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# Community Social Sustainability: Unpacking the Concept for Urban Governance and Planning

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**ABSTRACT**

Research on social sustainability has revealed a persistent knowledge gap concerning how to institutionalize social sustainability into urban governance and planning. New knowledge capable of operationalizing social sustainability to concrete community settings and identifying how governance and planning can help building socially sustainable trajectories are needed. This inspires us to develop a typology of community social sustainability coupling relevant theory and new and extensive empirical data. At the heart of the typology are three theoretically derived foundational characteristics—neighborhood robustness, access to every-day services, and governance structures—encompassing the most essential aspects of community social sustainability. When exploring them empirically, we find that their realization depends on joint contribution from multiple actors. The next layer of the typology thus identifies four supportive conditions strengthening the local capability to address, prioritize and build neighborhood robustness, relevant services, and governance structures. The paper ends with a guide for future research and practice.

## 1 | Introduction

Social sustainability was for long the "forgotten" and underrated pillar of sustainability (Opp 2017; Ballet, Bazin, and Mahieu 2020). During the last decade, however, the number of contributions has mushroomed (Wang and Ke 2024). Within this research, the community level of society receives strong attention. The reason is the community level's vicinity to people's everyday life, and its manageable size—hence it is at the community level the effects of public interventions are immediately felt and can be traced (Medved 2018; Shirazi et al. 2020; Wang and Ke 2024). A first wave of community social sustainability research started by exploring and defining foundational features of the concept, followed by a second wave studying how to achieve social sustainability on the ground (Hofstad 2023). Recent studies, however, reveal a persistent blind spot: more knowledge is needed on how to institutionalize social sustainability principles into urban governance and planning (Eizenberg and Jabareen 2017; Rashidfarokhi et al. 2018; Larimian and Sadeghi 2021; Hofstad 2023; Wang and Ke 2024). Inspired by this knowledge gap, this paper aims to build new theoretical and practical knowledge to clarify foundational characteristics of social sustainability in a community context and to identify supportive structures serving as bridges between a community's needs and capabilities on the one hand, and local governance priorities on the other. We ask:

> What are foundational characteristics of social sustainability in a community setting, and what are key conditions for realizing them in urban governance and planning?

These questions guide the development of a context-sensitive *and* governance-relevant typology of community social sustainability. Three communities in Norway constitute the empirical cases. In each of them a set of nested empirical investigations were performed, engaging inhabitants and other actors operating in the communities—local government, business, and civil society actors.

Nordic cities and communities are frontrunners in translating the sustainability agenda into operative policies and practices (Terama et al. 2019). However, few Nordic and North European cities have succeeded in emphasizing social aspects of sustainability (Medved 2018; Leminen et al. 2021). This gap has triggered Nordic cities to set in motion serious efforts to explore and implement more socially sound sustainability policies (Terama et al. 2019, 3). The cases studied in this paper showcase this exact motivation, enabling us to explore sustainability innovation and institutionalization in real-life settings (Leminen et al. 2021; Frantzeskaki and Rok 2018).

We construct a typology by combining the robustness and solidity of current theoretical research while mirroring these theoretical concepts in analysis of concrete empirical activities (Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright 2012; Reiche et al. 2017; Hofstad et al. 2022). Our approach is explorative and involves an iterative exchange between theoretical inquiry and empirical observations. The article's structure follows this typology-building logic. We start by establishing a theoretical foundation singling out dominant definitions of community social sustainability. Subsequently, we perform a series of nested empirical explorations developed and analyzed by a transdisciplinary team of researchers and practitioners. In the next step, we combine the theoretical and empirical results to create a revised, nuanced, and contextualized understanding of *the foundational characteristics of community social sustainability*. They are compared and discussed in the context of the empirical insights from local community governance, motivating the identification of four *supportive conditions* for levelling up social sustainability concerns in policy and planning. The paper ends by combining these characteristics and conditions as building blocks of the typology. At their interface is topical questions that in sum function as a strategic guide for future research and practice.

## 2 | State of the Art: Core Dimensions of Community Social Sustainability

Sustainability is a unique construct, containing three interrelated yet distinct dimensions: the economic, environmental, and social. Social sustainability should be understood relative to the two others, but also as a norm, concept, and political aim in and of itself (Littig and Griessler 2005). Moreover, a foundational insight from the Brundtland commissions' seminal work is that, when the concept is operationalized, the relationship between the three dimensions, and the activities in each of them, should safeguard intergenerational and intragenerational justice. When defining social sustainability, it is not enough to identify elements enhancing social livability in the present of interest is also its limits and interaction with the larger environmental-economic context now and in the future (Ballet, Bazin, and Mahieu 2020, 1389). This has instigated Winston (2021, 193) to define a sustainable community as a place:

> "... that meet the basic human needs of the present, so they can participate in society, while also protecting the quality of Earth's life-support systems on which the welfare of current and future generations depends."

The community is the smallest and primary level for encounters between residents and the social, environmental, and economic aspects of society, and are often used interchangeably with the neighborhood, both being a practical scale for initiatives and programs that seek direct social effect on the urban life of citizens (Wang and Ke 2024; Shirazi et al. 2020).

An underlying challenge when seeking to understand key characteristics of a community's social sustainability is the complexity and ambiguity of the "social." People's preferences in a locality are closely linked to key characteristics of the community, the networks it gives access to, the living and leisure opportunities available, and its location in the wider urban area (Vallance, Perkins, and Dixon 2011, 344–345; Doering, Silver, and Taylor 2020, 6–7). The distinct community context thus builds habits, identities, and lifestyles underpinning people's quality of life. However, such common sentiments are also unstable and exposed to continuous re-interpretation, development, and change (Kohon 2018, 15). What is more, a community is not a monolithic entity where all share the same values and aspirations (Dassen, Kunseler, and van Kessenich 2013, 195). Carving out a mutual sense of place is thus highly subjective, context dependent, and value laden. Changes in a community's physical and social environment may alter its dominant values and lifestyles, as well as maintaining or altering the distribution of burdens and goods within and across communities.

