Area-based initiatives and urban democracy

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ABSTRACT

Area-based initiatives (ABIs) set out to improve livability and living conditions in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods by making use of extensive citizen participation. ABIs are often criticized for constituting a form of undemocratic tokenism; this creates the illusion that residents have a say over urban development because citizens are only given consultative power. This paper takes a different perspective. We follow the 'systemic turn' in democratic theory, which addresses how direct citizen participation can reduce problems of inclusion, communication, and collective action created by defects in representative democracy. We find evidence that our case, the Grønland-Tøyen ABI in Oslo, Norway, at its best, is able to include new, previously marginalized groups in formulating a collective will that eventually impact city government policy. We argue that these cases show the potential of ABIs to enhance government effectiveness, as the participatory process creates preferable solutions to those produced by city experts. We also argue that it is the narrow scope of the participation schemes, rather than the lack of power devolved to citizens, that limits the ABIs contribution to urban democracy. This hinders the ABI's ability to address social justice and puts the legitimacy of the participatory arrangements at risk.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, cities throughout Europe have launched area-based initiatives (ABIs) to improve the livability and living conditions in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Citizen involvement has been a key component in achieving these goals, typically consisting of authorities consulting with the local population when implementing its measures. However, participating citizens are often not granted a decisive say over the measures implemented in their neighborhoods (Atkinson & Zimmermann, 2018; Ruud, Barlindhaug, and Staver, 2019; Savini, 2011). This has caused some to question the ABIs contribution to democratic urban governance, claiming it constitutes a form of tokenism and creates an illusion of resident participation in urban development (Blanc & Beaumont, 2005; Reichborn-Kjennerud & Ophaug, 2018). We agree that this is a relevant criticism. However, we also argue that it can overlook how innovations like ABIs can contribute to democracy, without necessarily granting the local population the definitive decision-making power.

From our perspective, marginalization and poor living conditions in these neighborhoods are often a result of deficits in the governance of these cities. If ABIs can make authorities more responsive to the grievances and desires of residents living in deprived urban areas, they will enhance the urban democracy. We are inspired by the recent systemic

and problem-oriented turn in democratic theory (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Warren, 2017). This turn emphasizes that the implementation of innovative procedures, which connects citizens directly to the policy- and decision-making processes, can make democratic systems more democratic than they would be without them. At their best, these procedures can improve democratic values such as legitimacy, effectiveness, and social justice, even if they do not directly delegate decision-making authority to local residents. They can do so by linking participation to key decision-making processes (Beauvais and Warren (2019) either directly or by enhancing marginalized groups capacity to participate and facilitate and convene arenas where they can exert this capacity (Agger & Jensen, 2015).

To illustrate this point, we examine the Grønland and Tøyen ABI in Oslo, Norway. This initiative provides a platform for marginalized residents to share their views on policy issues, fosters spaces for deliberation, and offers opportunities for citizens to influence government decisions. Although ABIs like the one in Oslo have limitations, particularly in terms of their ability to empower citizens to address broader issues affecting their neighborhoods, it is important to recognize that they can still make significant contributions to democracy beyond simply increasing citizen power. Scholars who tend to focus only on the power dimension of ABIs, often inspired by Arnstein (1969) participation ladder, overlook other potential contributions to democracy. In the

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present paper, we argue that the ABI we investigate remedied certain deficits in inclusion, communication, and collective action in the representative institutions of Oslo, despite its limitations.

We begin this paper by outlining the rationale behind citizen participation in ABIs, followed by a short literature review, and the theoretical framework that informs our research, before we provide an overview of the methods we used to collect and analyze data. We will then introduce the Grønland and Tøyen ABI, our case study, and our analyses of how this approach enabled citizens to participate in policy- and decision-making processes. Finally, we will discuss the broader implications of these findings for urban democracy, including how ABIs can contribute to more inclusive and responsive governance practices. Overall, this paper aims to shed light on the potential of ABIs to enhance democratic practices, and we will conclude by summarizing our key arguments and highlighting areas for further research.

2. Theory and previous literature

2.1. Marginalization, gentrification, and politics

ABIs were first introduced in the 1980s and 1990s with the aim of improving livability and living conditions in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Since then, they have become increasingly popular in European urban policy, with examples including programs like the "40 Neighborhoods Program" in the Netherlands, the "Contrat de Ville" in France, "Neighborhood Contracts" in Italy, the "Social City Program" in Germany, the "Single Regeneration Budget" in the UK, "Kvarterløft" in Denmark, "Storstadssatsingen" in Sweden, and "Områdeløft" in Norway. These programs typically involve physical renewal projects, as well as interventions in areas such as education, employment, culture, health, and leisure activities.

