Journal of Urban Management xxx (xxxx) xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Urban Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jum

Research Article

From resistance to collaboration: Implementing 'Our Neighborhood' project in Mashhad

Arezoo Alikhani [a,*], Seyedeh Niloofar Hashemi [b]

[a] Department of Urban Planning and Design, Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran
[b] Department of Architecture, College of Design and Engineering, National University of Singapore, Singapore

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Participatory urban planning
Bottom-up governance
Community engagement
Qualitative case study
Mashhad

ABSTRACT

Traditional urban planning in centralized governance systems often lacks meaningful public engagement, leading to projects that fail to meet local needs. The "Our Neighborhood" project in Mashhad, Iran, represents an attempt to implement a bottom-up, participatory approach to urban development in a non-participatory context. Over three years, and with the assistance of facilitator groups, this initiative fostered collaboration between residents and municipal authorities, enabling community-driven improvements across 243 locations.

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the challenges and successes of this initiative. Data was collected through structured interviews with municipal officials, city council members, and facilitator groups, as well as surveys completed by residents across different neighborhoods. The analysis focuses on key factors such as overcoming administrative resistance, fostering community trust, and institutionalizing participatory mechanisms. Findings highlight the crucial role of facilitator groups in enhancing stakeholder collaboration, and also accentuate the importance of adaptive planning and inclusive participation in ensuring project effectiveness. Although being successful in some aspects, findings suggest that the project's sustainability remains uncertain without institutional reforms that formally embed participatory mechanisms in governance frameworks.

By documenting the "Our Neighborhood" initiative, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on participatory urban planning, offering insights for cities seeking to balance top-down governance with bottom-up decision-making. It underscores the potential for participatory models to foster civic trust and create more inclusive and responsive urban development strategies.

1. Introduction

In many socio-political urban settings with centralized governance systems, adopting a bottom-up approach to urban management and development is not a frequent strategy. In urban planning, this may lead to districts' plans and projects not accurately responding to the needs and issues of residents and, therefore, being ineffective and unsatisfactory to local residents who are the actual users of city spaces. Thus, recently, researchers have increasingly acknowledged the importance of community engagement in urban development. One example of such strategies is the "Our Neighborhood" initiative; a bottom-up participatory project carried out recurrently in

This article is part of a special issue entitled: Managing (for) the Public published in Journal of Urban Management.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: alikhani@ferdowsi.um.ac.ir (A. Alikhani), niloofarhashemi@u.nus.edu (S.N. Hashemi).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jum.2025.09.007
Received 31 July 2024; Received in revised form 25 September 2025; Accepted 25 September 2025
Available online xxxx

different neighborhoods of Mashhad, Iran over three consecutive years and which involved local residents and the municipal government to come up with sustainable community-improving initiatives specific to each neighborhood.

"Our Neighbourhood" initiative was initially proposed by Mashhad municipality in an attempt to engage residents across different neighborhoods directly in decision-making processes with regard to prioritization and execution of projects within their locality. The municipality hoped that such an approach would not only improve the functionality of their urban development strategies but also would contribute to re-gaining public trust, a long standing issue between the municipality and residents of Mashhad.

Among the existing literature on participatory urban development, little research offers detailed and systematic documentation on narrating participatory projects which have been carried out in different regions and in different socio-political contexts around the world. Drawing on both authors' direct involvement with the project; with the first author as the municipal head manager mediating between government and facilitator groups; and the second author as the head of three facilitator groups, this research narrates the story of "Our Neighborhood" project, exploring its challenges, opportunities, successes and failures in the non-participatory context of Iran.

This research seeks to understand the ways participatory urban planning was unfolded in Mashhad's centralized governance system, and investigates the key challenges and strategies that emerged after such practice. The study is guided by Communicative Planning Theory as its conceptual foundation. This framework emphasizes three interrelated dimensions: (1) dialogue and legitimacy, (2) inclusiveness and representation, and (3) institutional transformation through which participatory practices can be evaluated. Through sharing the experiences and lessons learned from the case study, this research attempts to inform both policy and practice of urban planning in non-participatory contexts and also to inspire future efforts towards more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable urban development practices worldwide. The paper finally discusses the obstacles and possibilities of this approach and how facilitator groups act as a link between people and urban management while also offering insights and recommendations for further research.