## 2.1 | Two Foundational Dimensions of Community Social Sustainability

The designated scope of social sustainability in relation to the other sustainability pillars is defined in various ways in the literature. Two distinct dimensions do however stand out in central and recent contributions to the field (Dempsey et al. 2011; Dempsey, Brown, and Bramley 2012; Weingartner and Moberg 2011; Vallance, Perkins, and Dixon 2011; Eizenberg and Jabareen 2017; Opp 2017; Shirazi and Keivani 2019; Hofstad 2023; Wang and Ke 2024; Nilsson et al. 2024):

- *Social justice*—equal opportunity to access and acquire services and goods, avoid burdens, and take part in political institutions and processes

- *Social robustness*—social capital, social networks, stability, identity and belonging, and safety and security

The first dimension, *social justice*, is a cornerstone of sustainability. When applied to a community setting, it is often understood as equal access to a range of different services and facilities, such as health (housing, doctors, pharmacy, avoidance of environmental harm), education (schools, kindergarten), leisure (restaurants, pubs, libraries), transport (public transport, car-sharing, bike lanes, walking paths), income (job opportunities), and public space (parks, forests, urban squares) (Dempsey et al. 2011, 293; Medved 2018, Opp 2017; Wang and Ke 2024). In democratic societies, these amenities are distributed through political processes. To fulfil their life aspirations, citizens should thus have the opportunity to influence decisions (Trudeau 2018; Wang and Ke 2024). This coupling of social justice and governance within the realms of social sustainability resonates with the Brundtland Commission's call for more effective citizen participation to aid distributional justice (WCED 1987, point 28).

The second dimension of community social sustainability, *social robustness*, directs attention to the social and collective aspects of a community, often referred to as its capacity to maintain and reproduce itself at an acceptable level of functioning, and engaging people on the basis of where they live and the activities they perform (Dempsey, Brown, and Bramley 2012; Eizenberg and Jabareen 2017; Larimian and Sadeghi 2021; Shirazi et al. 2020). Relational ties and collective arenas lay the foundation for the members of the community to act together and voice their concerns in decision-making processes. The concepts of "social capital," "social cohesion," and "social networks" capture such collective capacities of local communities (Dempsey et al. 2011; Dempsey, Brown, and Bramley 2012; Shirazi et al. 2020). Ideally, they provide stability, identity and belonging, and safety and security, which in sum strengthen the ties between people and their attachment to the physical environment (ibid). Social robustness is thus built through a combination of social, historical, cultural, and physical features that mutually enforce one another and, when there are positive synergies between them, make people want to engage and fight for their community (Wang and Ke 2024).

There is a close connection between social justice and social robustness. On the one hand, a community with strong bonds between its members risks being exclusive. As Kohon (2018, 19) argues, social cohesive communities may strive, or even actively oppose, to include groups and individuals with deviant lifestyles, values and habits. On the other hand, a community with large socio-economic differences is often low on social robustness due to social divides and unequal access to resources. Hence, *inclusiveness* is a key for building socially sustainable communities, with inclusion of unorganized, "silent" community members representing a significant hurdle. More inclusive forms of governance are thus at the heart of social sustainability. So much so, that it sometimes is treated as a stand-alone social sustainability dimension (Nilsson et al. 2024; Hofstad 2023).

## 2.2 | Co-Governance: A Crucial Dimension for Safeguarding Justice and Building Robustness

How to build a bridge between community needs and aspirations on the one side, and local governance on the other is underdeveloped, both in theory and practice (Wang and Ke 2024; Hofstad 2023). Closing this gap requires collaborative forms of governance and planning (Frantzeskaki and Rok 2018), which stimulates us to dig deeper into the most recent understanding of the collaborative governance concept and its practical implications for understanding how local government-community encounters can enable social sustainability at local level.

Collaborative governance is a theoretical and practical alternative to conventional hierarchical and market-oriented modes of governance (Voets et al. 2021; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2016). The key purpose of collaborative governance is to create and strengthen public value through collective means, which generally involves developing new and better services or addressing new and emerging issues at the political agenda (Strockosh and Osborne 2020; Cristofoli et al. 2022). At stake is the legitimacy and accountability of decision making (Ansell and Trondal 2018). Collaborative governance denotes "the processes and structures of public policy decision making and management that engage people... across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private, and civic spheres to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished" (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015, 721). The last sentence in this quote is key. A central push factor for collaborative governance is a lack of means and resources due to fiscal stress or wicked issues as climate change and social exclusion (Voets et al. 2021; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2016). These issues require innovation by drawing on actors and resources beyond the public sector (Avoyan 2022; Brandsen, Steen, and Versheure 2018).

Co-creation is a particular concept and activity under the collaborative governance umbrella and is considered well-suited to spur innovation (Ansell and Torfing 2021). It is defined as "process through which a plethora of public and/or private actors are involved—ideally on equal footing—in a collaborative endeavour to define common problems and design and implement new, better, yet feasible, public solutions" (Hofstad, Vedeld, et al. 2022, 3; Hofstad, Mouratidis, et al. 2022; Ansell and Torfing 2021; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2016). Hence, counter to traditional citizen participation, which assumes that people reactively respond to political suggestions, co-creation presupposes that citizens are turned into proactive partners and cogovernors. Citizens are asked to contribute at all stages of decision-making—initiation, design, implementation, and evaluation (Opp 2017, 298; Hofstad 2024). The purpose is to build new trajectories and develop new solutions through collaboration between multiple relevant and affected actors that ideally unleash necessary resources and spur innovation.