The Grønland and Tøyen neighborhoods in Oslo are two examples of disadvantaged neighborhoods that have been the focus of ABIs. These neighborhoods have relatively high levels of unemployment, poverty, and inadequate housing and community spaces, resulting in poor living conditions for children and youths who lack access to public playgrounds, sport and leisure facilities, youth clubs, and other activities. The area also has a relatively high proportion of social housing, with many recipients of public assistance, recently arrived immigrants, large families living in small flats, and a high turnover rate (Brattbakk et al., 2015). Even though not impoverished to the same extent as inner cities in US cities or the European urban peripheries, residents in these neighborhoods face many of the same problems of territorial stigmatization (Wacquant, 2007). The area, however, is undergoing a transformation as young, highly educated, white middle-class people move in, causing house prices to rise and poorer residents to move out (Huse, 2014). Just as in most other major cities around the world (Porter & Shaw, 2008), Oslo's urban policies are largely devised to attract investments and middle class residents to the inner city. This agenda is pushed and supported by corporate developers aiming to transform these neighborhoods into areas appealing to the middle class (Andersen, Eline Ander, & Skrede, 2020). Ironically, ABIs and other urban regeneration programs can be seen as part of a neoliberal strategy to achieve gentrification rather than improvement for those who already reside in the relatively impoverished inner city areas (Smith, 2002; Vernegg, 2019). The Grønland and Tøyen ABI has also been accompanied by some attempts by the municipality to sell out social housing and thereby causing residents living on social assistance to move. This displacement, however, has only been partial and resulted in what Andersen et al. (2020) call pockets of gentrification, rather than a complete metamorphosis of the areas.

Oslo, like other European cities, has a "blended democracy" (Gagnon, 2018) that incorporates representative institutions such as elections, legislative assemblies, political parties, and government bureaucracies, as well as formal corporatist channels of interest representation and informal lobbying. There is also a wide range of institutions and avenues for collective will formation, including pressure and protests, as well as traditional and social media (Mansbridge et al., 2012). However, vulnerable resident groups are often weakly represented through these channels, with evidence showing that representative governments tend to prioritize median voters in their welfare spending (Kang & Powell Jr., 2010), and furthermore, members of vulnerable groups, such as low-educated citizens and immigrants, are less likely to be recruited as political representatives in assemblies like city councils (Cotta & Best, 2007). Corporatist channels also tend to exclude groups with weaker member bases, which leads to their interests being disregarded (Pierre, 1999, p. 381). The ABI is surrounded by this broader 'political ecology' (Smith, 2019) of various points of contact between citizens and the government, such as the election channel, mass media or activism. This co-existence can influence both the ability of the ABI and the ability of these other contact points to address deficiencies in the democratic urban governance.

According to Atkinson and Zimmermann (2018), extensive citizen participation is a common characteristic of most ABI approaches in Europe. The rationale behind this idea is that citizen participation is assumed to have positive effects on both the program outcomes and the neighborhood's social capital (Fröding, Elander, & Eriksson, 2011, p. 103). The Grønland-Tøyen ABI aims to include people who live, work, or use the area in decisions about how the community will develop (Oslo kommune, 2022). Underlying this aim is the recognition that vulnerable residents in disadvantaged areas are politically marginalized by the mixture of institutions and contact points that characterize urban governance in Oslo, which does not take their needs, preferences, and opinions into consideration.

2.2. Area-based initiatives and democracy – a short literature review

ABIs are devised out of the belief that the quality of the neighborhood affects the well-being and life-chances of individual residents (NOU, 2020:16). Critical scholars point out that the causes of poverty and social exclusion cannot be eradicated at the local scale but are the result of structural forces and policies at other levels of the state concerning employment, incomes and housing (Rees, Power, & Taylor, 2007). More positive scholars often counter that ABI goals are less ambitious, and normally focuses on making smaller improvements in the neighborhoods in the hope of countering negative spirals of crime, unemployment, drop-outs and physical degeneration (Ruud, Barlindhaug, and Staver, 2019, p. 21). Typically, ABIs apply both 'hard' and 'soft' measures. Hard measures are physical restructuring and upgrading, and improving local services, in particular public housing. Softer measures include fostering social capital, building community capacities and encouraging resident engagement in the various stages of the programs. One is engagement in decision-making about what the program resources are allocated to. Another has to do with the implementation of the projects that are included in the program. The third is mobilization of citizens to be part of the activities that the program funds or initiates (Fröding et al., 2011, p. 103). As Burton, Goodlad, and Croft (2006) sum up, the assumption is that citizen participation benefits individuals who feel more valued and gain self-confidence and self-esteem, the community who improves its social ties that can be channeled into collective action, and the programs that make better decisions and improved outcomes because these will be perceived as more legitimate and gain from insights and knowledge from locals.

At large, the scholarly literature has focused on the hard measures, and goals such as health (McGowan et al., 2021; Rong, Ristevski, & Carroll, 2023), integration of migrants (Zhuang, 2023), the degree of segregation and decay (Andersen, 2002) and general satisfaction and well-being among residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Lawless, Foden, Wilson, & Beatty, 2010; Townsend et al., 2020). There is less research on the community involvement and capacity building among residents. Moreover, evaluations of the success of the involvement often differ substantially. Whereas the official evaluation in Sweden focuses

on deficiencies of the participation (SOU, 2005:29), the one in the UK essentially found that it had provided beneficial results (Batty et al., 2010). This might be due to the differences in the type of programs that were adopted, as well as implementation strategies, but more likely testament to the fact that soft outcomes such as citizen participation are notoriously hard to measure and that there are no shared standards of assessment (Burton et al., 2006).

