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Hearing the quiet voices: Listening as democratic action in a Norwegian neighborhood

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how modes of listening and ideologies of democratic action are intertwined, through the example of a multicultural neighborhood in Oslo, Norway. While much work on language and democracy focuses on speakers, this article instead interrogates how a government listens to citizens, and how different conceptualizations of what listening is index different understandings of democratic action. While the Oslo municipality sees listening as a form of legitimation for governmental policymaking, local residents try to create a more open form of listening, which they see to be a better way of addressing the needs of a more diverse citizenry. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with municipal employees, neighborhood organizations, and residents, the analysis focuses on the participation frameworks and interactional genres that my interlocutors take to be instances of democratic listening, and how listening practices are intertwined with imaginations of a more inclusive future. (Listening, democracy, participatory politics, Norway)*

INTRODUCTION

Tøyen, a neighborhood in central Oslo, Norway, has what can feel like a constant stream of public meetings. Sometimes multiple times per week, Tøyen residents have the opportunity to meet with municipal or national political leaders and policymakers, and to provide feedback on planned local projects. Most of the participatory political opportunities in Tøyen are a part of a local ‘Area Boost’ (*områdeløft*) that began in 2013, a fixed-term municipal initiative common in underprivileged areas of Oslo, which usually consists of a mix of aesthetic improvements and social programming, especially for children.¹ These initiatives provide opportunities for the municipality to experiment with new, more participatory forms of governance. In Tøyen, these have included participatory budgeting, public meetings that incorporate aspects of design thinking, and the creation of a resident board to advise the city district manager in policy and funding decisions. Yet during my fieldwork in the neighborhood, residents, research reports, and the news media frequently reported that the Boost program was not actually listening to residents, particularly not to the ‘quiet voices’ (*stille stemmene*), a category that

usually referred to residents of minoritized background, youth in particular. Even the people who attended most of these public meetings complained that they were not being listened to. The goal of this article is to explain why that is, looking closely at the participation frameworks, interactional genres, and material traces of meetings between governmental representatives and Tøyen residents.

Frustrations around not really being listened to are common in the social sciences literature on participatory political initiatives, including those in Tøyen (Reichborn-Kjennerud & Ophaug 2018; Larsen 2019; Reichborn-Kjennerud, McShane, Middha, & Ruano 2021; Reichborn-Kjennerud, Ruano, & Sorando 2021). This work fits within a larger discussion about the efficacy and impact of citizen participation in urban renewal projects across Europe and the rest of the world (e.g. Blakely 2010; Michels & De Graaf 2010; Savini 2011; Stapper & Duyvendak 2020). Yet while these previous studies take for granted residents' complaints of 'not being listened to', and are interested in how to make participation more 'successful', in this article I want to pause and ask what listening actually looks and sounds like—for residents and for the municipal government. What are the participant roles and interactional genres that get taken up as listening, and are these shared between municipal employees and neighborhood residents? Participatory political initiatives are ostensibly moments for the state to listen to civil society, but how is that listening performed, who is the audience of performative state listening, and how do citizens make themselves into listenable subjects? I show in this article how Tøyen provides a lens through which we can examine what an attention to listening can tell us about ideologies of democracy, and inversely what participatory political projects can tell us about what it means to listen.

Much linguistic anthropological work on political participation focuses on the ways that representative democracy depends on citizens' 'having a voice', where 'voice' becomes a salient metaphor for power (Keane 1999; Kramer 2013; Kunreuther 2014; see also Hymes 1981, 1996). In this context, political empowerment is equated with 'giving a voice to' individuals, making them into modern Lockean liberal subjects who are capable of using language to advance their own independent self-interests (Bauman & Briggs 2003). Aside from a few exceptions (Slotta 2015, 2017), most anthropologists concerned with political language tend to focus on speakers, analyzing performance genres and the 'effectiveness of speaking' (Brenneis & Myers 1984:3; see also Bloch 1975; Brenneis 1978; Irvine 1979; Hull 2010). While similar metaphors of voice as political action are also common in Norway—as in most Germanic languages, the same word, *stemme* in Norwegian, means both 'voice' and 'vote'—my interlocutors flipped the focus of language and political subject formation, focusing less on the citizen as speaker and more on the government as listener. I never heard anyone living in Tøyen described as 'voiceless' or needing to be given a voice. What I did hear frequently was the need for politicians to become better listeners to the voices that were 'quiet' because they came from people who did not fit the typical white, middle-class Norwegian citizen. Every resident was presumed to have a voice already, and the

question instead was how policymakers could better hear those voices. As Stauffer (2015) has argued in a broader context, this shift from giving voice to learning how to listen is a powerful critique of the autonomous liberal subject, drawing focus to the ways that intersubjectivity and the ability to be heard are integral to subject-formation. We as subjects are fundamentally shaped by our interactions with other subjects, and the failure to be heard well can lead to isolation and powerlessness. Similarly, my interlocutors, both residents and municipal employees, agreed that it was the government's ethical responsibility to listen to all residents, although they disagreed on what it would mean to listen successfully. As this article shows, while the municipality designed listening sessions still based in the assumption that residents could all become Lockean liberal subjects, some residents pushed for a different kind of listening that would more adequately hear the heterogenous population.

Struggles over how institutions hear individuals are not unique to Oslo. In the United States, Carr has shown how social service agencies pre-establish ways of hearing client 'types', even in non-therapeutic contexts (2009). Yet while Carr's focus is on how actors inhabit these institutionally established roles in ways that are politically efficacious, I am interested in the ways my interlocutors turn the tables and instead question what a government's listening to citizens actually entails. In asking this question, this article is inspired by work in sound studies and an anthropological focus on listening. That scholarship has focused on styles of listening, or 'listening genres' (Marsilli-Vargas 2014), as a kind of total social fact, through which we can better understand, for example, the cultivation of certain kinds of ethical personhood (Hirschkind 2001), modern subjectivity (Inoue 2003), changes in forms of social organization (Johnson 1995), or historical and contemporary co-naturalizations of language and race (Rosa & Flores 2017).

I follow these scholars in conceptualizing listening as more than just the mere technicalities of auditory perception. Instead, listening practices among my interlocutors required particular states of mind, dispositions, and interactional frameworks. The event of listening included not only a moment of auditory or visual reception, but also the uptake of signs in the future as proof of listening, or the lack of it. However, the exact signs of listening differed between my interlocutors. For many municipal employees, listening to residents was about listening FOR signs within residents' accounts of their personal experiences and opinions, which could then be taken up as a form of legitimation for policy decisions. Residents participating in these participatory events, however, saw listening as requiring more of an open mind, where instead of listening for signs, the government should listen TO residents ON THEIR OWN TERMS. Their understanding of listening included both their perception of municipal employees' attitude toward them during public meetings, and an engagement with the surrounding environment: watching a public housing apartment block continue to deteriorate while the new, multi-billion Norwegian kroner Munch Museum towered over the nearby waterfront was a sign to many residents that the municipality was not actually listening to them.

