to the departments. These agencies conduct most city-level responsibilities, such as land use planning, transport, roads and other infrastructure, the physical environment, and primary and secondary schools.

The city districts are led by directly elected district councils. A full-time district chief officer heads the administration in each district. The city districts are responsible for care for the elderly, day care facilities, youth clubs, mental health care facilities, health centres, services for the mentally disabled, treatment and care of substance abusers, and integration of refugees and immigrants.

Discussions about where to localise the new Munch Museum in Oslo concluded on May 28th, 2013 (Oslo city council 2013, case 178/13) due to a deal between the three parties that formed the minority centre-right city government of Oslo (the Liberal party, the Conservative party, and the Progress party) and the Socialist Left party. The deal was a result of bargaining and wheeling-and-dealing. The Socialist Left party supported moving the museum out of the Tøyen area in exchange for an area-based initiative. The deal contained several sub-projects aimed to improve the living conditions in the Tøyen area, such as a community development programme, strengthening the cultural school services and before- and after-school care, and upgrading the Tøyen metro station and the Tøyen square.

The community development part of the ABI, which started in 2014, is organised as a partnership between the Norwegian government (represented by the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation) and the city of Oslo. A programme office, placed at the city district of Gamle Oslo, runs the programme. Thus, the responsibility is shared among state, city, and district levels of government. From 2019, the community development initiatives of the districts of Tøyen and Grønland were merged. This merged ABI had a budget of 30.3 million NOK (approximately 3 million Euros) in 2019. A Local Board comprised of four appointed citizen representatives and one representative each from the local school and the police, advises the city district CEO in matters relevant to the programme.

Findings

The ABI programme plan

The aim of the community development part of the ABI is to strengthen the quality of the local area and promote integration and participation (City District of Gamle Oslo 2018a). Five people are employed full-time with the ABI-programme. The programme funds this office, a community house, and several defined projects. An annual programme plan lists the projects, the priority of issues, and the activities that are included in the programme.

The draft programme plan is formulated by the programme office. The Local Board, the City District Council, the city-level ABI-programme board are all consulted before the programme owners (the Oslo city government and the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation) make the final decision. Only minor changes were made in the plan during the rather complex decision-making process. The allocation of money to the projects is finally decided by the Oslo city government.

In 2018 the city auditor criticised the city government for a lack of citizen participation in the formulation of the programme plan (Oslo City Auditor 2018). In response to this criticism, citizens were invited to participate in six

open consultative meetings in 2019. The meetings were broadly announced in various media, and relevant individuals and organisations were specially invited. At five thematic meetings, the participants identified ideas, which were discussed and voted on at a final meeting. Our informants consider the attendance at the five thematic meetings as good, while few met at the final concluding meeting (City District of Gamle Oslo 2018b:3). The activists among the citizens do not perceive the ABI-programme plan as an important participatory channel and they hardly attain these participatory arenas.

It is unclear how the citizen proposals from the thematic meetings informed the programme plan. Neither the choice of focus areas, the project portfolio nor the allocation of money among focus areas and projects are made with reference to inputs from the participatory process. Chapter 6, presenting potential new focus areas, is an exception. This presentation refers directly to the suggestions from the participatory arenas. . Furthermore, none of the input made by the Local Board or District Council can be traced back to the participatory process.

The programme office and the city district CEO are the key handlers of the citizen proposals. They sort out and consider the proposed ideas. The fate of each idea depends on being brought further by them. Our data shows that they perceive themselves as responsive and committed to furthering citizens' proposals. This is supported by a citizen informant, who stated ' . . . I experience that they have listened to quite many inputs, and I believe much of the inputs are vital for [. . . .] the successful result of Sørlie playground' (WP2RA3). The lack of transparency makes it difficult to verify these statements.

However, the programme officers underscore what they describe as 'the need to clarify expectations' (City District of Gamle Oslo 2018a, 16). Citizens are invited to bring inn ideas and suggestions on predefined issues, not to decide the plan. Furthermore, the programme officers underscore the limited scope of their formal responsibility. Finally, they emphasise that the most important participation is going on in the individual projects.