There are a few common topics in the literature on citizen participation in ABIs. One is who participates. ABIs are supposed to engage disadvantaged residents, but several observers point out that ABIs are vulnerable to structural exclusion mechanisms. Since participation normally is self-selected, those who are most likely to participate are residents with the "free time to participate in meetings, literacy and familiarity with standard meeting procedures, knowledge of local political matters, and access to likeminded citizens and networks" (Agger & Larsen, 2007, p. 7), or who belong to a segment of especially active or 'elite' residents (Atkinson & Zimmermann, 2018, p. 21; SOU, 2005:29, p. 177). These studies rely on qualitative methods. One study using a representative sample, on the other hand, finds no differences between participants and non-participants with regards to income, education and gender. Nevertheless, it finds that migrants systematically participate less than those without migrant background (Fröding et al., 2011).

Another topic is that of communication. Participatory processes often involve deliberations among participants, as well as between residents and agents from the government and voluntary organizations (Atkinson & Zimmermann, 2018). Agger and Larsen (2007, p. 9) find that 'discursive exclusion' is omnipresent in these since the processes are dominated by planners and local authorities, who tend to "exterminate" views that are deemed "unrealistic, unobtainable, politically controversial or otherwise non-desirable by the authorities." Another challenge is the lack of representativity of views included in the deliberative processes. Instead, the perspectives of hardline community activists dominate (Ruud, Barlindhaug, & Staver, 2019, p. 83).

As we have already mentioned, several studies deal with the questions of authority and power. Most observers find that the participatory approaches of the ABIs are primarily informative or consultative (Aikins & Krane, 2010; Atkinson & Zimmermann, 2018; Reichborn-Kjennerud & Ophaug, 2018; Savini, 2011; SOU, 2005:29). The literature point to several obstacles to enhance citizens' influence over program agenda, measures, and outcomes. Public service institutions, for example, tend to set the agenda from the outset of the programs with few opportunities for participants to add their own topics (Agger & Larsen, 2007, p. 10). Another obstacle is that most participation processes only concerns the execution of the projects that already has been decided (SOU, 2005:29, p. 177). Furthermore, professional staff as well as top managers in planning departments connected to ABIs are often unwilling to share power (Atkinson & Zimmermann, 2018, p. 20).

In other words, the research has a dim perspective on the possibilities of ABIs to contribute to the empowerment of disadvantaged residents, and hence also urban democracy. On the other side, however, some scholars argue that ABIs can empower residents in disadvantaged areas by enhancing their capacity (meaning skills, knowledge and tools) to engage in a meaningful manner with participatory processes (Brown & Baker, 2019; Jackson & Ronzi, 2021; Nasca, Changfoot, & Hill, 2018; Rong et al., 2023). Agger and Jensen (2015) goes further by arguing that ABIs not only can contribute to develop such capacities, but they even can mediate, facilitate, and convene arenas in which community actors can exert this capacity and affect government policies. They call this 'linking' social capital. Important are resources such as financial support, help with practical issues such as finding the right person in the city's bureaucracy, and trust between local residents and municipal institutions. Neighborhood organizations supported by ABIs can also play a role in connecting people from low-income neighborhoods to the labor market or welfare bureaucracies (Custers & Engbersen, 2022). This is important in our analysis of the Grønland and Tøyen ABI.

2.3. Direct citizen participation and the functions of democracy

Perceiving democracy as rule by the people, we follow Warren (2017) who claim that any polity must fulfill three functions to be characterized as democratic. These are: empowered inclusion, collective will formation and collective decision making. Rather than focusing on specific models of democracy (such as aggregative, participatory, or deliberative democracy), this systemic (Mansbridge et al., 2012) and problem-based approach (Warren, 2017) asks how different mechanisms, such as voting, direct participating, and deliberating can address these functions. This problem-based democratic theory is used both to identify democratic deficits within political systems and to assess whether and how political innovations respond to such deficits (Beauvais & Warren, 2019). We apply this perspective to the city. The more a city fulfills these functions, the higher is the degree of its urban democracy.

We have pointed to city governments' lack of responsiveness towards the desires and grievances of the residents of disadvantageous neighborhoods as a main deficiency of urban government. According to this theory, ABIs can contribute to democracy by bringing marginalized groups into the policy process and provide participatory spaces for underrepresented groups to formulate their own agenda. To enhance *inclusion*, the ABI's must reach out to those excluded from conventional arenas. Targeted recruitment can be a useful strategy to reach out these groups, and to counteract biases caused by self-selection (Fung, 2006, 2015). Furthermore, these marginalized groups must be able to impact the *collective agenda and will formation*. A careful process design can counter domination of well-educated and articulated participants and government actors. Besides of inviting citizen to participate in specific matters, ABIs can promote inclusion and collective will formation indirectly, by enhance the capacity of residents or resident groups to participate, and by supporting neighborhood organizations. Such efforts can strengthen the residents' capacity to participate in ABI-organized participatory processes as well as in other political processes and arenas.