A crucial question for our typology is how to conceptualize the institutionalization of collaboration and co-creation into the fabric of local governance at the interface between local government and the community. Four variables have recently been singled out, and tested, as key factors for achieving collaborative performance (Douglas et al. 2020, 641–642, building on Ansell and Gash 2008 and Emerson and Nabatchi 2015):

- *Incentives for collaboration*—trust between the actors, little resource asymmetry, clear incentives, awareness of interdependence

- *Institutional design*—explicit and respected rules, transparent decision-making

- *Facilitative leadership*—ability to convene actors, steward the rules, mediate conflicts, inspire action

- *Intensive collaborative processes*—face-to-face dialogue, shared fact-finding, problem solving, knowledge sharing

These variables are perceived to strengthen the effectiveness, legitimacy, and adaptability of collaboration. Of the four, strong incentives for collaboration are found to serve as a basic premise for reaching collaborative outcomes (ibid). This finding overlaps with a core insight across different strains of collaborative governance research: that mutual trust and interdependence between the actors stimulate them to co-create and strengthen their ability to deliver successful outcomes (Nederhand, Bekkers, and Voorberg 2016; van Eijck and Gasco 2018; Voets et al. 2021; Castellani et al. 2024). Douglas et al. (2020) further find that incentives for collaboration are most frequently combined with facilitative leadership and institutional design. The crucial position of these variables is confirmed also by later studies (Avoyan 2022; Cristofoli et al. 2022).

Because of the knowledge gap concerning the institutionalization of social sustainability concerns into community-relevant governance and planning, it is particularly interesting to empirically explore these collaborative governance dimensions in combination with social robustness and social justice concerns. How can engagement in co-creation processes strengthen a community's social robustness, and the residents' access to goods and services, by providing an arena for interaction with agenda setting and resource controlling actors (Trudeau 2018; Johansson 2015).

## 3 | Research Design: Methodological Approach and Empirical Basis

We utilize the three theoretical dimensions identified above as a heuristic guide, that is, the threefold understanding of social sustainability structures and frames our empirical data collection, at the same time as the empirical results contribute new insights and nuance to our theoretical understanding. This dialogue between theoretical insight and practical knowledge requires a transdisciplinary research approach combining different scientific disciplines and input from practitioners from outside academia (Brandt et al. 2013, 1). To this end, research has been conducted by a team of three researchers, with combined expertise on health and well-being, urban planning, and sustainability governance, and four advisors responsible for the social sustainability strategy of the relatively large Norwegian municipalities Kristiansand, Stavanger, and Fredrikstad. By working together, we have been able to combine scientific insight and practical know-how when designing, collecting, and analyzing data. At the same time, the research results have fed into place development strategies in each municipality, influencing the formulation of aims, priorities, and investments, the selection of policy instruments, and concrete policy measures in each community (Stavanger 2023; Fredrikstad 2023a; Fredrikstad 2023b; Kristiansand 2024).

### 3.1 | Case Overview: Selection Criteria and Background Variables

As shown in Table 1, the communities studied, Tinnheia, Kvernevik, and Holmen, represent contexts where social sustainability is at play. All are characterized by socio-economic and spatial disparities and are the subject of planned or ongoing municipal interventions to enhance local, social sustainability. This enables us to contribute and observe real-life discussions of relevant social sustainability aspects in the community.

Despite socio-economic challenges, the residents report a strong place attachment. Naturally, intentions to stay may indicate strong roots and place attachment, but for certain residents, they might also indicate lack of potential for residential mobility due to, for example, high housing prices, employment situation, or other personal or contextual characteristics.

There are some important differences between the three areas. Whereas Tinnheia and Kvernevik are located at some distance outside the city center, Holmen is in walking distance from the city center, with its wide selection of services and leisure facilities. Furthermore, the areas differ in their political representation. Stavanger and Fredrikstad have political representation at the city district level, while in Kristiansand, the city council is the only political body. Hence, the cases represent areas where social justice and robustness issues are on the agenda, and where the opportunity structures, their geographical location and institutional set up, varies. This makes them similar enough to be comparable and, varied enough to contribute general insights.

### 3.2 | Data and Methods

Data were collected in three steps: first a survey to community residents, followed by focus group interviews, and, finally, arrangement of city labs in each community. The project was designed to facilitate and enhance learning between each step in the data collection process, and between the participating municipalities. Specifically, the empirical material was built through a stepwise, sequential process where (a) each step in data collection laid the foundation for the next, and (b) experiences from one municipality laid the foundation for data collection and analysis in the next. The exact approach and number of activities in each locality varied according to contextual needs and experiences. The empirical material is summarized in Table 2 and presented below.