2. Citizen participation in urban development

Citizen participation has become a cornerstone of contemporary urban planning, aiming to bridge the gap between normative ideals of new urbanisms and the realities of governance. Yet, participation is particularly challenging in centralized systems where local communities might have political, social, economic, infrastructural and awareness inefficiencies, while also facing difficulties in organizing representative and responsive groups among themselves (Arnstein, 1969). In such contexts, intermediary actors, referred to here as facilitators, play a pivotal role in mediating between executive bodies and citizens. Although non-governmental and community-based organizations have experimented with such mediation, their experiences are often under-theorized, creating a gap between practice and conceptual understanding. This article aims to investigate the possibility of employing the capacity of citizen groups and specialized facilitators in order to enhance participation in the economic-political context of Mashhad, Iran; through analyzing the processes and outcomes of such a participatory project.

Since the late 20th century, public participation has become a cornerstone of planning discourse, tied to citizenship rights and democratic decision-making globally (Horelli and Wallin, 2024; Khan and Swapan, 2013). Participatory planning, tailored to community needs, counters conventional top-down approaches, yet its application varies widely. In developed countries with democratic systems, institutional and legal frameworks support citizen involvement (Raynor et al., 2017). In contrast, developing nations with

Table 1
International experiences of participatory urban planning and their conceptual relevance.

Country/City – Program	Key Features of Participation	Conceptual Dimension
United States (Milwaukee) – Neighborhood Strategic Planning (Ghose, 2005)	Participation supported neighborhood revitalization but revealed tensions between local input and broader policy goals.	Inclusiveness and Representation
Malaysia and Zimbabwe – Grassroots initiatives (Chitsa et al., 2022)	Community-based planning contributed to sustainability but faced institutional limitations.	
Canada (Metro Vancouver 2040) – Hybrid methods (Geekiyanage et al., 2021)	Combination of online and in-person engagement such as webinars.	
Europe (WPUP, PGIS, 9DF) – Digital and analytical tools (Mansourian et al., 2011; Cho et al., 2023; Natarajan and Hassan, 2024)	Web-based planning platforms, participatory GIS, and multi-dimensional frameworks for assessment.	
United Kingdom – Localism Act (2011) (MHCLG, 2023)	Statutory powers devolved to communities, but resource limitations persisted.	
Northern Europe (Helsinki, Amsterdam, Copenhagen) (Niitamo, 2021)	Municipalities struggled to reconcile participatory ideals with rapid economic development.	Institutional Transformation
Brazil (Porto Alegre) – Participatory Budgeting (Wampler et al., 2021)	Legally mandated process granting citizens authority to allocate budgets.	
Spain (Madrid and Barcelona) – Regulatory reforms (Bonet and Martí, 2012)	Legal reforms expanded citizen involvement in urban decision-making.	
Bangladesh (UPPR Program) – Community committees (Geekiyanage et al., 2021)	Local committees coordinated neighborhood development.	Dialogue and Legitimacy
Indonesia – Kampung Improvement Program (Suhartini and Jones, 2023)	Incremental, resident-led upgrading of informal settlements with minimal funding.	
China – Eco-city initiatives (Li and Jong, 2017)	Mixed outcomes under centralized control; participation remained limited.	

centralized governance, including Iran, do not usually prioritize participation, often importing democratic planning concepts with limited practical success (Connelly, 2010; Nyama and Mukwada, 2023).

Frameworks such as Arnstein's ladder of participation (1969), the IAP2 spectrum (Geekiyanage et al., 2021), and the more recent Nine-Dimensional Framework (Natarajan and Hassan, 2024) offer structured ways of evaluating participation, from informing and consulting to empowerment and institutional impact. These approaches emphasize that effective participation must be assessed not only by procedures but also by legitimacy, inclusiveness, and long-term institutionalization.

The evolution of participatory planning has also been accompanied by theoretical advancements. Communicative Planning Theory underscores the importance of inclusive dialogue and power balance in decision-making processes, emphasizing the role of planners as facilitators rather than authoritative figures (Horelli and Wallin, 2024). Scholars emphasize the need for designing informed, legitimate, and evaluable participation processes (Falconi and Palmer, 2017) in the context of urban development projects. Connelly (2010) underscores planners' complex role in facilitating participation under limited political opportunities, advocating for institutional and cultural transformation. Nyama and Mukwada (2023) highlight that participation occurs within institutional arrangements, shaped by political, social, and economic factors, with citizen awareness and institutional support as critical enablers.

Global experiences of participatory planning provide diverse lessons across different governance systems. Table 1 summarizes how international cases ranging from legally mandated models like Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting to community-led programs such as Indonesia's KIP, and from digitally enhanced approaches in Seoul and Metro Vancouver to symbolic participation in China illustrate the interplay of dialogue, inclusiveness, and institutional transformation. Compared with these models, the "Our Neighborhood" project in Mashhad represents a distinct intermediary-facilitator approach which fostered dialogue and partial inclusiveness without achieving full institutional transformation.