The third democratic function political systems should fulfill is to *empower the collective* and enable them to achieve results (Warren, 2017). However, as previously mentioned, ABIs often fall short in this regard by being merely informative or consultative (Aikins & Krane, 2010; Atkinson & Zimmermann, 2018; Blanc & Beaumont, 2005; Reichborn-Kjennerud & Ophaug, 2018; Savini, 2011; SOU, 2005:29). According to Beauvais and Warren (2019), inclusions and deliberations must translate into actionable, legitimate decisions and the executive capacities required to implement them, but this is not the same as saying that the authorities must devolve decisions to the local community. That is one option, but another is to link ABIs to key sites of decision-making, which necessitates ensuring that citizen participation informs the (most) significant decision-making processes. One way to do this is to strengthen the residents' 'linking' social capital (Agger & Jensen, 2015) by capacity building, and by convening arenas where local residents can express their collective will to decision makers.

Critics of ABIs often use Arnstein (1969) participation ladder to argue that ABIs offer few meaningful participation opportunities. Arnstein values citizen participation schemes based on how well they redistribute power to excluded citizens in political and economic processes, placing full citizen control at the top of the participation ladder. We argue that power also depends on the scope of the issue. Full citizen control at the local level can be less empowering for residents than consultations on city-wide, regional, or national issues because most significant policy or resource redistribution decisions occur at a higher level than the local neighborhood. A neighborhood corporation controlling its own community funds in a deprived area may end up making decisions on minor or trivial issues; this is also known as the "park bench problem" (Fung, 2015). If consulted on significant issues, they could effectively have a greater say in policies and budget priorities that affect their lives. Typically, this would regard policies and budget priorities decided at higher levels of government, such as the city as a whole or at

the state or nation-wide level.

2.4. Responsiveness and the quality of democratic decision making

To develop this perspective even further, there are according to Fung (2006, 2015), a number of other positive effects from bringing under-privileged and politically marginalized groups into the policy process that neither exclusively depend on delegation of decision-making authority. These include the legitimacy, effectiveness, and social justice of urban policy and governance.

Democratic legitimacy refers to the acceptance of a political system by those who are bound by its decisions (Klausen & Sweeting, 2005). The opportunity to influence politicians and hold them accountable through voting in elections gives citizens "good reason to support or obey" public policy (Fung, 2015, p. 515). Another source of legitimacy is the possibility to influence policy through direct participation (Fung, 2006). Equal voting rights for all citizens are fundamental for the legitimacy of representative democracy. Similarly, inclusive or representative direct participation is important for enhancing the legitimacy of a participatory system. This is especially significant in areas with mixed populations of deprived neighborhoods that have different interests and demands. Participatory processes that are dominated by some affected groups and co-opted discussions will not contribute to the legitimacy of final decisions (Fung, 2006).

Regarding effectiveness, Fung (2015, p. 517) write that "governance is effective to the extent that governance arrangements are capable of solving the substantive problems they are set to address." Lack of representation of vulnerable groups in the policy process risks excluding their experiences from informing policy solutions. Those who 'wear the shoes' have valuable experiences, and deliberation among a diversity of participants can enhance the likelihood of identifying "superior solutions" to those of experts (Landemore, 2013; Peters & Pierre, 2016, p. 58). Direct citizen participation can provide information and knowledge to complex problems, and resources in the implementation process, which can improve the effectiveness of the government.

Fung (2006, 2015) also argued that participation can advance social justice. Injustice often results from political inequality caused by either the domination of a numerical majority or the domination of powerful minority groups. Incorporating previously excluded people and creating and delivering services that particularly benefit these groups can contribute to social justice. To promote social justice, ABIs must invite citizen voices to express their opinions on matters that affect the distribution of welfare.

3. Data and case study approach

Our case is the Tøyen and Grønland ABI in Oslo, Norway. The purpose of the case study is to elicit if, when and why an ABI can be desirable from a democratic viewpoint. In this sense, it constitutes a normative case study, which, unlike causal and interpretive case studies, deals with understanding how important public values can be realized (Thacher, 2006). This does not amount to a purely normative study, or what is often referred to as ideal theory (Valentini, 2012). Instead, we collect empirical data from a real-life case, utilizing a multi-method approach involving document analysis, observation of participatory processes, and interviews with key stakeholders. These are nine activists from the neighborhood, four politicians in the city district and city government, nine public administrators working with or in the ABI, three consultants who facilitated participatory processes, and two architects involved in an ABI renovation project. These semi-structured interviews, conducted between February 2019 and March 2020, were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the qualitative data-software NVivo. The data were coded according to predefined categories, as well as relevant topics occurring in the material as we analyzed it. We have not applied a specific analytical tool to these data, other than treating them as expert interviews (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019) since we

selected the interviewees strategically for their expertise and knowledge of participation processes. Among other things, this implies that we have been aware of these experts presenting strategic and not only 'neutral' information. However, the neutrality of the information is less relevant in our paper, since it has been important for us to evoke these actors' normative perspectives on the activities they have been involved in.