These disagreements over what it meant for the municipality to listen to residents point to shifting notions of what counts as democratic action, which, at least in Scandinavia, is fundamental to the existence of the welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990; Wahl 2011). A government's ability to listen to all its citizens is fundamental to a particularly Norwegian conception of democratic political authority, entwined with ideals of egalitarianism and consensus. Frequently, this is glossed as the 'Law of Jante', the idea that 'you are not special, and you are not any better than the rest of us', a *you* that includes political leaders. As Gullestad (1989) has shown, Norwegian ideas of equality rely on a perception of sameness, where differences, especially those related to rank, are deemphasized in everyday social interactions. While this understanding of egalitarianism can create pressure toward conformity, it can also work to legitimize democratic institutions. Vike has extended Gullestad's observations on egalitarianism to his analysis of Norwegian state institutions, arguing that elected politicians' success relies on 'the ability to demonstrate a subordination to the will of the majority' (2018:20). Failing to do so can result in a politician's being accused of 'not 'really listen[ing]', being arrogant, and eventually being voted out of office (Vike 2018:8). Vike connects this attitude to the universalist ethos of the Norwegian welfare state, where rights to entitlements are tied to citizenship, not means testing, and how relatively easy and natural it is for Norwegian citizens to make legitimate claims on the state (see also Hernes 1988). It also relates to a pan-Nordic understanding of political authority based on openness, accountability, and consensus (Elder, Thomas, & Arter 1988; Hilson 2008; Götz & Marklund 2015).

These ideas of democratic egalitarianism based on sameness have become complicated in recent decades, as migration from outside of Europe has visibly—and audibly—changed the Norwegian population (Gullestad 2006; McIntosh 2015). The increasingly heterogeneous population has a profound effect on this relationship between listening and governmental authority, as the white Norwegian 'listening subject' does not hear all citizens in the same way. As Stoever (2016) has convincingly detailed in the American context, racial politics are not only a visual phenomenon, but are actively produced through sound and listening practices. Although there are of course important differences between the US and Norway, similar listening practices play an important role in processes of racialization in Norway as well. In many public discourses, people of color, more frequently described in Norwegian as 'immigrants' (*innvandrere*) or having 'minority background' (*minoritetsbakgrunn*), are often heard as problematically 'noisy' (Connor 2019), while, at the same time, concerns about how 'quiet' their voices are politically are not limited to Tøyen. These groups are thus both inaudible and hyper-audible, just as Stoever, taking a sonic approach to Du Bois's visual color line (1903/2007), argues is the case for Black people in the United States (Stoever 2016:11–12). Throughout my fieldwork, I heard some residents of color accuse the municipality of only listening to white voices, and race was also implicit in Area Boost employees' and white Norwegian residents' references to 'quiet

voices', a category that usually included Somali residents, especially women, and teenagers, almost all of whom in Tøyen belong to ethno-racial minorities.

Discussions about listening were thus bound up in larger questions of inclusivity, political legitimacy, and what democracy in contemporary urban Norway should look like. As Paley (2002, 2008) has pointed out, although democracy is commonly thought of as a transparent concept, in actual practice it has been taken up to describe a wide range of different sociopolitical arrangements and ideals. This variety is due to democracy's 'socially embedded and emergent character' (Hartikainen 2018:88), where different enactments of democracy result from the ways that democratic discourses and practices are mediated through contextually specific social and semiotic processes (see also Coles 2004; Hull 2010; Bernstein 2017). To study these different ideologies of democratic action, we must look at those semiotic processes, including listening. In Tøyen, more traditional municipal employees saw residential participation as a way to legitimize policy decisions, maintaining a firm distinction between citizen advisor and government expert. Listening entailed strict participation frameworks designed to easily translate resident input into policy documents. Residents and some other municipal staff, meanwhile, saw participatory initiatives as an opportunity to overturn hierarchies between government/citizen, expert/resident, and instead create governmental initiatives that would more be more inclusive of an increasingly diverse citizenry. They also saw the municipality's participant frameworks as too rigid to adequately hear a diverse set of voices.

My analysis of listening as democratic action in urban Norway is based on twenty-three months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2015 and 2019 with local organizations and municipal employees in Tøyen. At the time of my fieldwork, the neighborhood's population of 13,000 was split almost evenly between people of migrant background, largely from Somalia, and white, 'ethnic Norwegians' (*etniske nordmenn*). Aside from religious and ethnic differences, these two groups also tended to be quite distant socioeconomically, as Tøyen residents of foreign background experienced some of the highest rates of unemployment and child poverty in the country and frequently lived in public housing, while white Norwegians tended to be highly educated, middle-class, and owned their own apartments. Yet residents from both groups expressed frustrations—during public meetings, on social media, or in conversations with me—that the municipality was not listening to them. Accusations that the Area Boost was not listening to some residents in particular had intensified even beyond Tøyen's boundaries following the release of a documentary in November 2017 about teenage boys in the neighborhood (Sunde 2017). The documentary argued that the Boost only listened to white Norwegian gentrifiers and not to these young men.² Following the intense media attention the documentary created, the Area Boost began to highlight the ways that it listened to all kinds of residents much more strongly. The audience of these listening efforts was thus not only the residents who the Boost was listening to, but also actors outside of Tøyen,

including the news media and politicians from parties opposing the left-wing coalition governing Oslo.

In this article, I focus on a series of public meetings that occurred in autumn 2018 when the Area Boost was seeking input on its program plan for the following year. Meetings have been a focus of social and linguistic anthropological study since the 1970s, with general agreement that meetings are not primarily for making decisions, but instead have various purposes, from reproducing social and organizational order (Boden 1994), to creating local meaning and values (Schwartzman 1989; Goebel 2007), to enacting principles of democratic modernity (Morton 2014). This article similarly does not look at meetings as decision-making events, but instead takes them as moments for potential democratic listening. Yet, unlike many linguistic studies of meetings, which use conversation analysis to examine turn-taking and alignment (Atkinson, Cuff, & Lee 1978; Boden 1994; Asmuß & Svennevig 2009), I am interested in how listening among my interlocutors extends beyond the here-and-now of auditory perception to include the circulation of various graphic artifacts, like reports, sticky notes, and photographs, as well as invocations of the surrounding built environment, which all contribute to the production of governmental and other forms of organizational knowledge (cf. Hull 2012; Wilf 2016).