The place standard tool (PST) was developed by Public Health Scotland, the Scottish Government, and Architecture and Design Scotland, and is a flexible tool that invites inhabitants to assess different aspects of their neighborhoods, using a survey and/or focus group interviews (Mouratidis et al. 2024). It is structured around 14 main themes, which represent the physical, social, and procedural aspects of a place. The 14 themes are: moving around, public transport, traffic and parking, streets and spaces, natural space, play and recreation, facilities and services, work and local economy, housing and community, social interaction, identity and belonging, feeling

**TABLE 1** | Contextual overview.

| Background variables | Tinnheia | Kvernevik | Holmen |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of inhabitants and homes | Kristiansand municipality: 117,237 Tinnheia community: 3000 residents, 1400 homes | Stavanger municipality: 149,449 Kvernevik community: 5500 residents | Fredrikstad municipality: 85,541 Fredrikstad center area: 5934 homes, the exact number for Holmen unknown |
| Geographic location | On the top of a steep hill 3.5 km from the city centre | 9.3 km from the city centre by car, 8.7 km by walking | 1 km to city centre, easily accessible |
| Access to services and amenities in the neighbourhood | School, kindergarten, grocery store, a restaurant, hairdresser, youth centre | School, kindergarten, grocery store, community centre, swimming pool | Few services and amenities in their own neighbourhood, but in the city centre all social, cultural and commercial facilities available |
| Socio-economic profile | Lower education and income level and higher proportion of immigrants than the municipal average | Lower education than the municipal average, and higher proportion of immigrants (29%) origin from 112 countries, in parts of the area 20% of children living in low-income households | The municipality's highest proportion of children in low-income households (41%), children with single parents (37%), recipients of work assessment allowance and social assistance, rental housing, and of people moving out the area, and the lowest median income |
| Place attachment and stability | As the first test arena, this question was not included in the Tinnheia survey, but strong attachment communicated in an open-ended question | Intentions to continue living in the case area: 43% for rest of life, 25% more than 10years, 22% 3–10years, 8% 1–3years, 3% less than a year | Intentions to continue living in the case area: 50% for rest of life, 13% more than 10years, 19% 3–10years, 16% 1–3years, 1% less than a year |
| Political representation at the community level | No political body at the community or district level | Municipal District Committee appointed by the city council | Local community committee in each school district elected by the community's inhabitants |

**TABLE 2** | Data overview: Type and scope.

| Type of data | PST-survey | PST-focus groups | City lab |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of studies | 3 | 16 | 5 |
| Number of entities | Tinnheia: $N = 358$, 10%[a] | Tinnheia: 6 | Tinnheia: 3 |
| | Kvernevik: $N = 1053$, 32%[a] | Kvernevik: 5 | Kvernevik: 1 |
| | Holmen: $N = 196$, 12%[b] | Holmen: 5 | Holmen: 1 |

[a]Response rate.

[b]Response rate in central Fredrikstad, including Holmen.

safe, care and maintenance, and, finally, influence and sense of control. The themes correspond to the core social sustainability factors identified in the relevant research literature (cf. Hofstad 2023).

We used PST to conduct online surveys with the residents in the three case areas (Mouratidis et al. 2024). For each of the 14 themes of PST we formulated a single question, thus significantly shortening the original questionnaire. To compensate the loss of information this simplification entails, we formulated two general open-ended questions that were included in the survey. Since the survey was conducted in sequence in the three case areas, we took the opportunity to revise both the questionnaire, and the open-ended questions based both on the experience of the previous application and local knowledge needs. A thorough description of the survey, as well as the results in each area, can be found in Mouratidis et al. (2024). Overall, the response rates of all three surveys are in line with those of other surveys conducted in Norway in recent years (e.g., Mouratidis and Yiannako 2022). Accordingly, the samples are subject to biases common for this type of survey. On average, respondents are more highly educated than the average population, and young people and people with immigrant backgrounds are underrepresented.

To address these biases and produce deeper insights, we conducted *focus groups interviews*. In total, we facilitated 16 focus groups with representatives of groups that are less likely to participate in participatory processes (Mouratidis et al. 2024, Koeckler et al. 2020) and/or residents whose needs might not be sufficiently addressed. The participants represent so-called "silent voices," for example, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, adolescents, and young adults. As these are groups that traditionally are more difficult to reach, recruitment was a challenge. We used contacts in welfare services, voluntary organizations, churches, and schools as recruitment channels. The number of participants in each group varied from 10 to 1, with an average of four participants per group. In all focus groups, the 14 themes of PST served as an interview guide, and participants were asked both to evaluate the existing qualities of their respective neighborhood and to present their ideas on possible improvements. Table 3 provides an overview of the focus groups.

City labs constituted the third and final step in data collection in each neighborhood. Building on the insights from the PST survey and focus groups, the aim was to engage inhabitants, and other relevant actors, such as service providers, planners, civil society organizations, religious centers, private

developers and politicians in co-creating knowledge about the community as well as possible measures to increase the social sustainability of the area. The number of participants ranged from 20 to 40, and the number of city labs varied from one (in Kvernevik and Holmen) to three (in Tinnheia). In each neighborhood we tested a different interactive method: world café (Tinnheia), future workshops with backcasting[1] (Kvernevik), and a combination of the two (Holmen). Regardless of the specific method, participants in each city lab were invited to assess the present, describe their hopes for the future, and to reflect on how the gap between the present and future could be closed through co-creation.[2]

## 4 | Empirical Results According to Core Dimensions of Community Social Sustainability

The PST survey and focus groups reveal citizens' life worlds—what they cherish and what they dislike in their living environment. There is a close resemblance between the results of the quantitative and qualitative PST data. This overlap strengthens the validity of the survey results, and indicates that the judgement of the communities' social and physical conditions is shared across different socioeconomic groups. Table 4 summarizes and provides overview of the results from the PST survey.

Below, the PST survey and focus groups, together with the city lab results are categorized and discussed according to each of the main dimensions of community social sustainability identified in the theory section: social robustness, social equity, and co-governance. By analyzing the data through the lens of each theoretical core dimension, we gradually build a typology singling out foundational community social sustainability characteristics and their supportive conditions.