Communicative Planning Theory highlights three interrelated dimensions that are directly relevant to the Mashhad case:

1. Dialogue and legitimacy; examining whether communicative practices among citizens, facilitators, and municipal authorities created trust, recognition, and legitimacy in decision-making.
2. Inclusiveness and representation; assessing the extent to which different social groups (women, migrants, low-income residents, youth) were included in participatory processes and whether their voices were equitably represented.
3. Institutional transformation; evaluating whether the initiative led to structural changes in urban governance, or remained limited to temporary and discretionary mechanisms.

This three-dimensional framework provides analytical leverage for contexts like Mashhad, where municipalities operate with limited public accountability and rely on self-generated revenue (Rahnama et al., 2011). Accordingly, the study is guided by two central questions: How successful was Mashhad's model of participatory urban planning? And what were the key challenges and strategies that emerged after such practice?

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method case study design to investigate the processes and outcomes of the "Our Neighborhood" initiative in Mashhad. The case study approach with data collected from both qualitative and quantitative methods was adopted as they enabled researchers to reflect an in-depth exploration of such participatory planning practices within a non-democratic and centralized governance context. For such a large-scale project, such methodological design, combining breadth through large-scale surveys and depth through qualitative inquiry, enables a multi-perspective understanding.

An evaluation of the "Our Neighborhood" project was carried out among three groups involved in the process:

- **Municipal managers and council members**: By purposive sampling, structured interviews were conducted with 38 individuals from the managerial body of the municipality, including senior municipal officials and city council members. Their insights helped connect the project with the broader planning and political framework of Mashhad.
- **Facilitation groups**: Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 40 members or heads of facilitation groups. Selection was made to ensure representation of different neighborhoods where the project was implemented. Considering the fact that heads of the facilitation groups had worked across different neighborhoods in different rounds of the project, conducting interviews with them ensured that we have a broad understanding of different neighborhoods.
- **Community residents**: With the assistance of facilitation groups who best knew the local contexts, a total of 1350 residents were surveyed. The sample was calculated using Cochran's formula for unknown populations ($\sigma = 0.94$, margin of error $= 0.05$). Respondents (5–6 per neighborhood) were selected purposively to ensure diversity in gender, age, education, and socio-economic background across the 243 local implementation points. Questionnaires included both close- and open-ended questions, enabling measurement of satisfaction, trust, inclusiveness, and awareness.

Among municipal respondents, 87.1 % were men and 12.9 % women, with a mean age of 39 years. Most held master's degrees (64.5 %), followed by bachelor's (29 %) and PhD (6.5 %). Facilitation group members were younger (mean age 31), predominantly female (64 %), and educated at the master's (48 %), bachelor's (39 %), and PhD (13 %) levels. On the other hand, in community surveys, women comprised 38.5 % of participants and men 51.5 %. Authors believe that the lower participation of women could be due to cultural limitations or distrust in communicating with representatives of the municipality. Questions on education, occupation, and income were deliberately excluded from the survey among residents, as pilot testing showed that respondents were reluctant to

disclose such sensitive personal details, which could undermine trust and participation in the process.

The aim of collecting data from these there groups was to obtain a multi-perspective understanding of the project which sheds light on different phases of the process such as the planning phase, the execution phase, and the socio-political impacts of the project. It should be noted that our ultimate goal was to ensure that we have reliable data across all different neighborhoods in which the project was conducted. In doing this, we acknowledge that the unit of analysis was the individual resident and that the design prioritises cross-neighborhood heterogeneity rather than statistical analysis at the single-neighborhood level.

Interview data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. This involved several steps: (1) coding data, which entailed allocating initial codes to the scattered bits of data that relate to the research questions; (2) categorizing themes, where the codes were classified into more general themes aimed at depicting broader patterns and insights; and (3) interpretation of findings, which entailed a deeper investigation into the interrelations of different themes and how they contribute to the overall objectives of the research.

To assess reliability, both authors independently coded a random 20 % sample of interview transcripts and results were compared to establish inter-coder reliability. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion to reach a consensus.

Member checking was also used by sharing preliminary themes with a subset of participants from each group to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Moreover, triangulation was achieved by comparing data from managers, facilitators, and residents, allowing for the cross-validation of findings and a more robust, multi-faceted analysis. For example, themes of “trust-building” in qualitative interviews were consistent with survey findings showing that 61 % of participants reported increased confidence in local decision-making. Similarly, reports of unequal participation among women and migrants in interviews aligned with lower participation rates in survey data.

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using SPSS, generating descriptive statistics that complemented qualitative findings. This multi-layered approach allowed for cross-validation of perspectives and for capturing both elite and grassroots views of the participatory process.