The Area Boost meetings discussed here included both two weeks of public events open to the general public and bi-monthly meetings where the much smaller Local Advisory Board to the Area Boost met to discuss the results from those public meetings and approve the municipality's plans for incorporating resident input. I attended the largest public meeting in October as a Tøyen resident myself and a foreign researcher, and I observed two of the advisory board meetings in November and December. My analysis is also influenced by conversations I had with advisory board members, municipal employees, and other residents throughout my fieldwork. In the rest of this article, I first show how the Area Boost and other municipal employees organized these events to facilitate a particular form of listening, where citizen input could be easily translated, or transduced, into documents and used to legitimize policy decisions. I then analyze an interaction between a resident and the city district manager at a local advisory board meeting as exemplifying a disagreement between residents and some Area Boost employees on one side, and more 'traditional' governmental employees on the other, over how the government should be listening to citizens. Finally, I argue that these two different modes of listening index different understandings of democratic action in an increasingly heterogeneous Norway.

LISTENING FROM THE MUNICIPALITY'S PERSPECTIVE: TRANSDUCTION AND DOCUMENTATION

From the municipality's perspective, participatory events were about taking oral and written suggestions from residents and transducing them into policy recommendations

and budget items, which could then be approved and implemented by the elected municipal government. I use the term transduction (Silverstein 2003; Gal 2015) instead of translation to highlight that these processes are not only concerned with the denotational content of residents' suggestions, but also about moving across semiotic modalities, from targeted conversations between neighbors, to statements written on post-it notes and butcher paper, to tables in policy documents. These transductions worked to legitimize policy decisions, as they appeared to emerge from citizens' voices, instead of being imposed by the municipality.

The annual Area Boost program plan determined which projects would be prioritized in the following year and how funding would be allocated. In the year I observed them, participatory events began with a series of themed workshops that took place at various times over several weeks. During my fieldwork, the themes, which had been selected by the local advisory board to the Area Boost, ranged from environment and climate, volunteering, housing, youth belonging, and public health. Following these workshops was a larger public meeting where Area Boost employees presented the initial recommendations on all five themes and allowed residents to provide final input.

The first step in the transduction process from input to policy occurred in the smaller workshops, which were held at different publicly accessible places around the neighborhood. Attendance ranged from eight people at the environment and climate workshop, to over sixty at the one about youth belonging. All workshops had a 'café dialogue' format, as they called it, which was also used by many of the local organizations in the neighborhood, where attendees sat in groups of about five people around tables covered in large pieces of paper. Each table discussed prompts, while one or all participants jotted down notes on the paper. At the end, each table shared the important points from their discussion with the room (Figure 1).

In the days following these workshops, Area Boost staff, who had collected all of the graphic artifacts from these workshops, organized them into numbered points that they typed and printed out on sheets of A4 paper that they could then hang around the outer walls of the tent where the concluding public meeting took place (Figure 2).

During this final public meeting, held on a Saturday afternoon in a large tent set up outside the Grønland subway station, each attendee was given ten small post-its to vote on the points from the workshops that they thought were the most important, and a few larger post-its in case they had anything they wanted to add. As was the case at almost all of the local meetings I attended, most people grouped around the station about youth, with some of the younger attendees giving all of their ten votes to the same point (Figure 3).

The voting system, along with the dozens of pizzas provided for attendees, gave the meeting a festive atmosphere. Just as Wilf (2016) argues that the use of post-it notes by consultants and entrepreneurs in New York City are a salient index of a ritual of creativity, the post-it notes at this public meeting were a Peircean rheme

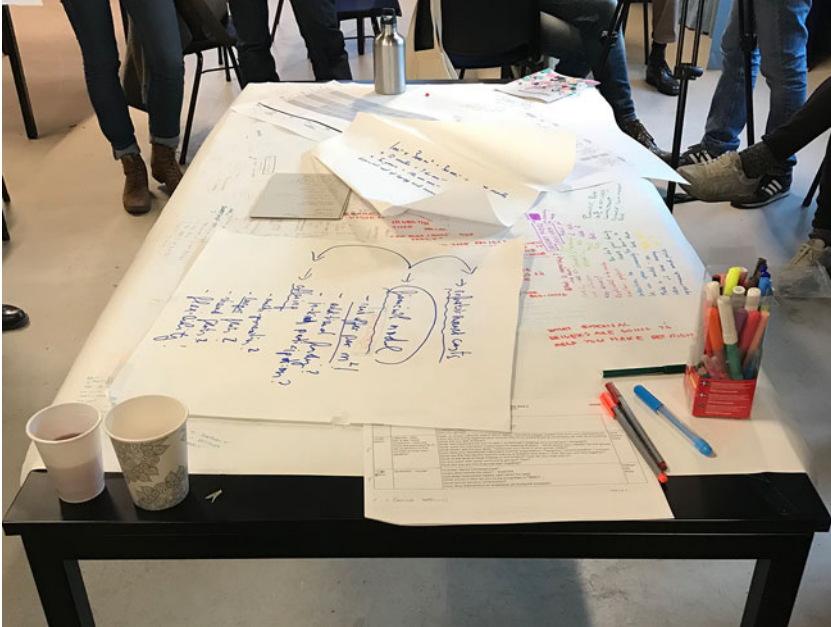


FIGURE 1. The result of a similar ‘café dialogue’-style meeting organized by the Tøyen Housing Association. All photos by author.

of the ‘innovative’ (*nyskapende*) character of the kinds of participation and local engagement the Area Boost program is meant to create. Policy in an Area Boost does not come out of dry documents and meetings alone, but through the active involvement of potentially all citizens. These meetings had a kind of immediacy to them that more traditional ways of doing local politics through representation do not—anyone can write a comment on a post-it. At the same time, the post-it notes at the Area Boost public meeting work to create a kind of idealized liberal public sphere, where the suggestions from the general public become completely detached from the people making them. While the municipal employees worried about diversity and representation and made sure to document that not everyone was white and middle-class through photographs of the events that were included in a report on the participatory process, the connection between each suggestion and the person who made it was erased. The only thing we can know about the participant is what their handwriting looks like (Figure 4), but even that disappears as the Area Boost employees type up the comments into their reports (Table 1). While the Area Boost likely used this format to make everyone’s contributions appear equal, where ‘quiet’ and ‘loud’ voices all become the same volume, it also took away a form of accounting for which residents the city eventually was seen to be listening to over others.