## 4.1 | Social Robustness: Basic Values Strengthening Community Attachment

Social robustness denotes the social and collective aspects of a community, described as the ability to maintain and reproduce itself at an acceptable level of functioning. In the PST survey, it is measured by the variables *feeling safe, identity and belonging*, and *social interaction*. Two of these variables, safety and identity and belonging, are scored high and judged as important, especially in Kvernevik, but also in Holmen and Tinnheia. When comparing the three, we find that identity and belonging are linked to distinct contextual factors: the

**TABLE 3** | Type of focus groups per neighborhood.

| Tinnheia in Kristiansand | Kvernevik in Stavanger | Holmen in Fredrikstad |
|---|---|---|
| Ethnic minorities | Ethnic minorities with children | Ethnic minorities |
| Older persons | Older persons | Older persons |
| Young adults | Junior high school student council | Young adults |
| Families with children ×2 | Young adults | Persons with disabilities |
| Mixed group | Men | Single parents |

**TABLE 4** | Place standard tool survey results for all communities.

| PST variables according to main dimensions of community social sustainability | Tinnheia (N = 358) | Kvernevik (N = 1053) | Holmen (N = 196) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social robustness | | | |
| Feeling safe | 5.74 | 5.87 | 4.97 |
| Identity and belonging | 4.73 | 5.73 | 5.03 |
| Social interaction | 3.09 | 3.94 | 3.76 |
| Socially just access | | | |
| Public transport | 5.93 | 5.46 | 4.61 |
| Moving around | 5.12 | 5.13 | 4.72 |
| Natural space | 4.73 | 5.26 | 4.12 |
| Traffic and parking | 4.67 | 3.93 | 5.04 |
| Housing and community | 4.46 | 5.15 | 5.31 |
| Play and recreation | 4.33 | 5.23 | 4.43 |
| Streets & spaces | 4.10 | 4.50 | 4.27 |
| Facilities and services[a] | 4.03 | 4.54 | 5.63 |
| Care and maintenance | 3.51 | 4.40 | 4.13 |
| Work and local economy | 2.91 | 3.11 | 4.89 |
| Collaborative governance and co-creation | | | |
| Influence and sense of control | 3.95 | 3.77 | 3.31 |

[a]School, kindergarten and childcare, health services, shops, leisure activities, places to meet friends, etc.

quality of the public and natural space, and of social ties and relations. Kvernevik is designed as a "garden community" with clearly marked borders of the living environment, with the traffic kept on the outside and natural space surrounding the community. It cater for social meetings and activities. In all three communities, our informants are aware that their neighborhood had, and to some degree still has, a bad reputation due to their comparatively lower socio-economic status in the municipality. They reflect on how this creates an inner solidarity between community members. Perceptions of safety seems to depend on exposure to social and physical risks. Holmen scores somewhat lower on this variable than the other to, which is natural given its location close to the city center and its higher level of socio-economic deprivation.

Turning to the *social interaction* variable which measures the availability of places and opportunities to meet, we see that in Tinnheia and Kvernevik this variable receives a low score, and in Holmen somewhat higher. Holmen dwellers have access to a bustling city center with several formal and informal arenas, while the other two offer only a minimum of such physical social arenas. In qualitative survey responses and focus group dialogues, the inhabitants underline that being part of a social network is crucial, not merely close friendships but also opportunities to socialize with other community members. In contrast, not being or feeling included hampers belonging:

> I am not well known in the area, and I have no one I can ask to show me around (Focus group participant, ethnic minorities, Tinnheia).

The quote illustrates a common message from ethnic minorities participating in the focus groups. They find it difficult to build social relations to their neighbors of Norwegian origin. As newcomers, they have a hard time being included, especially if they do not speak the language. They suggest development of open, low-threshold arenas where you can take part in activities and thus be included without fully knowing the language.

In sum, the empirical results show how social robustness emerge from the creation of positive synergies between social and physical features of the community.

## 4.2 | Social Equity: Accessible and Maintained Every-Day Facilities, Services, and Amenities

The social justice dimension address whether community dwellers have equal opportunity to access and acquire various services, facilities and amenities. Ten variables of the PST measure these elements (see Table 4). A general impression is that in Kvernevik, there are more physical amenities that receive high scores (above 5) compared to the other two case areas, whereas Holmen on average has the highest score and Tinnheia the

lowest. We see that the high scores of Kvernevik mirror aspects of their community that contribute to feelings of safety, identity, and belonging: *moving around, natural space, housing and community, and play and recreation*. With a good *public transport*, the distance to the district center is not experienced as too demanding.

An interesting finding is that the variable *facilities and services* is too broadly defined in the survey. It includes all kinds of social and cultural facilities. In open questions and in dialogues with citizens in focus groups and at the city labs, the message was clear: immediate access to *basic* services and facilities is at the heart of people's well-being. Tinnheia and Kvernevik have both experienced a gradual loss of basic services and activities in their neighborhood in recent decades. At the heart of both communities used to be several shops, businesses and public services, such as a medical center and a dentist's office. Over time, these services moved closer to the city center:

> In the really old days, for a number of years, we had both a post office and a bank, we also had two grocery stores (...), and then there were a lot of people, and you stood outside and met people, and talked, and we had a hairdresser, and it's still there. But it's so quiet (focus group Tinnheia, the elderly group).

Proximity to everyday services enables a "smooth daily life," but also opportunity for socializing with neighbors. Holmen dwellers have access to the city center offering all kinds of social and cultural activities. Yet what they lack, that the two others have, is a school. In Kvernevik and Tinnheia, the school and kindergarten are the social nave of the community. According to Holmen informants, the placement of the school outside the area contributes to social fragmentation. A school is an organizing entity for social and political activities. The community is divided into school districts when organizing participation in planning or place development, electing local community committee members, and it is an arena for recreational activities by and for the residents.