3.1. Researcher positionality and reflexivity

Regarding positionality, it should be noted that both authors held active roles in the initiative: the first author served as project director, responsible for selecting facilitation teams, negotiating with municipal authorities, and overseeing implementation; and the second author led multiple facilitation teams across three neighborhoods. We acknowledge that our insider role provided easier access to participants, internal documents and real-time observations. However, it also posed risks of bias, including confirmation bias, social-desirability responses during interviews, and potential gatekeeper influence through municipal authority. To mitigate these risks, both authors engaged in independent coding followed by intercoder comparison; kept reflexive memos to critically examine positionality; and ensured analysis was based on systematically coded data rather than personal impressions, reducing the influence of authors’ roles on findings. These measures ensured that analysis was grounded in data rather than personal involvement.

We acknowledge that our dual role as both implementers and researchers shaped the study. We explicitly acknowledge this dual role as a limitation, while emphasizing that it also enabled deeper insights into the institutional and community dynamics of the case.

4. Case study

4.1. Case selection: unfolding the context

Mashhad, Iran's second largest city and a major religious metropolis, was selected because of its unique governance structure and its role as a pioneer in experimenting with citizen participation under centralized planning traditions. The “Our Neighborhood” project is particularly significant since it provided a legally mandated mechanism for allocating 5 % of municipal civil project budgets through community decision-making which was a rare institutional opening for public involvement.

The unique socio-political and urban management context of Mashhad profoundly shaped the project's outcomes and its potential replicability elsewhere, reflecting broader challenges and opportunities in Iran's centralized urban governance system. Unlike democratic settings where participatory planning is institutionally embedded, Iran's municipalities, including Mashhad's, operate independently of direct public accountability, relying heavily on self-generated revenue rather than governmental budgets or citizen input. Approximately 70 % of municipal income derives from selling additional building densities and collecting fines for unauthorized construction, rather than taxes tied to community needs (Rahnama et al., 2011). Essential infrastructure services such as electricity, water, gas, and telecommunications are managed by separate entities, leaving municipalities without integrated authority and further distancing them from public oversight. With limited state funding, restricted to occasional support for initiatives like public transport development, municipalities lack fiscal dependence on citizens, reducing incentives to solicit their opinions. This structural disconnect has led to widespread distrust and a lack of attachment among residents and the municipality, exacerbating physical and maintenance challenges with regard to public spaces.

Historically, Mashhad's urban planning has mirrored a top-down paradigm, evidenced by its three comprehensive plans, none of which involved citizen participation in preparation or decision-making processes (Rahnama et al., 2011). The authoritative approach has marginalized public engagement, reinforcing a perception of urban management as detached and unresponsive. In response, recent years have seen tentative efforts to incorporate citizen participation, albeit often in a symbolic capacity. One such initiative was the establishment of Neighborhood Social Councils (NSC), comprising 14 representatives per locality tasked with relaying community concerns to the municipality. However, these councils have remained largely ineffectual, serving more as a performative gesture than a substantive participatory mechanism.

It was within this constrained environment that the "Our Neighborhood" initiative emerged, leveraging a municipal budget clause mandating that 5 % of civil project funds be allocated based on citizen decisions; a rare legal opening for community involvement. Facilitator groups, composed of experts in urban planning, architecture, sociology, and psychology, were formed to bridge the gap between residents and the municipality, engaging directly in neighborhoods to identify and prioritize local needs.

This socio-political context significantly influenced the project's outcomes. The lack of integrated management and historical exclusion of citizens fostered initial skepticism and resistance, both from municipal officials wary of administrative burdens and from residents unaccustomed to meaningful participation. The project's reliance on facilitator groups was a pragmatic response to these barriers, enabling dialogue where institutional channels were weak. The national religious significance of Mashhad added another layer of challenges, as authorities often prioritize large scale pilgrimage-related infrastructure needs over local needs.

4.2. Procedural considerations and challenges during the project

Across five implementation rounds from 2019 to 2021, the "Our Neighborhood" project was implemented in 243 local points in Mashhad and generated extensive citizen input: 30,981 responses in 43 points (Round 1), 68,596 in 60 points (Round 2), 56,421 in 40 points (Round 3), 64,500 in 40 points (Round 4), and 75,000 in 60 points (Round 5).[1] The project unfolded through a sequence of steps including initial negotiating with municipality authorities, selecting facilitator groups, engaging neighborhood social councils, raising awareness, organizing public hearings, conducting surveys, and communicating results; each of which presented distinctive challenges but also provided opportunities for embedding participation in a resistant institutional context.