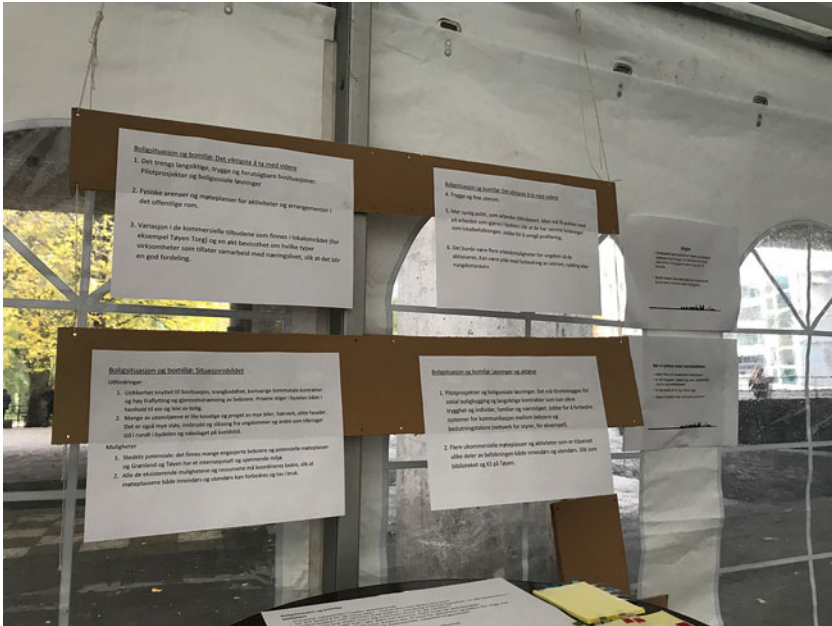


FIGURE 2. The Housing station, before the meeting began, with typed up points from the Housing workshop.

As the public meeting ended and residents began to trickle out, Marte,³ an Area Boost employee, moved around to the five stations in the tent, photographing all the post-it notes and the votes that people had left so that she could later type them up in the order of which had received the most votes. In the weeks following the public events, Marte and her colleagues collated the initial suggestions from the workshops and any additional suggestions written on post-it notes in a table in their report about the participatory process (Områdeløft Grønland og Tøyen 2018). They annotated each piece of input with comments and a suggestion for how to carry out the idea. For example, the handwritten suggestion above in Figure 4, ‘MORE LEISURE CLUBS FOR youth’, was typed up in the report with the following recommendations, in the same format as the point about youth employment that had been on the typed list in Figure 3.

The recommendation column in Table 1 points to an area of the Area Boost budget that incorporates these suggestions or includes them as a ‘new area of opportunity’ where an Area Boost policy and future budget item should be developed. They also link the comment to the specific, numbered goals of the Area Boost’s strategic plan. The Area Boost staff’s job is to take up comments from local residents, transducing them from thoughts jotted on a piece of butcher paper or a post-it note into a recommendation that can be nested under a strategic goal. The main goals

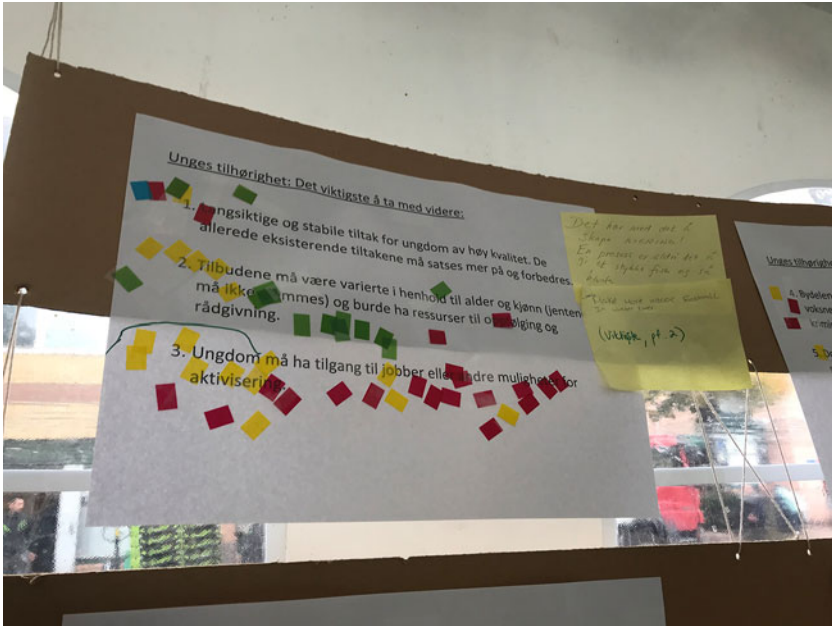


FIGURE 3. The station on Youth Belonging. The most votes are for point 3: ‘Youth must have access to jobs or other possibilities for activation’.

were broad enough, and the citizen input structure had been directed enough, that this transduction always appeared to be possible. I never witnessed a citizen suggestion that the municipality could not take up. These series of transductions also show how municipal listening surpasses the here-and-now of sound production. Instead, listening here involves a series of ‘resonances’, where particular words linger until finding a referent (Marsilli-Vargas 2022). An initial statement like ‘Youth must have access to jobs or other possibilities for activation’, takes on new meaning through post-it notes, as it no longer becomes a suggestion from one resident alone, but a wish of many Tøyen residents. For Area Boost employees, these resident words then come to reach a new referent of which the initial speaker may have been unaware: the numbered strategic goals and particular budget areas.

After the Area Boost staff had completed the meta-report and the program plan, which included a budget, the documents were shared and discussed with the local advisory board, which I discuss in the next section. The documents then moved through the elected district committees, with written recommendations from the district manager that came verbatim from the local advisory board’s official recommendations. These recommendations were taken up by the district council, and the plan continued to move up to the city council, who had the final say on budgeting. While the final program plan included a summary of the main themes that emerged

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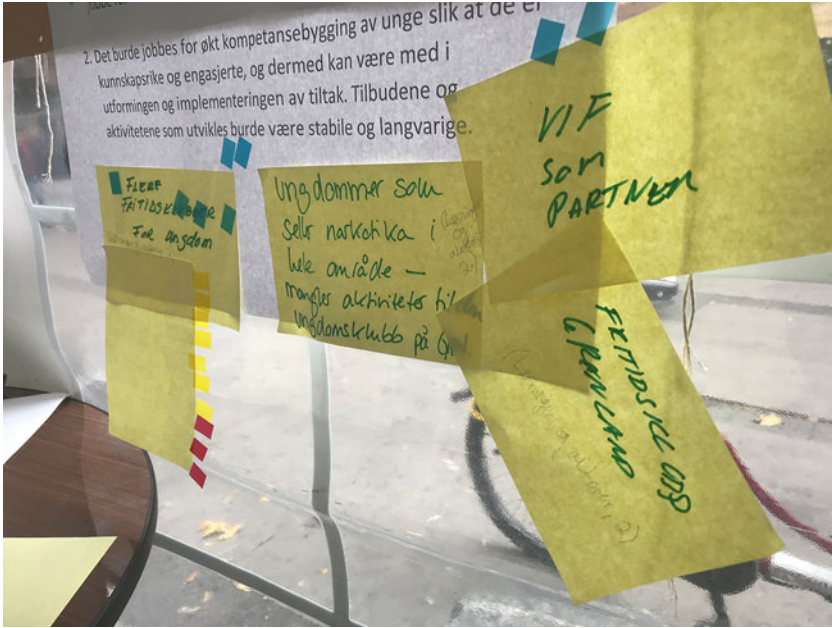