*Natural space* is another everyday service cherished by the citizens. Holmen dwellers address the importance of the community and city center parks, Kvernevik and Tinnheia dwellers tell stories about how they appreciate having easy access to the natural areas surrounding their community. In Tinnheia, a lack of maintenance of an open space in the local forest received many mentions in the survey, and in the focus groups. So much so that we arranged a dedicated city lab on the topic.

An important message from the study is thus that people value easy *access to basic, everyday services*: schools and kindergartens, doctors, pharmacies, dentists, grocery stores, cafés, and natural areas. These amenities have a double function: they deliver a service and represent arenas for social interaction and organization.

Other facilities, such as work opportunities, do not need to be within the community, formulated in this way by focus group participant in Kvernevik:

> This is an area you should live in! Work we do elsewhere (young adults-group).

The minor importance of work opportunities in the community underscores an interesting methodological finding. The score given in the PST survey do not necessarily give information about the importance of the variable in question. Work opportunities are ranged low in Kvernevik and Tinnheia, but high in Holmen. This reflects the work availability in the community, not how the respondents qualitatively judge this variable.

Another important message in our material is that *the quality of the physical environment influences people's well-being.* This was a major issue in all the communities. In Tinnheia, nearly half of the respondents in the survey addressed the poorly maintained community square. The problem is not merely that the inhabitants are discontent with their surroundings, the lack of maintenance creates a feeling that the municipal administration values the community less than other communities. This is a theme in all communities, represented by two quotes from the Holmen survey:

> Holmen has some similarities with the Old Town [in Fredrikstad] aesthetically, so why does the area look so dilapidated and ill maintained?

> Car wrecks are in several places outside houses or in the backyard of the apartment buildings. It litters and gives a feeling of decay.

The opposite, physical improvements in Kvernevik and in Fredrikstad city center close to Holmen, created pride and belonging.

A common message across the cases and variables are that when basic services and amenities are replaced or lacking, it has repercussions beyond the exact service it produces. Social robustness and socially equitable access to services and amenities are intimately connected, exemplified by how ethnic minorities suggest developing physical arenas that provide opportunity for building friendship. In general, the range of services and the quality of the surrounding environment affect the social interaction and ties among community dwellers, the building of identity, pride and belonging, and the judgement of their community vis-à-vis other communities in the municipality. Of particular importance is access to everyday services to cover basic needs and to build social networks.

## 4.3 | Co-Governance: Safeguarding Basic Social, Physical, and Political Elements

Co-governance is the final dimension highlighted in the theoretical section. It is key to create an institutional bridge between community needs and aspirations on the one hand, and local governance processes and priorities on the other. Co-creation between multiple relevant and affected actors is a central feature of co-governance, especially when seeking to develop new and innovative solutions. To unleash its

potential, however, co-creation depends on clear incentives (trust, interdependence), institutional design (transparency, explicit rules), facilitative leadership, and close interaction between the actors.

The PST survey results show that there is an institutional void both in the governance system and in the community hampering their capability to co-governs. The variable *influence and feeling of control*, measuring the opportunity to take part in and influence relevant decisions, receives low score in all three communities. Our qualitative data further shows that the inhabitants' political awareness and knowledge and interest generally is low. Their engagement centers around their immediate social and physical environment. The few informants who have tried to influence and interact with the municipality found it difficult to navigate the system and found that they know neither where nor whom to turn to. Hence, the low score on the variable *influence and sense of control* reflects both a lack of available political channels in the municipalities and a lack of experience and awareness among the inhabitants.

The discourse at the city labs illustrated that the community has limitations in regard to taking on a more active role. In part, there is wear and tear on community enthusiasts over time:

> "I know that I have been involved in quite a few things. I'm actually a bit bored. I am not going into any positions of trust or maintenance tasks anymore. I have been involved in the neighbourhood organization and the local community committee...." (Participant in the city lab, Holmen).

In part, there is an organizational void in the communities—all three communities lack a neighborhood organization working on behalf of the community as a whole. This reduces the communities' ability to build social relationships and joint positions and voice them in place development processes. Correspondingly, municipal representatives find it difficult to activate the population:

> "We would like to organize more activities, but it is very difficult to get input" (...). It is rare that input is received that concerns Holmen (Local government participant in the city lab, Holmen).

This reflects both a lack of capacity in the community and an inadequacy of conventional participative methods to engage beyond the usual suspects. In sum, the communities lack crucial capacities to engage compared with more socially robust communities, and the municipality needs new models or methods to stimulate the development of the necessary social and organizational resources in the community.

The lack of capacity on both sides became evident at city lab discussions. Tinnheia, Kvernevik, and Holmen exploit the opportunity to apply for funding of local activities and investments to a lesser extent than other communities in the municipality. In Kvernevik, the city lab discussion built awareness and engagement for creating a mutual social arena in the community—enabling local discussions and development of a joint position and voice toward the municipality. The citizen representatives at Holmen and Tinnheia city labs took a different approach. They argued for a more active municipal role, formulated in this way at Tinnheia:

> "The municipality may have to take the lead in social sustainability, by establishing something that is not necessarily profitable, but an investment, in the long run, for the population."

A central theme was how investments in the physical surroundings can be initiated, and who is responsible for subsequent maintenance. The data reveals a blind spot concerning where the public responsibility for investments and maintenance ends and where the private responsibility to contribute starts. Often, responsibilities are intertwined and unclear, and the responsibilities of the public are rarely articulated or made explicit.