In addition to interview data, we supplemented our research with official documents describing the participatory arrangements of the ABI, as well as observations of a participatory budgeting process, meetings of the Steering Committee of the ABI, and the participation website www. gamleosloinvolverer.no. This mixed-method approach and data triangulation provide us with in-depth knowledge of the case and its contexts, which informed our interpretation of the interviews. We examined both formal participation channels and other channels and connection points highlighted by the interviewees. While our study does not provide a complete picture of all channels and connection points linking residents in the area to the broader political system, it does offer insights into those that the interviewees themselves consider important.

Our data pertain to the design of participatory arrangements and the interviewees' perceptions of their functions and effects, rather than actual effects concerning inclusion, deliberation, and impact. This is due to our focus on the mixture of participatory opportunities included in the ABI and their contribution to democracy. However, it is also a limitation of our study, which highlights the potential rather than actual contribution of the ABI to democracy.

4. Analyses

4.1. Reseidents participation in the Grønland-Tøyen ABI

The Grønland-Tøyen ABI originated in 2014. Unlike ABIs elsewhere in Europe, Norwegian ABIs – including the Grønland-Tøyen ABI – work less with renovation and upgrading of public housing quarters (Ruud et al., 2019). Instead, the program aims to improve living conditions in disadvantaged neighborhoods, with a focus on community development, child and youth services, education, and employment. The Grønland-Tøyen ABI is part of a city-wide program that provides extra support and services to the most disadvantaged areas, but the city district of Gamle Oslo manages the community development aspect of the program, as it is responsible for the Grønland and Tøyen neighborhoods. The municipality of Oslo has delegated various responsibilities to its city districts, such as managing kindergartens, youth clubs, and health centers, as well as integrating refugees and immigrants and providing care for the elderly. However, the city and/or state government handles crucial issues for residents' well-being, such as housing, employment, education, sports facilities, funding of new public spaces, and policing. The Grønland-Tøyen ABI had a budget of 87,8 million NOK in 2022, involving funding from both the district and the city. In comparison to the overall budgets of the district and the city's budget this sum is small. In 2022, it constituted around 2 % of the district's and 0,06 % of the city's budget.

The ABI places significant importance on resident participation, which is integral to its program. It conducts participatory processes annually in connection with the program plan, as well as for specific projects. The program plan is informed by citizens through multiple participatory processes, including workshops and café-dialogues, where residents can suggest and discuss plan content. The ABI has also used a digital participatory process through a citizen engagement platform (gamleosloinvolverer.no) to select plan priorities. The ABI also engages in participatory mechanisms for specific projects, which include public meetings, workshops, participatory budgeting, online consultations, and more innovative methods where participation facilitators construct temporary installations, such as benches, concert stages, and playground equipment, and observe their actual usage to gauge resident preferences. Furthermore, the ABI supports various community initiatives where residents take responsibility for projects to improve their

neighborhoods, such as self-organized neighborhood groups and local organizations, which it assists financially. Approximately 7 % of program funds went towards stimulating such activities between 2014 and 2018. The program also operates a community house where many of these groups conduct their activities.

4.2. The importance of the political context

To fully understand the Grønland and Tøyen ABI contribution to empowered inclusion and collective will formation, is it crucial to understand the broader 'political ecology' (Smith, 2019) of various points of contact between citizens and the government that surrounds the ABI and enables citizens to influence decisions that affect their neighborhoods. One such connection point is the election channel, where citizens elect officials at the national, city, and district levels of government in Oslo. In Norway, there is evidence of a close social distance between residents and elected officials, with frequent direct personal contact (Larsson & Skogerbø, 2018; Windsvold, 2020). The corporatist channel is another connection point, which provides access to decision-makers in land use and other urban planning issues at the city and district levels. Bureaucrats often meet with such groups during the preparation of cases for political decisions.

In this political context, certain segments of the population are effectively marginalized. The lack of political representation for residents in the Tøyen-Grønland area is evidenced by the continuous challenges faced by public housing inhabitants, the deteriorating conditions of local schools, the absence of leisure time activities for children, and other issues. Empirical research and statistics support this perspective. Representative democracy excludes many immigrants and all youths under 18 from participating in elections, and even those with voting rights are less likely to cast their votes (Bergh, Christensen, & Holmås, 2021). Furthermore, immigrants and individuals with lower levels of education have reduced opportunities for representation in decision-making councils (Kleven, 2017). In many cases, both formal corporatist methods and informal lobbying favor the opinions of white, educated, middle-class residents, rather than underrepresented groups (Falleth, Hanssen, & Saglie, 2010).