At the outset, strong resistance emerged within Mashhad's municipality. Officials feared that residents' demands would be unrealistic or duplicative, and some questioned the necessity of consultation given their own perceived awareness of community needs. These concerns were gradually overcome through preliminary meetings with senior managers and council members, where continuous dialogue helped secure legitimacy and institutional support. This highlights the importance of building trust and legitimacy, which Communicative Planning Theory identifies as prerequisites for meaningful participation.

Facilitator groups were then recruited through a structured process that combined public calls, interviews, and attention to inclusivity. Their role was central, as they not only conducted surveys and hearings but also mediated between communities and municipal authorities. The choice of neighborhood centers (which had to be spaces which are accessible, familiar to residents, and not recently reconstructed) was strategically made in consultation with social councils to maximize visibility and attendance. Yet, local power dynamics complicated this stage: some social council members resisted the facilitator groups, fearing that their authority would be undermined. The project therefore had to carefully balance inclusivity with respect for existing community structures, reinforcing the role of facilitators as mediators rather than replacements.

Public hearings constituted the most visible element of the process, with three mandatory sessions carried out by the facilitator groups in each neighborhood. These hearings introduced the project, reviewed survey results, and presented design proposals for community validation. Attendance varied widely, reflecting both skepticism and distrust among some residents, who doubted the municipality's sincerity. Facilitators responded by cultivating dialogue and transparency, demonstrating how communicative practices can gradually transform public perceptions in contexts of entrenched distrust (see Figs. 1–3).

Surveys provided another channel for capturing resident perspectives. They combined creative tools including banners inviting residents to complete the sentence "I want this place to be …" with mobile outreach in shops and households. This phase, typically lasting a month, generated between 500 and 5000 responses per neighborhood. Despite challenges such as vandalism or data loss, daily documentation by the facilitator groups preserved the integrity of the process. Responses from surveys were categorized into four groups: small-scale feasible projects[2], large-scale demands beyond budget[3], routine municipal duties[4], and inter-agency issues[5]. These classifications were then communicated back to residents and municipal authorities, creating an iterative cycle of dialogue, feedback, and refinement.

Finally, feasible projects were translated into design proposals either by facilitators or consultants and presented in the third public hearing session for community validation before municipal contractors implemented them. Budgets, initially tied to five percent of city funds, were publicly announced to enhance accountability. This closing step reinforced transparency and institutional learning, even though broader structural constraints limited the scope of projects (see Figs. 4–6).

[1] During the "Our Neighborhood" project, facilitator groups collected 500–2000 responses within each neighborhood and organized public hearings attended by 50–200 residents.

[2] Feasible responses which were appropriate considering the project's budget. These included responses such as street pavement improvements, providing a safe play space for children, creating safe public spaces, creating neighborhood-scale sports spaces for the youth, etc.

[3] Responses requiring significant funds which were beyond the project's resources and objectives. These included issues such as lack of a local park or road construction.

[4] Related to regular municipal duties which were not exercised in a satisfactory level in the eyes of local residents. These also could not be addressed through the "Our Neighborhood" resources but the facilitator groups would report all such responses to respective departments at the municipality for further action. These included responses such as improper and untimely waste collection or greenery maintenance and pruning in public areas.

[5] Issues requiring collaboration among various organizations such as removing drug dealers from the neighborhood, controlling the number of illegal migrants residing in the neighborhood or constructing a medical clinic.

Fig. 1. (Left). Holding public hearings for special groups such as women.

Fig. 2. (Middle). Holding public hearings in public spaces of the neighborhood such as parks.

Fig. 3. (Right). Holding public hearings in public spaces of the neighborhood such as local bazaars.

Fig. 4. (Left). Presence of all ages during the needs assessment phase.

Fig. 5. (Middle). Completing the sentence "I want this place to be …." on the needs assessment banner by all residents.

Fig. 6. (Right). Applying different needs assessment methods suitable for different age groups - Drawing "I want my neighborhood to look like …" by children.

5. Findings

The "Our Neighborhood" project with all its challenges, limitations and successes is a measure against which other small-scale participatory urban planning projects could be analyzed and thus records several important lessons. To better understand the multiple post-implemention aspects of this project, multiple interviews were conducted among chief municipal officers, city council members, coordinators and implementers of the projects, and a total of 1350 household surveys were analyzed, enabling this study to systematically assess residents' levels of trust, satisfaction, inclusiveness, and participation rates across different neighborhoods. In line with the conceptual framework, findings are organized around three dimensions: (1) dialogue and legitimacy, (2) inclusiveness and representation, and (3) institutional transformation. Analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data reveals the following intriguing lessons learned from this bottom-up process.