FIGURE 4. Handwritten additions, including ‘MORE LEISURE CLUBS FOR youth’, ‘Youth who sell narcotics in the whole area lack activities in the youth club in Grønland’, ‘VIF [local football club] as a partner’, and ‘Leisure club Grønland’.

from the participatory workshops, they were no longer written as direct reported speech from participants, but instead as general themes, expressed in nominalizations and tenseless constructions (Table 2). A form of what Geertz (1988:145) has called ‘ventriloquism’, where an interpretive voice claims to speak from within another group instead of about it, these nominal phrases are aperspectival, seeming to come collectively ‘from the neighborhood’ instead of from one group within it. Photos of the participatory meetings in the separate report on participation showed off the diversity of participants in terms of gender, ethnicity, and age, but the recommendations themselves erased any diversity in opinion, or anyone who may have refused to speak. The neighborhood’s voice became facts that would be easy for politicians to process, and, most importantly, could easily be attached to pre-existing budget categories.

For the municipality, listening culminated in budgetary allocations. The implementation of budgeted projects might provide further opportunities for residents to participate, but the major decisions of the kinds of programs and interventions had already been made. While these stages of transduction from citizen input to budget allocation were all carefully documented to make transparent how priorities came from the needs and desires of the local community, as Mazzarella has

TABLE 1. Translation of table in report on participatory process (Områdeløft Grønland og Tøyen 2018:9).

Input	Assessment	Recommendation
Youth must have access to jobs or other possibilities for activation.	This point came up at all the workshops and got the most votes of the theme during the public meeting. There is obviously a need for activity options and youth employment, and easier access to salaried work is sought after by youth themselves. Important both as a crime prevention measure, to improve conditions for growing up, and to improve the quality of life for residents in the long run.	Input for focus area in the budget: Co-creation residents, civil society, social entrepreneurs, and business community. Seen in connection with goals 3 and 6.
More leisure clubs for youth.	Great need for strengthened leisure and activity offerings for youth. The district has mapped 124 different activity offerings in the Gamle Oslo District within sports, leisure, culture, and health under the auspices of volunteer teams and associations, social entrepreneurs, and the district's services.	New area of opportunity discussed in the program plan's ch. 6 Input for focus area in the budget: - Attractive and stable activities for children and youth in Tøyen and Grønland. - Co-creation residents, civil society, social entrepreneurs, and business community. Seen in connection with goals 1, 3, and 6.

TABLE 2. Translation of portion of 'Summary of recommendations from workshops and the public meeting to the new local program plan' (Oslo indre øst-satsingen - Delprogram nærmiljø 2018:14).

Workshop theme	Recommendation to take further
Housing	Stabilization of housing situation, especially for families with children More safe and nice, non-commercial meeting places outside and inside
Youth	Jobs for youth Varied and stable leisure time offerings for youth
Climate and environment	Create knowledge and engagement about climate and environment Less traffic, more green connections between Grønland and Tøyen

observed, there is a 'paradoxical tendency of transparency measures to yield, in practice, new opacities' (2006:476). The actual process of transducing comments on post-it notes into budget line items was opaque to most of my interlocutors,⁴ who wondered if their participation was just a formality to provide legitimacy to what the municipality had already decided, or if the city listened to some groups of people but not others.

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While every document these meetings created is publicly available, I do not know of any residents, aside from the four advisory board representatives I discuss in the next section, who consulted any of them or checked to see if their comments had been taken up and incorporated into policy recommendations or budget items. Instead, residents were much more likely to look at what they could see in the neighborhood as a sign of whether the municipality had listened. Was there a place where young people could go in the afternoons after school ended? Did more of their friends have jobs? Frequently, residents looked to the built environment for signs of governmental listening, or more often, the lack of it. For example, despite years of discussions between neighbors, housing activist organizations, and the municipality, a block of municipally owned apartments still stood empty as of late 2022, after residents had been forced to move elsewhere in 2014 when the municipality tried to spread public housing more evenly across the city. During the same period, the new Munch Museum, which is also owned by the municipality, and which the government had only agreed to move from Tøyen to the wealthier new neighborhood on the waterfront in exchange for the Area Boost, has been constructed and opened, with an annual operating budget several times larger than the entire Area Boost. For many of the residents I got to know, these material effects were much more important evidence of who the city was listening to than any policy document.

THE LOCAL ADVISORY BOARD: LEGITIMATION AND RESISTANCE

Before the drafted reports and documents could be implemented, they needed to pass through one final step of participatory democracy: discussion and approval by the local advisory board. Here, how listening worked is more complicated, as these meetings were not just an opportunity for the city to listen to residents, but more of a dialogic relationship, where a small group of residents were expected to listen in return to municipal employees. Board meetings also became a site where residents tried to resist the municipality's view of participatory politics and propose alternative forms of democratic listening.

The advisory board was created several years into the Area Boost, with the purpose of ensuring that residents were being included in the development of the Boost's programs. More concretely, the board's job was to decide what the city district manager should be reporting to the municipal government. The board was made up of four resident representatives, Arild, Nina, Samira, and Yusuuf, who were evenly divided by gender, ethnic background (Norwegian or Somali), and neighborhood (half from Tøyen and half from neighboring Grønland, which was included in the Area Boost beginning in 2018). Most had experience with boards and formal meetings, and they were all relatively highly educated compared to the neighborhood average, two skills that were vital because their role as representatives required them to be able to read and understand the policy documents under

discussion. Pål, the city district manager, chaired the board, assisted by Sofie, the director of the Area Boost.⁵ There was also one representative from a local school and another from the police. The board met about bi-monthly in a conference room in the municipality's offices, where they sat around a large table. Meetings were organized in much the same way as the monthly district council meetings for elected politicians, where participants followed a previously set agenda, with each point of business (*sak*) given a catalogue number and all relevant documents archived as PDFs on the municipality's website. Agenda topics for the advisory board ranged from reviewing the Area Boost program plan for the next year, to discussing partnerships between the city and locally based NGOs, to planning participatory projects around renovating public spaces. Advisory board meetings were organized in this way in large part so that their decisions could easily move through the pre-existing bureaucratic infrastructure to the district council, although the board's decisions did not go directly to the governing political body. Instead, the board's job was to make recommendations to Pål, who then made his own recommendations to the council.

Advisory board members were expected to review all of the documents that were going to be discussed in advance and come to the meeting ready to present their comments. Each agenda item typically involved anywhere from one to five documents. The first was the official item, about one to two pages long, which laid out the issue and ended with a final paragraph that began, 'The local board recommends the district manager make the following decision(s)' (*Lokalstyret anbefaler bydelsdirektøren å fatte følgende vedtak*), followed by a series of sentences that were all passive constructions, taking away any sort of agentive role. For example, the agenda item for the program plan included two decisions.