In the case of Tøyen-Grønland, neighborhood interests are channeled into the political system through the ABI, which has a unique history. The center-right minority city government and the Socialist Left Party reached a political compromise to establish the ABI. The Socialist Left Party initiated the establishment of the ABI to support the relocation of a museum of national importance out of the area, which gave the party ownership of the initiative. Following the 2015 local elections, the Socialist Left Party became part of a majority coalition that governs the city. The mayor, representing the Socialist Left Party, acknowledges her responsibility for the neighborhood, communicates regularly with representatives of various associations, and is personally familiar with many residents. However, according to our interviewees, the connection between local activists and the government is also dominated by the middle class, rather than the segments with the most urgent needs. A senior public administrator described this trend by stating, "It is the activists that we hear from. [...] The activists from the white middle class" (WP2BP1).

4.3. Inclusion

One way in which an ABI can contribute to democracy is by creating inclusive participatory spaces that represent groups that are typically excluded from elected bodies or corporatist channels (Beauvais & Warren, 2019). While the ABI invites residents to open meetings discussing program plans or public space designs, public administrators do not believe that these assemblies promote inclusiveness. As the chief administrative officer (CAO) of the city district stated, "public assemblies are not participation. They consist typically of men in their fifties who are white and represent themselves and historical interests"

(WP2BP8). Our interviews with public administrators reveal concerns about the inclusivity and representativeness of these spaces, as well as the tendency for "silent voices" such as youth, immigrants, and the elderly, to not participate in these open, self-selected processes.

To avoid the domination of well-educated, affluent, and mainly middle-class residents, the ABI combines open and targeted recruitment strategies. For example, members from a database of resource persons from marginalized local communities were invited to participate in workshops to discuss the content of the ABI's annual program plan. Similarly, the renovation plan for the park called Rudolf Nilsens Plass targeted girls from a local school, and even drug users from a clinic located next to the park. Additionally, an online participation process was conducted to select priorities for the 2021 program plan, which was combined with 'ambassadors' who were paid to reach out to groups that had previously been absent from participatory processes; the ambassadors were themselves members of the communities they recruited from. As a result, the ABI mobilized twice as many participants as previous recruitment methods (Melbøe, 2021) and recruited individuals with limited proficiency in Norwegian language.

A theme that runs through the interviews is the intention to counteract the tendency that 'strong voices' dominate the open and self-selected channels with targeted recruitment of parents with migrant backgrounds, children and adolescents from low-income families, young girls, and more:

> "There is always a danger that the chattering class gets space and is heard. We call attention to the voices that are not heard which are, after all, not silent. It's just that we don't listen." (WP2BP2).

It is difficult to assess the overall inclusiveness of the ABIs participatory processes. No one has mapped the profile of participants. However, our data strongly indicate that the ABI provides some of the most affected residents the opportunity to have a say, which other channels do not, and these residents bring new voices into the various projects that the ABI initiates. Furthermore, there is an impression among the interviewees that, compared to the time before the ABI started, the area has seen an explosion of new actors and associations voicing the interests of groups previously not heard in the policy process. As a politician at the district level expressed:

> "Previously, nobody spoke out, and one must sometimes applaud [....] what has occurred. The civil society on Tøyen has become so much more alive. There has been an explosion of stuff going on, and consequently more people [....] speak out about things." (WP2BP6).

4.4. Will formation

The quote above exemplifies how an ABI can contribute to collective will formation by creating spaces where residents, and especially marginalized groups, can formulate their own agendas and mobilize political support (Beauvais & Warren, 2019). As shown above, the focus of the ABI's participation schemes is to bring the voices of marginalized residents into the policy process. However, this often takes the form of expression of preferences, and less commonly through deliberation between participants that allow them to formulate their own collective project. This is most evident in approaches such as participatory budgeting and tactical urbanism, where participants are expected to express their preferences through voting between budget alternatives or simply how they use temporary installations in a public space. The ABI justifies these methods by saying that deliberative processes are often dominated by the more vocal middle class. According to one of the employees in the ABI, "the problem with citizen participation is that some master the verbal better than others. These are men in their fifties. No kids, women or minorities speak in open meetings. A [tactical urbanism] model reaches completely other demographics" (WP2BP9).

This does not mean that the ABI eschews methods with deliberative

components. On the contrary, their extensive use of workshops in diverse participatory processes aims to achieve consensus through deliberations between participants. The already-mentioned renovation plan for the Rudolf Nilsens Plass began with a series of workshops to express the preferences of specific groups and ended in a 'world café' where the different proposals were discussed and adapted to each other in a common design. According to the facilitator, this deliberative aspect had a very positive impact on the park plan. It had "more of a focus on play in the park, quiet areas [in addition to sport]. It became more diversified" (WP2BP9). This deliberative approach has also periodically marked the participation in formulating the annual program plan of the ABI, where a series of initial workshops on different thematic topics ends with a common deliberation and prioritization of the most valuable items for the program plan (Programkontoret, 2018). These cases illustrate that, at its best, the Grønland-Tøyen ABI creates spaces for deliberation among marginalized groups. This demonstrates that consultative processes, when inclusive and deliberative, can bring new and previously marginalized perspectives into the policy formulation process.