Our results thus serve to nuance our knowledge regarding necessary conditions for co-creation to thrive. While the literature has concentrated on immediate aspects of the co-creation process itself, we have explored co-creation of concrete solutions in a community setting. This enables us to identify institutional conditions for co-creation. Our data show how a low level of social capital reduces the community's ability to engage in processes and exploit opportunities for funding of investments and activities. The communities' own capacity to take initiative by organizing themselves and engage differ. A key question is, thus, building institutional conditions that inspires both the community and local government to take a more active role in creating, maintaining, and strengthening social sustainability, depending on the contextual situation.

## 5 | Foundational Characteristics and Supportive Conditions of Community Social Sustainability

The empirical findings add nuance and depth to the theoretically derived core dimensions. First, they illustrate that some community social sustainability variables are more important than others, such as to feel safe in the community, to develop identity and belonging, to have access to basic, everyday facilities and services, attractive and maintained public and natural space with ample opportunity to move around. Secondly, our data confirms that there is a fine balance between social inclusion and exclusion that one deeds to be aware of when seeking to strengthening a community's social robustness. This is illustrated by how local arenas are less accessible to those with a short stay in the country and community. Also at a community level, the access to goods and services are unevenly distributed—the communities studied are less capable of accessing local funds than other communities in the municipality. Thirdly, these results point to institutional voids, both within the community and between the local community and the local government. Social robustness and social justice thrive on the community's capacity to take collective

initiative; facilitate interaction, discussions, and voice concerns towards local government. When such capacities are comparatively weaker than in other communities, it requires greater sensitivity from local government to the social consequences of policies, and to possible measures capable of compensating for weaknesses and building on existing strengths. However, development of more locally or group sensitive policies depends on close interaction with the communities. Yet our data point to an institutional void also between the community and local government in the sense that there are few interactive channels available or accessible for local people.

This lack of engagement opportunities is a general finding in governance, planning and social sustainability literatures. Our more detailed results may however be subject to contextual biases. We have a mixed methods approach developed both to secure continuous learning and development of insights, but also to compensate for each method's weaknesses in the sense that the quantitative survey provides general insights from the communities that the qualitative data lacks, while the qualitative data contribute depth and compensate for educational and ethnic biases in the quantitative material by engaging "silent groups." Yet these groups proved hard to recruit. Without a transdisciplinary approach, it would have been even more difficult, as local knowledge and relations are focal to reach them. In the end, the focus groups consisted of residents representing the group in question that were accessible and ready to participate. Hence, the focus groups in each community are not representative for the group as such. This weakness was compensated for by comparing the results from similar focus groups across the three communities. Likewise, the city lab discussions were closely linked to contextually defined issues, yet results were made more generally applicable by comparison across cases. Of interest, thus is the representativeness of the cases. The cases as such were selected because they were fruitful arenas for exploration of key aspects of community social sustainability, not to be representative of Norwegian or Nordic communities. The socio-economic, physical, and political situation of the three communities had put social sustainability high at the agenda, making core questions, dilemmas, challenges and opportunities publicly assessed, discussed and sought solved through different governance measures. In the wake of these processes and activities, came results of principal and general interest. The suggested typology of community social sustainability sums up these results.

## 5.1 | The Typology of Community Social Sustainability

When comparing the theoretically derived conceptual dimensions of community social sustainability with our empirical findings, we are able to provide a more nuanced typology. At its heart is a set of foundational characteristics indicating what needs to be in place for a community to be socially sustainable:

– *Neighbourhood sustainability*, a basic social structure providing opportunity for social interaction and the creation of safety, identity and belonging

– *Everyday sustainability*, a basic physical-material structure securing a minimum level of services and facilities, and maintenance of public and natural space

– *Governance sustainability*, a basic political structure providing arenas for maintaining and further developing social and physical-material needs

Each of them depends not only on the community capacity and its residents, but also on the interactional relationships with external actors, which are in control of critical resources for community robustness and development. Yet the exact thresholds of these foundational characteristics are still unclear: What minimum level of social robustness—networks, social initiatives, social arenas—should a local community have to be characterized as socially sustainable? And what minimum quality should physical public areas have? Who is responsible for building a sufficient level of social capital, a basic offer of local services, and an acceptable quality of the physical environment? Is it the responsibility of the municipality? Or the community? Or for-profit or non-profit organizations? How can processes capable of unleashing each actor's resource potential be organized?

The threefold foundational characteristics thus need to be supported by a set of supportive conditions that in sum render it possible to address their inbuilt dilemmas and challenges, and to identify adequate, contextual solutions. Figure 1 sums up key aspects of the typology.

The supportive conditions are as follows:

### 5.1.1 | An Equitable Level of Social Capital, Amenities, and Public Space

Both this study and others show how communities' social ties, their ability to act on behalf of their municipality, their offer of services and the quality of public and natural space vary according to the socioeconomic status of the area, thus influencing the social sustainability of the community (Wilkinson and Pickett 2007; Dempsey et al. 2011). Without defining and institutionalizing social equity as a principle for urban development, one risks exacerbating such existing inequalities (Kohon 2018; Trudeau 2018). A key question when seeking community social sustainability is thus how to secure an acceptable level of social, physical, and political structures when a community's own resources to do so are fragile. Securing equitable place development unleashes a need for measuring the status of each foundational characteristic, and the community's own ability to safeguard them. Depending on available resources in the community, the municipality needs to judge whether there is a need for a differentiated municipal role in place development that secures an equitable level of social, physical, and political resources in the community.