- (i) Programplan for områdeløft i Bydel Gamle Oslo fremmes til bydelsutvalget i Gamle Oslo og legges til grunn for søknad om 30,3 mill. kr fra Oslo indre øst-satsingen - Delprogram nærmiljø.
'Program plan for area boost in Gamle Oslo district is moved to the district council in Gamle Oslo and forms the basis of the application for 30.3 million kroner from Oslo inner east-investment – Subprogram local environment.'
- (ii) Medvirkningsprosessen til programplanen har vært tilfredsstillende.
'The participation process for the program plan has been satisfactory.'

Unlike in the public meetings, where staff took citizen input and translated it into nominal phrases, on the advisory board these formulaic decisions were written before the meeting had happened and representatives had spoken. Consensus had been reached, at least officially, before an interaction occurred. In the meetings I observed, while representatives made suggestions to attached documents, the main decisions, these passive constructions, did not change. These meetings were thus not exactly a site for the CREATION of authoritative discourse (Morton 2014) as much as

they were a site for the Goffmanian frontstage (1959) AFFIRMATION of discourse that had emerged through backstage conversations between municipal employees. Although these frontstage meetings were open to public observers, the backstage conversations were not.

In this context, what listening even means becomes complicated. The regular attendees at these board meetings had strict roles and modes of participation. Pål would go through each agenda item, opening the floor for comments from the representatives. When there was need for clarification, Sofie would jump in with further explanation but otherwise said very little, at least not verbally. Sofie explained later that she actually 'said a lot' in the meetings in the form of the written documents and decisions the board reviewed. In Goffmanian terms (1979), Sofie and her staff were the author of the decisions made by the board, while the local representatives were the principal, a role that they took on through listening (reading) and responding to Sofie's written contributions during board meetings. Then, Pål was supposed to listen to those recommendations and animate them by sharing them with the elected city district council.

Pål tried to keep meetings focused on the documents at hand. He was a career bureaucrat, with much more experience in formal policy meetings with civil servants than he had engaging directly with residents, and he tried to structure meetings in the way that he found most efficient. However, the resident representatives were not entirely satisfied with this format. They thought the strict participant roles, where no one could say anything that did not fit the agenda items or relate to the documents under discussion, were too restrictive. Residents felt that this municipal model was not listening, but just a way to legitimize policy decisions that had already been made, and that too much got lost in the desire to translate their interactions into formulaic, written phrases. They also felt like it could not adequately capture the diversity in experiences of people living in the neighborhood. Many board members, including the residents, police, and school representatives, met outside the meeting location early, or stood around chatting long after the official meetings had ended. I heard them say to each other that they enjoyed learning more about other perspectives on the neighborhood, and several told me that they helped them to better represent the neighborhood in their official duties on the board.

Residents frequently expressed their dissatisfaction during meetings themselves. The following is an interaction between Nina and Pål towards the end of one of the meetings I observed. Nina may have been one of the more vocal critics during meetings, to the point that she somewhat sheepishly described herself to me as the 'troublemaker', yet her suggestion here is representative of how all of the resident representatives thought about meetings, as far as I could understand. From my conversations with Nina outside of these meetings, it also seemed that she understood that her position as a well-educated, white Norwegian woman allowed her critiques to be heard in ways that Somali-Norwegian residents' voices might not be.

(1)⁶

- 51 Nina: Jeg har– jeg har ikke– jeg har et sånt forslag (.) mer eh mer en sånn tanke om et punkt på agendaen som vi kunne hatt som et sånt fastpunkt som ikke er et eventuelpunkt men som kunne være litt som (.) kort og åpen diskusjon om hva vi har opplevd si– eller om det er viktige ting vi har opplevd siden sist (.) for at vi tenker for å få (.) potensialet til oss som lokalstyret der det blir sittende forskjellige erfaringer. Og DET kunne vært nyttig (.) ikke for at det skal bli en sak men bare for at– for å– for å ta litt som temperatur på hva skjer NÅ. Eh (.) kunne det være en tanke?
- ‘I have– I don’t have– I have a kind of suggestion (.) more uh more a kind of thought about a point on the agenda that we could have as a kind of permanent point that isn’t an Any Other Business point but that could be a little like (.) short and open discussion about what we’ve experienced si– or if there are important things we’ve experienced since last time (.) so that we’re thinking about getting (.) the potential for us as the local board where there are different experiences. And THAT could be useful (.) not that it’s an item but just so that– to– to take a little like the temperature of what’s happening NOW. Uh (.) could that be a thought?’

Nina begins by saying that having ‘short and open discussion’ would help the meetings because it would allow board members to talk not only about the documents they are meant to be consulting, but also about their own personal experiences. Doing so would allow them to learn from each other, which she sees as an untapped potential of the board, and to bring a kind of immediacy to the meetings (‘what’s happening NOW’), which Nina does not see in the documents they discuss.

Pål replies in (2) below.

(2)

- 52 Pål: Skal vi og– vi har snakket om å ha en evaluering, altså rundet rundt bordet=
- ‘Shall we and– we’ve talked about having an evaluation, that is a round around the table=’
- 53 Nina: =ja ja=
- ‘=yes yes=’
- 54 Pål: =etterpå, hvordan har dagens møte– har dere fått (*uforståelig*)
- ‘=afterwards, where has the day’s meeting– have you [PL] gotten (*incomprehensible*)’
- 55 Nina: ja
- ‘yes’
- 56 Pål: Snakker litt om det dere skulle ha visst for å behandle saken med, eh så det var å finne en sånn måte å gjøre det på
- ‘Talk a little about what you [PL] should have known to address the item, uh so it was to find a kind of way to do it’
- 57 Nina: Ja? Ja.
- ‘Yes? Yes.’
- 58 Pål: Men det– men men m– je:g jeg prøver å holde det innafør at=
- ‘But that– but but b– I: I try to keep it within=’
- 59 Nina: =tida?
- ‘=the time?’
- 60 Pål: Ja, nei ikke– ikke tida.
- ‘Yes, no not– not the time.’
- 61 Nina: Å nei (*ler*)
- ‘Oh no (*laughs*)’

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- | | |
|---|--|
| 62 Pål: (<i>uforståelig</i>) ikke blir en generell diskusjonsgruppe | ‘(<i>incomprehensible</i>) not be a general discussion group’ |
| 63 Nina: Nei, ja! | ‘No, yes!’ |
| 64 Pål: Det er veldig fort at du kan ha et sårn, du vet, et klageorgan. | ‘It happens very quickly that you [SG] can have a kind of, you [SG] know, a complaint body.’ |
| 65 Nina: Ja, nei det skjønner jeg veldig godt | ‘Yes, no I understand that very well’ |
| 66 Pål: Men da er det= | ‘But so it’s=’ |

Pål’s idea of ‘sharing experiences’ is not about bringing in the current situation in the neighborhood, instead focusing on the agenda items at hand. This is to avoid the genre of interaction that he brought up frequently at these meetings, the ‘general discussion group’, or ‘complaint body’, which he believed was a waste of time because it never accomplished anything.