These deliberations also have significant limitations. We have found aspects of what Agger and Larsen (2007) call discursive exclusion through the ABI office's desire to "steer the participants' expectations" of the program plan process, which arguably constrains the scope and content of the deliberation among the participants. Another example is the ABI Steering Committee, whose most important role is to deliberate over and provide advice to the city district CAO, but the board members experience the time for preparation and the space for discussion and opinion formation as too narrow to allow for true deliberation (Engdahl & Larsen, 2020). Furthermore, in our observations of the Steering Committee's meetings, we saw repeated attempts by the CAO to limit the board members attempts to deliberate among themselves before coming to the official board sessions. The CAO described this as a form of fractionating.

Although the space for collective will formation in the formal participatory processes organized by the ABI is limited, this dimension is nurtured through the ABI's financial support to various self-organization initiatives in the neighborhood. One example is the most notable resident action groups in the area – the 'Tøyen-initiative' – which held a series of dialogues called 'the local political café', involving both residents and politicians. One of these dialogues involved a debate about how the main Tøyen Square was managed, involving the landlords. In the aftermath of this meeting, the actors initially represented in the square's management board – the landlords, the shop owners, and the city district council – accepted resident representation in the board because of local pressure. Furthermore, the ABI has supported training for youth activists and resident representatives, the Somali Education Activity's proactive neighborhood dialog and established a 'community house'. These are crucial stimuli of collective will formation in a neighborhood where these types of political activities have been low for decades – especially among migrant communities.

4.5. Empowerment

Residents are granted limited authority to make direct decisions regarding ABI matters in collective decision-making. The Grønland and Tøyen ABI regulations state that residents' demands and wishes should guide the ABI's activities, with 'guide' being a crucial term. Residents mainly play a consultative role, while elected officials in the district council hold ultimate authority over the ABI's program plan. Based on resident input, the ABI office and the city district CAO create a final proposal that is later decided upon by the district council. The Steering Committee, made up of four resident representatives, one representative from the local school, and one from the police, advises the city district CAO on the annual program plan and other relevant matters. The formal instances of residents making decisions are often limited to minor or trivial matters. For example, in participatory budgeting projects,

residents vote on which activities get funded, but this only accounts for 0.2 % of the annual ABI budget.

Our general impression from the interviews is that both politicians and administrators are eager to learn about and listen to the experiences and opinions of residents, but they do not feel obliged to follow their advice. They reserve the right to make the decision themselves, in accordance with the logic of representative democracy:

"I think that […] participation is essential. We need it. But that doesn't necessarily mean that I as a politician feel obliged to follow it. […]. We are elected to use our judgement." (WP2BP6).

Although this is true, it also conceals how residents' perspectives and preferences impact local policies in other ways. For instance, the program plan, which is decisive for the spending of the total budget of the ABI (approximately 87 million NOK in 2022 according to Bydel Gamle Oslo, 2021), is influenced by resident input. Inputs from the participatory process are integrated into the program plan proposal formulated by the Steering Committee. Even though the elected officials in the district council hold ultimate authority, they only make minor alterations to the plan presented to them by the Steering Committee. The upgrading of Rudolf Nilsens Plass is another example of participatory inputs being manifested in the final decision. The municipality's Agency for Urban Environment included all residents' proposals in their recommendations, which the city council approved. However, in another participatory process for a site named 'Olafiagangen,' the municipality did not initially include participating residents' advice. Instead, they proposed a food market with shops and restaurants for the middle class, while residents proposed using the site for a playground for kids growing up in poverty and cramped quarters. Through political pressure, residents gained support from the city government, and now their proposal has been implemented.

This latter case illustrate that politicians and active citizens prioritize alternative contact points over formal participatory institutions (Bertelsen, 2020). In our interviews, we found that direct communication with decision makers through face-to-face interaction, telephone, direct messages on social media, and email, is deemed the most effective way to influence local policies. Activists have also achieved success through direct contact with politicians and public pressure, such as in the closing of a street in front of a local school yard and securing funding for a sports arena in the neighborhood. These examples demonstrate how decisions with significant impact on the area's disadvantaged residents are made at higher government levels without formal participation processes involving local residents. While this 'scalar mismatch' poses a challenge to democratic principles, ABIs can still support self-organization among residents and provide legitimacy to local demands and strengthen the links between activists and decision-makers, even on issues outside the neighborhood. Again, looking only at the formal authority delegated to the ABI overlooks the other ways in which it empowers local communities.