But within these constraints, programme and city district officers probably are conscientious handlers of citizens' proposals. The programme officers and the CEO see it as one of their roles to push other parts of the city government. 'Indeed, we do [. . . .], what we catch up we incorporate [in our comments to their plans and programmes]' (WP2BP8). 'I see it not only as the mandate of the ABI, but as the City District strategy, that we shall be the eyes and ears of the local level into the municipality [city-level government]' (WP2BP2). If their ideas and proposals are backed by citizen participation, this will increase their impact, according to one programme officer: ' . . . solid documented consultation strengthen our case' (WP2BP9). This is not always the case, however; several informants mentioned a case where citizens demanded better lighting in a local park. This was not implemented because it was not included in

the operational plan and budget of the relevant city agency. The need for cross-sector coordination was one reason why the responsibility for the ABI and programme plan was lifted to the city government from 2018.

Tøyen Torg – the main square

The renovation and upgrading of the Tøyen square was part of the Munch agreement from 2013. The landlords had initiated the project before that and, according to several informants, had successfully lobbied the city government, which included the project into the agreement: 'The municipality will contribute to the upgrading of the Tøyen Centre according to the plan for revitalisation described by the Owner Forum [local landlords and the municipality]. The plan will be implemented as soon as practically possible starting no later than 2014' (City Council of Oslo, Case 178/2013, our translation).

However, little happened before September 2016

Then the collaborative effort between the landlords and the city environmental agency was abandoned. The initial plan was that the two parties should use 15 million NOK each on the project, but they were not able to agree on how to share the risk of increased costs or project delay (Aftenposten 2017, November 15). Furthermore, according to some of our informants, the agency did not approve the landlords' plan. When the agency realised that it was not obliged to collaborate with the landlords, it decided to go further with the project alone.

Meanwhile, the landlords spent their money on renovating the facades of their buildings. Several new cafes and shops opened around the square. The local library expanded and opened a children's library, the Biblio. The environmental agency, in cooperation with the ABI programme office, initiated a process of mapping the use of the square and the need for new facilities and installations. This was done to demonstrate that something had happened, and according to one informant, in order to take the offensive vis-à-vis the landlords.

> 'We got a heavy case on our lap that was decided after lobbying from the landlords. We should enter a collaboration that was not defined at all. Then there were delays, and the question of what to do at the Tøyen Square before we could start the upgrading' (WP2BP4).

A designer group was hired to place several temporary installations at the square. The choice of installations was based on talking with people the designers met at the square. The purpose of this strategy of 'tactical urbanism' (Silva 2016) was to see whether and how these installations were used by the local people. The environmental agency monitored the effects. According to informants the use of the square by the residents increased.

Furthermore, the environmental agency hired an architectural firm to design the square floor, furniture, and other permanent installations (as lightening and plants). The firm was asked to promote the local identity of Tøyen. The architects told us that they started from the temporal installations but created their own images and expression of the plural local community, based on their professional and artistic expertise. The residents were not involved in this last round, although their input was sought in the temporary round. Both the agency and the architects expressed the usefulness of this input:

> 'We wouldn't have included these playing type of furniture if it hadn't been for the previous consultation process. It also gave us confidence about what is working . . . .' (WP2O11).

> 'I am very satisfied with the (participating) process. I am proud of that project' (WP2BP4).

In this process, the agency and the architects negotiated the wishes and demands from the private industry, various city agencies and public concerns, and their own vision of the square. According to our informants, this initial process brought power to the arguments of the environmental agency and the consultant architects: 'The square shall not be a commercial place. We have fought about the borders so that the business [cafes and shops] should not spread too far [and occupy too much of the square]' (WP2O10). The residents' wish for an open square centre with playground area and places to seat, and where the café tables were placed in the square periphery, was fulfilled. The designers running the participatory process were quite satisfied with the result. The upgraded Tøyen Square was opened on December 1st, 2018.

Besides giving the experts ideas and knowledge, the temporal installations made residents use the square and created a feeling of ownership: The temporal furniture 'encouraged people to meet at the square, a place where it was great to stick around. All children wanted to play here; the adults wanted to sit here . . . The [temporary] furniture created a social meeting point' (WP2RA3).

In this case, the citizens' influence on the permanent solution is related to the agency's and the consulting architects' handling of their proposal. Citizens' inputs are interpreted by these experts and weighed against their knowledge and professional expertise. They are also weighed against other values and demands, such as technical standards and infrastructure.