5.1. Dialogue and legitimacy

This dimension captures whether communicative practices in the project generated trust, mutual recognition, and legitimacy for decision-making.

Citizen Dialogue and Consensus Building: Interviewees and respondents believed that the "Our Neighborhood" project made possible the dialogue between people and local managerial system and that it, to some extent, regained citizens' attention to neighborhood issues and their trust toward the municipality through the provision of ongoing information and consultations. Surveys indicate that 65.4 % of residents felt the project enhanced their sense of belonging, and 53.9 % reported high or very high satisfaction with the project outcomes. A member of the Neighborhood Social Council mentioned "*to be honest, when the facilitation group came to Kalateh Barfi to explain the "Our Neighborhood" project, many citizens were unsure whether this project, like previous years, would remain fruitless and endless. They couldn't even agree on what needs should be prioritised. However, this project showed that the best solutions can be reached through dialogue*" (member of NSC[6] 25, Kalateh Barfi neighborhood, 2022). Respondents and interviewees believed that this iterative consultation process was effective in ensuring that the local community is brought on board, leading to potential engagement of real users of spaces in the planning of their neighborhood.

However, reliance on municipal approval proved as a constant challenge which limited true consensus, as final decisions often reflected official priorities over resident input; a constraint less evident in Porto Alegre's legally mandated Participatory Budgeting (Wampler et al. , 2021). This suggests that while dialogue was restored, its depth was curtailed by centralized control, raising questions about the extent of citizen empowerment.

Raising Awareness Among Citizens: Based on the analysis of interview and survey data, identifying citizens' priorities brought with it an understanding of residents' beliefs around urban management roles and issues of urban planning. By involving the local residents in first-hand participation experience, "Our Neighborhood" project helped in improving local residents' awareness as well. However, this awareness was unevenly distributed; neighborhoods with stronger pre-existing social capital benefited more, while marginalized areas lagged; a limitation not fully addressed in the collected data.

Promoting Dialogue for Future Generations: Children and youth were notably active, with parents observing that young people introduced them to the project and participated directly in its implementation. This intergenerational engagement suggests that early involvement can foster long-term civic learning and collective vision. A resident in Reza Shahr neighborhood mentioned: "*Our children informed us that such a project was being carried out. We didn't have much hope for these projects and didn't take them very seriously, but the process was fascinating for them. When the first small-scale was executed and accessible on the ground, my children were painting the playground they wanted themselves. They taught us a great lesson—that issues can be solved through dialogue*" (Resident 6, Reza Shahr neighborhood, 2022). Nonetheless, data show no evidence of sustained impact among youth, indicating the need for longitudinal evaluation.

Partial Adaptation to Challenges During the Pandemic: Due to the conditions caused by COVID-19 limitations, the project renewed its participation strategies and arranged public dialogue sessions with regard to social distancing measures. A head of a facilitation group explained: "*We were all concerned that if we had to halt the project due to COVID conditions, we would surely lose the trust we had gained from the people again*" (Head facilitator 17, 2021). While this adaptability sustained momentum, the lack of digital tools {such as those advocated by PGIS frameworks (Cho et al., 2023)}, restricted participation, underscoring the vulnerability of analog methods during crises.

The above themes reflected the first dimension of our conceptual framework, where dialogue generated legitimacy but did not translate into genuine empowerment.

5.2. Inclusiveness and representation

This dimension examines the extent to which diverse social groups were engaged and whether participation was equitable across gender, class, and ethnicity.

Inclusive Participation Across Demographics: Quantitative findings reveal that while 50.8 % of respondents reported active

[6] Neighborhood Social Council (NSC).

participation in needs assessment, only 27.2 % were both aware of and involved in neighborhood council elections. Women accounted for 38.5 % of participants[7], while migrants and low-income groups were underrepresented in public hearings, which were often dominated by middle-class residents. Interviewees confirmed that facilitators attempted to engage all demographics, but voluntary participation and lack of proactive outreach limited inclusivity. Thus, inclusiveness was more an aspiration than an achieved outcome. This corresponds to the second dimension of the framework, showing that while participation channels were open, social inequalities and cultural barriers limited true representativeness (see Fig. 7 and 8).

5.3. Institutional transformation

This dimension evaluates whether the project created structural change in governance, accountability, and sustainability of participatory practices.

Realizing Potential Opportunities: Interviewees and respondents highlighted that the project revitalized abandoned lots into playgrounds and community parks, improving security and neighborhood utility. 65.8 % of surveyed residents strongly supported implementing similar projects in the future, confirming demand for replication. Yet the focus on small-scale projects, limited by the 5 % municipal budget clause, left broader infrastructural needs unmet; unlike Indonesia's Kampung Improvement Program, where resident-led efforts scaled incrementally (Sambodo et al., 2023). This suggests untapped potential constrained by funding and municipal priorities.