5. Concluding discussion

In the Grønland-Tøyen ABI, citizens are usually only asked to express their preferences on particular issues, rather than to actively participate in deliberation or set their own agendas for the neighborhood. Even when given decision-making authority, it is typically only on minor issues, leading some to question the classification of the ABI as "real participation" according to Arnstein's ladder (Reichborn-Kjennerud & Ophaug, 2018). Whereas this is arguably true – and we do not wish to underestimate these limitations – taking a system-oriented approach to democratic theory allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ABI's contributions to democracy. This approach allows us to assess how the ABI can remedy some weaknesses of the existing, albeit blended form of urban democracy, that one finds in most democratic countries.

Through targeted recruitment, the ABI has successfully included

previously marginalized perspectives and voices in policy formulation, thus addressing deficits in inclusion of affected groups. In some cases, these voices have even influenced policy output, further enhancing responsiveness towards marginalized residents. Taking Rudolf Nilsens Plass as an example, the city government's final decision was in accordance with the participatory inputs. In this case, the inclusive and deliberative participation process enabled the city government to use the allocated resources to offer the residents a park that allowed more diversified activities and needs. This illustrates how the ABI's participation processes can enhance *effectiveness*. The discussion and deliberation informed by the experiences and knowledge of vulnerable groups enhanced the creation of a 'superior solution' (Peters & Pierre, 2016), thus improving the effectiveness of public policy (Fung, 2015).

These achievements are made possible by inclusive and deliberate participation enabling marginalized residents to formulate a collective will. The ABI's participation process was, furthermore, integrated into a formal decision-making process, creating linkages between residents and centers of authority, linkages that, together with policymakers' willingness to listen to citizen input and incorporate residents' will into the decision-making process, are crucial prerequisites for achieving such results through consultation.

By applying a system-oriented approach, it is also possible to assess the limitations of ABIs. The Grønland-Tøyen ABI does not significantly contribute to enhancing *social justice*. Social justice implies redistributing public resources to marginalized groups, such as children and youth growing up in poverty and residents in social housing in the area. However, the Grønland-Tøyen ABI's resources are insufficient to address matters of redistribution or other matters that significantly affect the welfare of marginalized groups, such as social housing conditions, employment opportunities, or racism. The ABI's participation processes involve inviting residents to express their preferences or deliberate on smaller issues, such as grants to voluntary initiatives or the upgrading of public spaces. Thus, the limitation of the ABI is related to power, but not in the same way as the Arnsteinian interpretation. In the Grønland-Tøyen ABI, residents' participation is limited because the ABI's scope is limited in terms of dealing with social justice. This 'scalar mismatch' at its worst can undermine the ABI's legitimacy. Although the targeted recruitment of politically marginalized groups into many of the ABI's participatory processes can enhance inclusion and provide legitimacy for the program, it falls short for major issues that affect the distribution of resources in the city.

When residents have been able to influence matters of broader scope, such as getting the city government to invest in a sports arena in the neighborhood, it has been through public pressure outside of the participation process facilitated by the ABI. On the other hand, the ABI does support social justice endeavors by empowering self-organizing initiatives among residents – thus enabling the local community to mobilize for the sports arena. Local organizations that took actively part in the mobilization against the food market at Olafiagangen and against the city governments plan for selling out social housing were also supported by ABI-funds. The success of these mobilizations demonstrates that interests other than those being pro-gentrification were voiced and eventually heard. These observations support arguments about how ABIs can contribute to enhancing marginalized resident groups capacity to voice their concerns and be heard by the decision makers (Agger & Jensen, 2015).

We argue that the narrow scope of the ABI's participatory schemes is the most significant barrier to the Grønland-Tøyen ABI's contribution to urban governance's responsiveness to the needs and grievances of the most vulnerable residents. Expanding the scope of direct citizen participation to include more important matters can help address some of the weaknesses and limitations of the ABI's participatory schemes. One the other hand, we argue that the ABI still makes valuable contributions to the democracy of Oslo despite its imperfections. Its emphasis on targeted recruitment has successfully included marginalized groups, and in some cases has pushed city authorities to implement policies that

better suit local needs. A systemic approach to democracy, examining the ABI in a broader political ecology, enable us to unveil this mixed contribution to urban democracy.

Our normative case study of one ABI is dependent on the context in which it was implemented, which was particularly benevolent because the city government has a high stake in the ABI and especially close bonds with local activists. ABIs can have different consequences on urban democracy in other political contexts, where less supportive parties are in power, or where the distance between residents and representatives are longer. To better understand the interrelations between ABIs and the broader political contexts, there is a need for further studies applying the system-based approach to comparative studies or case studies in cities representing different political systems than Oslo.

Our case shows that ABIs in general have the potential to enhance urban governance's responsiveness to the needs and opinions of vulnerable residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods. However, the restricted scope of the ABI's participatory schemes limits its contribution to democracy and particularly its ability to remedy social injustice. The formal participation arrangements do not invite citizens to deliberate and impact redistributive matters, while city politicians are responsive to lobbying and mass mobilization, which may weaken or undermine the legitimacy of both the ABI's participatory schemes and representative democracy.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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