The closure of Kolstadgata

An active resident from Tøyen proposed closing Kolstadgata, the street that passes by the local primary school, for the first time in 2013. In 2014 he initiated and conducted a petition – organised through the activist

group Tøyenkampanjen – which collected almost 500 signatures. The district council supported the idea and asked the city government to consider closing the street (Gamle Oslo District Council, case 137/2014). Simultaneously, the leader of the City Council committee for environment and transport, representing the Socialist Left party, made a similar proposal for the committee. Later, during spring 2015, she made a proposal for the City Council to expand the Tøyen school yard (City Council of Oslo, case 422,015). Both her proposals were turned down. However, the city government asked the environmental agency to consider closing the Kolstadgata street as a part of their work on measures to improve traffic safety around the schools. The agency recommended closing the street (City Environmental Agency, 2015), which was temporary closed for passages by private cars later in 2015 (Gamle Oslo City Council case 31/2016).

The parents' working committee and the school board of Tøyen school supported closing Kolstadgata. They were eager to expand the school yard and to make the school road safer. Partly based on their initiative, a majority in the city district council made a second request to close the street and expanding the school yard in a meeting in February 2016 (Gamle Oslo District Council case 31/2016).

Meanwhile, the city council election in September 2015 resulted in a new city government. The centre-right coalition was replaced by a left-wing–green coalition. In November 2017, the vice mayor of environment and transport asked the environmental agency to make an assessment concerning a permanent and total closure of the street (Planning and Building agency 2019). This process led to a permanent closure of the street outside of the school yard on September 3rd, 2019. Meanwhile, the work on formulating a zoning plan started. This process turned out to be complicated and was not completed by March 2021.

This case demonstrates how local activists succeeded in putting the case on the political agenda. The activist core is found among parents of children at Tøyen school. The school yard of Tøyen school is small, and the Kolstadgata runs close by, making the school road unsafe. The school principal supported the case. The activists used the formal participatory channel of the parents' working committee and the citizen open half-hour of district council, and informal channels as citizen mobilisation, petitions and lobbying central politicians at the city level. They succeeded in gaining support from a majority of the district council, and from the Socialist Left party. This party, which had negotiated the Munch agreement with the right-wing parties in 2013, became part of the majority coalition after the local election in 2015.

Closing the Kolstadgata had strong support among residents and district-level politicians. The main opponents were two city-level agencies: the school agency and the transport agency. The school agency did not support the idea of an open school yard, while the transport agency was hesitant to change the bus line.

Both the school principal and the District Council act as handlers of the citizen initiatives. However, it is the direct link between the activists and individual political leaders – mainly politicians that represent the Socialist Left Party – at the city level that makes the difference. A combination of citizen mobilisation and lobbying makes central politicians both aware of and eager to solve the problem. The pressure that the political leadership of the city put on the city agencies was probably crucial for the agencies to accept a closure of the street. City-level politicians actively supervise the implementation and ask for progress. The activists deliberately exploited this, by putting individual political leaders in the copy-field in emails to the agencies: '[NN; the name of a politicians] has a heart for Tøyen and a lot of prestige in Tøyen, so sometimes finally [NN; the name of the activist] put [the name of the politicians in the copy-field] of the mail, and something is happening' (WP2RA8). This practice is frustrating the school agency, according to some of our informants: 'The school agency, in this case of the school yard, they stopped answering our e-mails, quite simply' (WP2RA8). A zoning plan will define the permanent use of the area. The delayed zoning plan frustrated the activists. In November 2019, the ABI programme office initiated a participatory budgeting process concerning preliminary activities and installation at the site, in order to make something happen.

Discussion

All three cases confirm that different types of actors can act as handlers of citizen proposals in urban development projects (see Williams 2012; Blijleven, van Hulst, and Hendriks 2019; Thompson 2019). The handling activity is not limited to the ABI programme officers. Other city government actors, both civil servants and elected politicians, and even hired consultants, handle citizen proposals. Hence, the boundary spanners are not limited to the insiders taking part on the participatory arenas. Even though our findings cannot disprove that it is important to involve politicians and civil servants in the participatory processes in order to promote what we call handling (see, for example, Røiseland and Vabo 2016; Blijleven, van Hulst, and Hendriks 2019), actors not taking part in the participatory arenas can also handle citizen proposals.