Community-Supervised Implementation: The local community played a significant participatory role during the process and more importantly during the implementation stage. Although the municipality did not seem to be willing to use local assistance for the implementation phase, residents believed they have done their best "*to oversee the contractor's work to ensure they delivered the best results"* because *"after all, this is our neighborhood—it feels like our home, and we care about it*" (resident 9, Noh-Darreh nieghborhood, 2021). Among the surveyed residents, 42.6 % reported "closely" supervising the implementation, 27.6 % "somewhat," and 29.5 % "little". With residents' participation and support in monitoring the implementation phase, higher degrees of accountability in management processes were reached. Community supervision was effective not only in enhancing the quality of the outcomes but also turned people into stakeholders who felt responsible for the premises, and this created a positive collaborative atmosphere. This reflects the third dimension of the framework, where community oversight signaled accountability gains but fell short of deeper institutional transformation due to municipal discretion and centralized control.

In summary, the "Our Neighborhood" project illustrates both the potential and fragility of participatory urban planning in a centralized context. Its achievements in fostering dialogue, raising awareness, and creating accountability mechanisms are evident. Yet inclusiveness remained uneven, decision-making power stayed with the municipality, and larger structural needs went unaddressed. Viewed through the lens of communicative planning, the project demonstrates how dialogic processes can open participatory spaces even in constrained institutional environments, but also how such spaces remain limited unless embedded in broader systemic reforms. Viewed through the lens of Communicative Planning Theory, the project illustrates that dialogic processes can open participatory spaces even in constrained environments, but their transformative capacity remains limited unless embedded in broader systemic reforms.

6. Discussion

The "Our Neighborhood" project illustrates both the opportunities and constraints of embedding participatory planning within a centralized governance system. Its achievements demonstrate how dialogue and structured facilitation can foster trust and civic learning, while its limitations reveal enduring institutional and social barriers.

From the perspective of dialogue and legitimacy, one of the most notable outcomes was the restoration of dialogue and partial trust-building. Quantitative findings show that 65.4 % of residents reported a stronger attachment to their neighborhoods, and 53.9 % expressed high satisfaction with the project's implementation. Interviews confirm that repeated public hearings created new channels of communication between citizens and municipal authorities. However, consensus was often curtailed, as final decisions required municipal approval. This reliance on centralized discretion meant that dialogue could enhance legitimacy but not always deliver binding influence.

Comparatively, unlike Porto Alegre's legally mandated participatory budgeting (Wampler et al., 2021), which guarantees continuity and accountability, Mashhad's framework relied on a discretionary five-percent budget clause, making it more fragile and subject to political change. These contrasts highlight both the innovation and the fragility of Mashhad's intermediary-facilitator model in contexts of centralized governance.

Inclusiveness was another mixed achievement. The project attracted diverse participants, with visible youth involvement. Yet, analysis shows that low-income groups and migrants were consistently underrepresented in hearings and decision-making processes, despite the facilitators' efforts. Moreover, women included only 38.5 % among survey respondents. Such groups' absence or lower participation highlights structural barriers that voluntary participation alone could not overcome, underscoring the need for proactive outreach strategies such as targeted sessions and alternative participation channels.

In terms of institutional transformation, the project's central innovation was the role of facilitators as intermediaries. "Our

[7] It should be noted that this number is related to the percentage of women who participated in needs assessment phase of the project, and not the third group of respondents who participated in this paper's data collection.

Fig. 7. (Left). Inclusiveness: The presence of different age and gender groups during the project process.

Fig. 8. (Right). The presence of different social classes and ethnicities in the project.

Neighborhood" depended on independent groups of planners, sociologists, and local experts who bridged distrust between communities and the municipality. This intermediary-facilitator model represents a distinct contribution: it demonstrates how participatory practices can emerge in centralized systems where accountability mechanisms are weak, by inserting mediators that translate, negotiate, and legitimize community voices.

Adaptability to unforeseen circumstances was key in maintaining the participatory process. Although the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to in-person engagement, yet the engagement processes adjusted by implementing socially distanced public hearings and modified consultation strategies. However, the lack of digital engagement tools limited accessibility, particularly for those unable to attend physical meetings. Comparative experiences from other participatory planning models demonstrate that leveraging digital tools can enhance inclusivity and engagement. Future projects should explore integrating web-based participatory platforms and GIS-enabled planning tools to expand outreach and participation, an initiative which was absent in Mashhad's case.