Nina has let Pål speak, but now she interrupts him to come back to her initial point.

(3)

- | | |
|---|--|
| 67 Nina: =men– men | =but– but |
| 68 Pål: Ja? | Yes? |
| 69 Nina: Potensialet vårt som gruppe siden vi (.) er satt sammen fordi vi (.) kommer fra forskjellige steder, har forskjellige erfaringer i eh i området? Så kunne vi på en måte (.) Og da øver vi òg, ikke sant, og er i gang på bare konkrete forslag, hva som passer inn her. Kan vi gjøre det bare litt som øvingsak for oss? | Our potential as a group since we (.) are put together because (.) we come from different places, have different experiences in uh in the area? So we could in a way (.) And so we’re trying too, right, and are going with just concrete suggestions, what fits here. Can we do that just as a trial case for us? |
| 70 Pål: Ja, men dere må tenke mer at vi på styret har strategisk arbeid. | Yes, but you [PL] must think more that we on the board have strategic work. |

Nina suggests (turn 69) that because Tøyen-Grønland has such a diverse population, that these traditional ways of thinking about how to address problems will miss some of the nuances. Pål responds (turn 70) by using this as a teaching moment about how official board meetings function, using the second-person plural to address everyone, not just Nina, and tell them that ‘we’, as a collective board, must think more strategically. This distinction between strategic board and ‘discussion group’ or ‘complaint body’ encapsulates what Pål repeatedly stressed about civic participation in policymaking, both during meetings, and when I first spoke to him about why I wanted to observe board meetings. He told me that it was important to remember that

the Norwegian word commonly used to talk about this kind of participation, *medvirkning*, meaning cooperation, is made of up two words, *med* ‘with’ and *virkning* ‘consequence, result’. Compound words with a preposition and verb or nominalized verb are very common in Norwegian, and although the meaning of the compound tends to be more idiomatic, it is a common metasemantic analysis to break the word into its two parts. Pål worried that most people focus on the first word and its idea of inclusion, but he likes to focus on the second part, because ‘if there is no result, there’s no point including people’ (*Hvis det ikke er noe virkning så er det ikke noe poeng i å ha folk med*). A discussion club-style format might be more comfortable for the resident representatives, but, at least for Pål, that would not produce a result.

Pål makes a few brief comments about thinking strategically that were difficult to make out in my audio recording. He then continues a few turns later, given in (4)

(4)

- 76 Pål: For at– de her løpende diskusjoner kan fort til at vi mis– mister fokuset. Men det, det å få et strategisk bilde, ‘Hvor er det vi når? Skal være– Skal vi den veien eller skal vi mer den veien? Skal vi ta den investeringa der eller skal vi gå opp hit?’ Så jeg, jeg, jeg vil at det ikke bli en disk– at vi ikke vil bli (*uforståelig*) hele tiden. ‘So that– these kinds of running discussions can quickly end up that we lose the focus. But getting a strategic picture, ‘Where is it we’re heading? Will be– Will we go that way or will we go more that way? Will we take that investment there or will we go up here?’ So I, I, I want that this doesn’t become a disc– that we won’t become (*incomprehensible*) all the time.’
- 77 Nina: Nei? Nei, men samtidig så hvis man ha en god strategisk tenke på at man må ha en strategi. ‘No? No, but at the same time if one has a good strategic thought that one has to have a strategy.’
- 78 Pål: Ja. ‘Yes.’
- 79 Nina: Men så har man– føler det ut at sånt man vet at, ‘Oi nå er strategien blitt på vei i feil retning fra hva den reale situasjonen er.’ ‘But then one has– it feels like one knows that, “Oh, now the strategy has headed in the wrong direction from what the real situation is.”’
- 80 Pål: Ja. ‘Yes.’
- 81 Nina: Sånn tenker jo du mer som en sånn der eh temperatur. ‘So you [sg] think more as a kind of uh temperature.’

In turn 76, Pål continues his strategy of voicing the board and what it means to think in a strategic and focused way. Nina, meanwhile, takes up Pål’s use of reported hypothetical speech to argue against him in turn 79, stating that it is important to make sure that strategic thinking matches the reality that the advisory board is supposed to be addressing. However, while Nina also uses reported speech, the hypothetical board she is voicing speaks differently from Pål’s. Pål always uses

first-person plural deictics to focus on what ‘we’ the advisory board needs to consider, and is future-oriented, toward the next meeting or future outcomes of board decisions. Nina, meanwhile, does not use the first-person, instead making a factual statement that the board’s strategy ‘has headed in the wrong direction from what the real situation is’. Thinking collectively toward the future, for Nina, is not useful if the board’s plans are not grounded in reality.

At this point, there is a brief struggle to hold the floor, mirroring Pål and Nina’s attempts to control the terms of the meeting.

(5)

- | | |
|--|---|
| 82 Pål: Ja. | Yes. |
| 83 Nina: Eh | Eh |
| 84 Pål: Ja. Hvis vi= | Yes. If we= |
| 85 Nina: =Du kan tenke på at= | =You [sg] can think that |
| 86 Pål: =det vil bli et slags svar= | =this will be a kind of answer= |
| 87 Nina: =for å være sånn= | =in order to be such= |
| 88 Pål: =hvis du– hvis du kan– | =if you [sg]– if you [sg] can– |
| 89 Nina: Ja? | Yes? |
| 90 Pål: Ta en konkret– hvis– hvis– Det tanke, god k– hvis, hvis du tenker deg er inn i setningen her. | Take a concrete– if– if– That thought, good k– if, if you [sg] imagine the sentence here. [referencing document under discussion] |
| 91 Nina: Mmhmm. | Mmhmm. |
| 92 Pål: Når du– eller for at det blir sittende noe du her tenker på? | When you [sg]– or is there something here you [sg] are thinking about? |
| 93 Nina: Nei det var ikke noe i konkret akkurat nå= | No it wasn’t something concrete right now= |
| 94 Pål: =nei= | =no= |
| 95 Nina: =Jeg mer tenker på at (.) i løpet av neste års møter skulle vi– eh– jeg– at vi må få HELE potensialet ut av denne gruppa her. | =I was more thinking that (.) in the course of next year’s meeting we should– uh– I– that we need to get the FULL potential out of this group here. |
| 96 Pål: Ja. | Yes. |
| 97 Nina: (<i>ler</i>) Ikke sant? Og jeg tenker at eh så har vi et veldig stort potensial i å faktisk prate og jeg så den, siste gang når vi avsluttet tidlig du så og vi sto (<i>ler, andre ler også</i>) utenfor og pratet! Skal vi ikke den da? Men det betyr at vi har glede av og nyte av å prate sammen uten at– uten at DET er– at det er en verdi i seg sjøl å faktisk prate sammen også. | (<i>laughs</i>) Right? And I think that eh we have a very great potential in actually chatting and I saw that, last time when we ended early you [sing] saw us and we stood (<i>laughs, others laugh too</i>) outside and chatted! Won’t we do that then? But that means we enjoy and find use in chatting together without that– without THAT being– that there’s a value in itself to actually chatting together too. |
| 98 Pål: Mmhmm. | Mmhmm. |

however, thought that the ‘full potential’ of the group involved talking about diverse experiences and getting to know and learn from one’s neighbors.