The cases also demonstrate that the actors handle citizen proposals differently. Their handling is influenced by the fact that the responsibility for the cases is shared across sectors and levels of city government. In the case of the programme plan, the programme officers are active in appealing to and negotiating with other system actors they depend on to realise ABI projects. They also put a lot of effort into managing citizens' expectations to ensure that the participating citizens do not expect too much. In the case of renovating the Tøyen Square, bureaucrats from the city agency and consultant architects are active in brokering and negotiating with relevant parties (sector agencies, property owners and shop owners) as part of a regular planning process. In the case of

Kolstadgata, system actors initially tried to channel citizen proposals through formal channels. The school principal and the parents' working committee did so by appealing to the school authorities, and District Council members did so by appealing to the City Council. Due to a lack of success, the school principal and the parents' committee joined forces with citizen activists to lobby city-level politicians. These politicians succeeded in convincing the City Government to initially decide to consider closing the street, and finally to decide on the closure.

Our study also supports the importance of linkage to formal decision-making processes (Røiseland and Vabo 2016; Blijleven, van Hulst, and Hendriks 2019). In the programme plan and the Tøyen square cases, system actors are obliged to handle citizen input, and linkages to formal decision-making processes allowed handling through negotiation, since the processes implied meeting points between the handlers and potential veto players. In the Kolstadgata case, where these linkages were weak, the only way to pass reluctant and even actively opposing agencies was to instigate top-down instructions. Citizen activists were able to mobilise individual politicians to put the case on the formal political agenda and, later, to channel the case through several political decisions. In the other two cases, top-down instruction was not an alternative. The city district could not instruct city-level agencies to implement projects from the ABI-programme plan, so the programme office was left with the possibility to convince them. The reason behind the recent reform that placed responsibility for the programme plan at the City Government level is that it allows for hierarchical coordination. The programme office can now, through the City District CEO, recommend the City Government to demand cooperation from city-level agencies. The renovation of Tøyen square was decided as a zoning plan and the city government expected the relevant city agencies to agree on the recommendation that they presented for final decision.

Our findings also indicate the importance of linkages to system actors (Blijleven, van Hulst, and Hendriks 2019). Both the programme officers and the agency officers responsible for handling citizen proposals seem to be rather conscientious in their endeavours to channel these through other agencies and departments. However, the system actors' handling both enables and constrains citizens' impact. In the programme plan, the strategy of managing expectations through predefined subjects and scope of participation constrains citizens' impact. The handling process lacks transparency, due to both complex decision-making processes and translation from citizen proposals to programme formulation. There is no sign of citizens activating other channels in this case, so their impact depends on the programme officers' handling. In the case of Tøyen square, citizen impact is restricted by the participatory design and through the planning process, but still evident in the design and use of the square. This impact depends on the handling of professionals within the city agency as well as the hired consultant firm. The findings demonstrate how complexity both enables and constrains citizen impact.

The closure of Kolstadgata was initiated by citizen activists, whose perseverance instigated a strong and lasting commitment from leading politicians. These citizens were active in community organisations and/or the parents committee, which both mobilised citizens and advocated their interests. The Kolstadgata case demonstrates how citizen activists and organisations can use informal participatory channels to influence decision making processes that citizens are not invited to participate in. Individual citizens can take a lead in participatory endeavours (Fung 2015) and interest organisations or civil society organisations can play a crucial role in promoting citizens' proposals (Fung 2005). They combine formal and informal channels and address various handlers at the same time. In such cases, organisational complexity is positive, as it implies that there are several entrances for the citizen into the decision-making process.

The fact that citizen proposals often must pass several veto points in the city government is one reason why the programme officers are eager to manage citizens' expectations. In complex organisations, citizens' impact does not depend solely on programme officers' openness and will, nor on their access to own leaders. Programme officers also need access to leaders and experts in the sector agencies they are dependent on. Hence, we can expect that they select citizen proposals they themselves control the implementation of, or proposals they find easy to handle through the system. Font et al. (2018) described such behaviour as 'cherry picking'. This tendency towards cherry picking and the programme officer's emphasis on managing expectation does constitute a risk that citizens only are invited to participate in 'trivial issues' (Fung 2015, 521), and not in matters that truly concern them. This is the reason that the citizen activists of Tøyen gave for not taking part in the programme plan. However, system actors do more than pick among citizens proposals; we find evidence that they also are proactive. The ABI-programme office initiates citizen participation through experiments with tactical urbanism (Tøyen square) and participatory budgeting (Kolstadgata) regarding temporal installations and activities. In the case of Tøyen Square, this initiative was taken in cooperation with the city environmental agency. The ability to refer to or back up their arguments with citizen support gives legitimacy to the case within the political administrative system. Therefore, civil servants refer to, and even sometimes initiate citizen participation, to improve the odds of realising their own solution. We interpret the programme office and planning agency's participatory initiative regarding the Tøyen square as an effort to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the political leadership and the private landowners. They could argue that their choice to drop the initial plan of the landlords did promote the interests of the citizens. Hence, our findings support previous studies concluding that public administrators are instrumental in their approach to citizen participation (Eckerd and Heidelberg 2020). The same can be said about elected politicians; they

are not only open to listen to citizen lobbyists, but they also actively seek out to local citizens to find cases to promote themselves as citizen representatives. Both strategies strengthen the politicians' chance of re-election.