Another important outcome of the project was the long-term impact on civic engagement and trust in municipal governance. Interviews with community members indicated that the project fostered a renewed sense of agency among residents, particularly among younger participants who played an active role in the process. However, sustaining this engagement beyond the project's timeline requires embedding participatory mechanisms into governance structures rather than relying on temporary initiatives. Without long-term institutional commitment, the risk remains that such projects will be perceived as isolated experiments rather than fundamental shifts in urban planning practices. "Our Neighborhood" operated within a discretionary framework, making its continuation dependent on municipal priorities rather than institutionalized policy. This highlights the need for legal and structural reforms to embed participatory practices more permanently within urban governance frameworks.

Despite its bright sides, the project also faced constraints due to the centralized nature of Iran's urban governance system. The municipal reliance on non-tax revenue sources, fragmented authority over urban services, and limited financial autonomy constrained

the project's ability to address larger-scale community concerns. This reflects broader structural limitations of participatory planning in non-democratic contexts, where institutional barriers can hinder sustained citizen engagement. Comparative examples from countries with similar governance structures, such as China (Li and Jong, 2017), suggest that while facilitator-driven models can be effective, they require long-term institutional commitment to achieve lasting impact.

Future research should focus on several key areas to build on the insights gained from the "Our Neighborhood" case study. First, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the sustainability of participatory initiatives in centralized systems; whether short-term engagement translates into lasting shifts in civic behavior and governance structures. Second, comparative studies across different socio-political contexts can help identify best practices for institutionalizing participation in constrained environments. Third, research into digital participatory tools can provide insights into how technology can enhance accessibility and inclusivity, addressing some of the limitations encountered in Mashhad. Finally, exploring the economic implications of participatory planning, both in terms of cost-effectiveness for municipalities and broader economic benefits for communities, can provide valuable justifications for expanding such initiatives.

To sum up, while participation in this case study enhanced dialogue, awareness, and local agency, its depth was constrained by centralized approval, uneven inclusivity, and financial dependence.

These patterns resonate with broader debates in communicative planning, where legitimacy and inclusion can be fostered through dialogue, but their transformative potential remains limited without institutional reform. Hence, the limitations highlight the need for structural reforms, institutional commitment, and innovative participatory mechanisms to ensure the long-term sustainability of citizen engagement in urban development.

7. Conclusion

The "Our Neighborhood" project in Mashhad illustrates how participatory urban planning can be implemented in a traditionally centralized governance system. By engaging residents in decision-making, the initiative fostered a more collaborative approach to urban development, demonstrating that structured participation can lead to tangible improvements. While the project successfully created a platform for community voices, its reliance on municipal discretion rather than an institutionalized framework raises concerns about long-term sustainability.

The case study underscores the role of mediation in non-particiaptory settings. Facilitation groups' efforts helped overcome initial (community) resistance and ensured that community input was systematically integrated into planning decisions. However, the project's effectiveness was limited by broader structural constraints, such as fragmented urban service management and a lack of municipal financial autonomy, which restricted the extent to which participatory proposals could influence city-wide development.

The case study also underscores the importance of transparency and accountability in participatory planning. Clear communication about decision-making processes, budget allocations, and project outcomes helped build degrees of trust between residents and municipal authorities. Future participatory models should further institutionalize these principles, ensuring that community engagement is not just a symbolic exercise but a meaningful contribution to governance.

Taken together, these findings align with the three dimensions of our conceptual framework. In terms of dialogue and legitimacy, the project demonstrated that structured communication, facilitated by intermediary groups, could partially rebuild trust in a centralized context. Regarding inclusiveness and representation, the initiative showed both the potential for wider engagement and the persistent barriers faced by marginalized groups. Finally, in terms of institutional transformation, the project revealed important openings for community involvement but fell short of embedding participation into binding governance structures, leaving it vulnerable to political discretion.

Finally, while the project cannot be considered a full institutional transformation, it nonetheless signals the potential of dialogue, inclusiveness, and intermediary mediation to reshape relationships between citizens and municipal authorities. Although we acknowledge that the findings of this study are not generalizable in any other context, Mashhad's experience offers both a cautionary tale of structural limits and a practical example of how participatory spaces can be carved out, legitimized, and gradually scaled to strengthen future urban governance.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Arezoo Alikhani: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Seyedeh Niloofar Hashemi:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT (OpenAI) in order to assist with language editing, restructuring, and improving clarity. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. The research was conducted independently, and no external funding or support was received that could have influenced the outcomes or interpretations presented

in this study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript, and there are no financial, personal, or professional interests that could be construed to have inappropriately affected the research.

Arezoo Alikhani.

Niloofar Hashemi.

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