FORMS OF LISTENING AS TYPES OF DEMOCRATIC ACTION

Pål and Nina’s disagreement was part of a much wider discussion happening among Area Boost employees and engaged Tøyen residents around authority of democratic participation. Linda, for example, one of the Area Boost employees, would agree with Nina’s ideas about meeting structure. She felt that the municipality’s hierarchical way of trying to engage residents was the reason why residents felt they had not been listened to. At public meetings and in casual conversations around the community center, she would frequently bring up Arnstein’s Ladder of Civic Participation, which distinguishes between ‘tokenistic’ participation and true ‘citizen control’ (Arnstein 1969:26). Linda distinguished between what she saw as *medvirkning* ‘cooperation, assistance’ and more egalitarian *samskapning* ‘co-creation’. *Medvirkning*, which she equated with Arnstein’s ‘Consultation’, is a top-down process where residents are asked for their input on projects that have been initiated ‘from above’, while *samskapning*, or ‘Partnership’ on Arnstein’s scale, describes projects where the state and local residents come together as equals. This view of participation relies on an idea that neighborhood residents are more knowledgeable experts about the local situation than the government. Yet these local experts cannot act entirely on their own, but through a relationship built on consensus with the municipality.

Medvirkning is the more common term in participatory initiatives, used by the municipality, government ministries, and even corporations. As mentioned above, the local advisory board was a typical example of *medvirkning*. *Samskapning*, meanwhile, a recent calque of the English word ‘co-creation’ (Røiseland & Lo 2019), implies a kind of newness. Pål, for example, did not know what the word meant when Nina brought it up at a board meeting. As Linda describes it, *samskapning* is not about getting local inhabitants to give feedback on municipal projects, but instead to get people to come together around a table ‘as equals’, and to work something out together. Linda stressed that co-creation requires creating trust between different kinds of people, something that does not just come out of creating meeting places where different kinds of people are in the same place at the same time, but instead creating kinds of events where people must come together around a table, talk, and learn from each other. This model relies on flattening hierarchies, where municipal employees and bureaucrats are there to facilitate the ideas coming from community members. While co-creation still relies on meetings as the ideal democratic structure, unlike the municipality’s initiatives, it relies more on experience-based forms of expertise, where residents know what they need better than the people who are usually sanctioned experts. These two different forms of democratic action, participation and co-creation, require different forms of interaction and modes of listening.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to detail how different ideas of how the municipality should listen to citizens, and how citizens can speak in a way that is listenable, are tied to different ideas of what counts as democratic action. For the municipality, the focus was on the moment of listening itself. This included careful documentation that gave public initiatives legitimacy through their seeming transparency. In this model, the municipality saw citizen participants as kinds of ideal liberal individuals, where representation of different demographic categories was important, but where that diversity was erased in the actual moments of speaking, so that, ideally, everyone's input would be treated equally. Residents, however, along with some Area Boost employees, had different ideas about what it would mean for the state to truly listen to them. Local advisory board members like Nina believed that the 'full potential' of participatory politics was about moving beyond bureaucratic documents and instead learning from each other's experiences through face-to-face conversations. They saw this kind of more open production of knowledge about the neighborhood as a way of being more inclusive of different kinds of residents and their perspectives. Other neighbors questioned the city's focus on the moment of citizens' speaking, and instead saw the more relevant temporality of listening to be the future uptake of citizen speech, made visible in the built environment.

These different understandings of how the municipality might listen to citizens, and what that listening should produce, indexed different political visions of what the social democratic welfare state might look like. While both positions agreed that all citizens have the right to make claims on the government, and that state policies require citizen approval to be legitimized, some Tøyen residents and Area Boost employees wanted to go further. They hoped to level hierarchies between residents with experiential based knowledge and bureaucrats with technical expertise. This, they argued, was the only way to fully include the diversity of backgrounds and experiences present in Tøyen, and increasingly, the entire country. In reimagining listening practices, these residents were involved in a much larger project of making the Norwegian democratic welfare state inclusive of all citizens.

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

=	overlapping speech
(<i>words</i>)	paralinguistic information
(.)	pause
[word]	clarifications
WORD	added stress

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NOTES

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¹Area-based urban policies (*områdesatsinger*) have been implemented in areas of Oslo with 'challenging living conditions' (*levkårsutfordringer*) since 2007 (Andersen & Brattbakk 2020; PricewaterhouseCoopers 2021). Since these programs are designed to be short-term experiments, the exact form that each one takes is somewhat different, with the forms of participation discussed here being unique to the Area Boost Tøyen. The 'Tøyen Boost' ran from 2014–2018 and began as a direct result of the city-owned Munch art museum's being moved out of the neighborhood to a new building on the waterfront. It was later expanded to include neighboring areas of central Oslo through 2026 and renamed the Oslo Inner-East Commitment (*Oslo Indre-øst satsingen*). For a detailed account of the origins of these policies in Tøyen, see Brattbakk et al. (2015).

²While the Area Boost has certainly made Tøyen a more attractive place for middle-class, white Norwegians, and real estate prices have skyrocketed in the years since the Boost began, gentrification has been an issue in the neighborhood much longer (Huse 2014).

³All names of individuals are pseudonyms.

⁴And to the ethnographer—much of the transduction work from comment to budget item was done by municipal employees in private meetings that I could not attend.

⁵Oslo is split into fifteen administrative city districts (*bydeler*), each of which is governed by an elected council who determine the tasks of the municipal staff. The city district manager (*bydelsdirektør*) leads these staff members. The Tøyen Area Boost included parts of the Grünerløkka and Gamle Oslo city districts, but administratively was included under the Gamle Oslo district.

⁶Transcription conventions are given in the appendix. Although Pål and Nina each spoke regional dialects from outside of Oslo, transcriptions are in Bokmål for consistency and anonymity.

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