For the insider boundary spanners, their instrumental use of citizen participation does not contradict their obligation to represent citizens or take care of citizens concerns. They see both as parts of their role, whether as a programme officer, city planner or elected politician. In the same way as citizen activists combine formal participatory channels with actions and lobbying towards representative government actors, insider politicians and civil servants combine a conscientious handling of citizens' proposals with an active use of citizen participation as an instrument of representative government. Such interrelation between participation and representation is probably inevitable when citizen participation is about delivering input to decisions made by representative government. Again, organisational complexity seems to trigger dynamics that enable participation impact.

Conclusion

Designing participatory arrangements that avoid system veto points might be preferable from the point of view of citizen impact (Fung 2006, 2015; Font et al. 2018), but it is seldom feasible or even desirable from the perspective of representative government (Hertting and Kugelberg 2018). The present study shows that system actors not only constitute veto points; they can also be advocates or handlers who actively channel citizen proposals through the political-administrative system, and even initiate citizen participation.

In all three cases presented in this article, system 'insiders' take action to channel citizen proposals through the decision-making process. Far from being successful every time, citizens' impact seems to depend on such handling. Even in cases where citizen participation is linked to the formal decision-making processes, active handling has an influence on the fate of the proposals by channelling them through various veto points. Our study indicates that boundary spanners are as important in the post-participation phase as they are during participation. Furthermore, our study indicate that institutional factors impact the boundary spanners' handling of citizen proposals. Hence, there is a need for both scientist and practitioners to focus on arranging for and facilitating the handling of citizen proposals in this phase.

We study the system actors handling of citizen proposals in Oslo, Norway. System actors' positive attitudes towards citizen participation make Norway an interesting case for such a study, but this also constrains the possibility to generalise our findings to systems that are less favourable to citizen participation. We have compared three cases with different linkages to government decision making processes. However, they do also differ in other ways, so we cannot rule out that differences in handling are caused by, for example, the variety in costs

the cases put on the city government. In any case, we believe that the paradox of organisational complexity is relevant for other cases and systems. Further studies are needed to investigate how this varies across political-administrative systems.

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Appendix

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List of interviews

Interviewee	Position	Interview date
Politician 1	Mayor	25.06.2019
Politician 2	Chair of the Gamle Oslo district's urban development committee	15.03.2019
Politician 3	Chair of the Gamle Oslo district council	26.05.2019
Politician 4	Vice-chair of the Gamle Oslo district counci	04.03.2020
Bureaucrat 3	Communication officer, the Agency for Urban Environment	10.04.2019
Civil servant 1	Head of Department, Gamle Oslo district administration	15.01.2019
Civil servant 2	Chief Program Officer, the district's area-based initiative (ABI)	01.02.2019
Civil servant 3	Manager, the Agency for Urban Environment	04.06.2019
Civil servant 4	Chief District Officer, Gamle Oslo	03.06.2019
Civil servant 5	Program Officer, district's area-based initiative	21.11.2018
Civil servant 6	Head of department, the Agency for Urban Environment	05.02.2019
Civil servant 7	Project manager, Agency for Urban Development	22.05.2019
Civil servant 8	Leader, the ABI local board	04.03.2020
Civil servant 9	Principal, Tøyen school	22.01.2019
Resident 1	Contact person, 'Tøyeninitiativet'	21.01.2019
Resident 2	Vice chairman, Sterling sport club	28.01.2019
Resident 3	Contact person, 'Tøyenkampanjen'	03.06.2019
Resident 4	Leader, Parents Working Committee, Tøyen school	24.06.2019
Resident 5	Resident representative, Tøyen Square association	28.01.2020
Resident 6-9	Resident members of the ABI local board	12.06.2019
Consultant 1	Employee, Growlab	06.06.2019
Consultant 2	Manager, Byverkstedet	18.06.2019
Consultant 3	Consultant, Tøyen Square association	11.01.2019
Consultant 4-5	Employees, Grindaker arkitekter	20.06.2019