### 5.1.2 | Capacity Building

Guaranteeing the identified foundational characteristics also involves mobilizing the community's own resources. However, these resources often remain untapped by urban
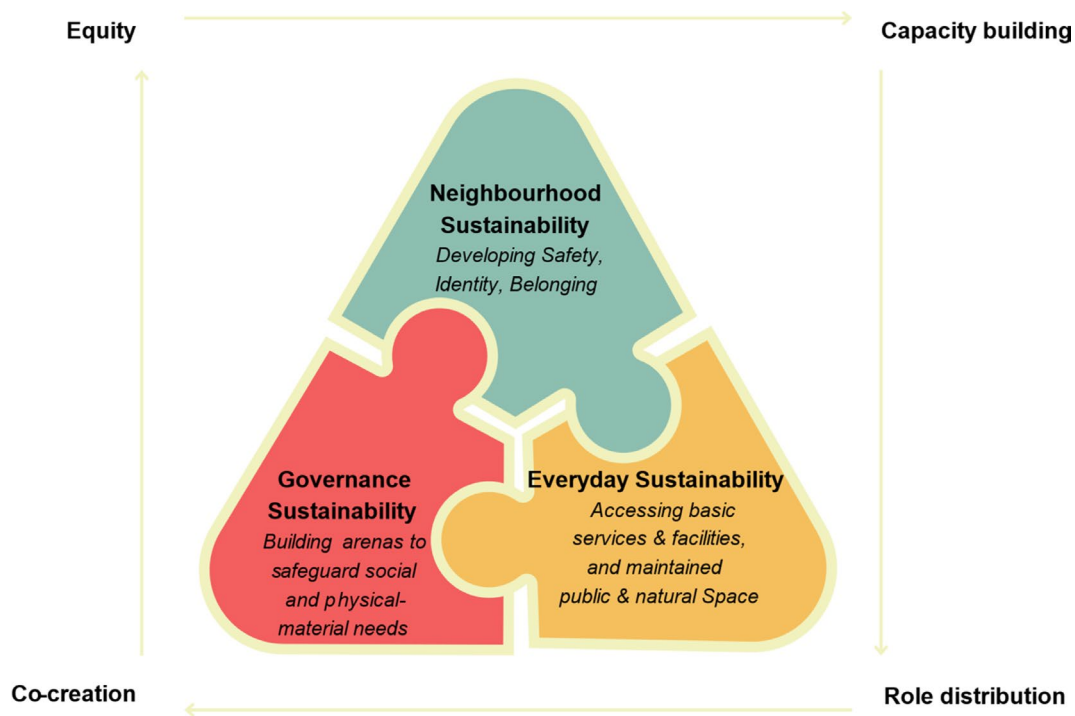
**FIGURE 1** | Community social sustainability typology: Foundational characteristics and supportive conditions.

planning and governance (Wang and Ke 2024). What is more, our results illustrate that some incentive structures, as dedicated funding that communities may apply for, necessitates that the community already is socially robust. As underlined by community research, the consequence thus may be reinforcement of differences rather than reduction of them (Avelino et al. 2019). Governance incentives thus need to have a broad scope, including awareness of the social robustness of the community and incentives for collaboration. To unleash a broader resource base through co-creation, depend on institutional capacity building culturally, organizationally, and economically (Hofstad 2024). Over time, the resource asymmetry between public and civil society actors and across communities can be reduced, enabling the community to take on a more active role.

### 5.1.3 | Role Distribution

Ensuring an acceptable level of each Foundational characteristic of community social sustainability involves not only compensating for eventual weaknesses. Our results reveal that unclear division of roles and responsibilities between public and community representatives hinder necessary actions to build community social sustainability. This is particularly evident concerning public space. Neither the municipality nor local landowners and neighborhood associations know where their responsibility for the maintenance of playgrounds, green space and/or public squares ends, and where the municipality's starts. To enable the upgrading of the community environment to an acceptable standard, these actors need to know what are expected of them. This result mirrors the centrality of institutional design found in collaborative governance literature (Douglas et al. 2020; Ansell and Gash 2008, 2018). More specifically, explicit and respected rules, as well as transparent

decision-making processes provide a basis upon which collaboration may unfold. We see how the lack of clear institutional design creates stalemate in the community. Greater awareness of their specific roles, and even more importantly, where community and municipal responsibilities intersect, may lay the foundation for a more active relationship.

### 5.1.4 | Co-Creation

Given how public, private, and community actors are all crucial and dependent on each other for maintaining and developing services and amenities laying the foundation for social ties between people, collective effort cannot be avoided. Co-creation is about opening governance processes to a broader set of relevant and affected actors (Ansell and Torfing 2021). Yet this requires that community, private and local government actors have the capacity and opportunity to take on new roles. The city labs portray how:

a. Community actors need to exchange their traditional role of consumers formulating "wish lists" with a more active partner role

b. Private actors need to engage not only to maximize their interests but also to take a stronger societal role

c. Public actors need to replace distanced, closed decision-making and planning processes with more inclusive, context-sensitive forms of co-governance

These suggestions are an attempt to operationalize local social sustainability, and the relationships between local community, local administration, and other stakeholders. As climate change and population ageing put pressure on both welfare and governance arrangements, both scholars and public

**TABLE 5** | Community social sustainability: A guide for research and practice.

| Foundational characteristics/ supportive conditions | Neighbourhood sustainability | Everyday sustainability | Governance sustainability |
|---|---|---|---|
| Equity | Are social arenas and networks inclusive and accessible? | Are core services and facilities accessible to different community groups and across municipal locations? | Are relevant governance processes open and accessible for all? Are alternative steps taken to recruit "silent voices" into these processes? |
| Capacity building | Does the community need additional organizations and arenas? | Are there unexploited capacities that could contribute building new amenities, facilities, services? | Is the community able to collectively voice and act on their needs and concerns? Is the political-administrative apparatus of local government capable of engaging citizens and process their initiatives? |
| Role distribution | Who can manage and operate social arenas in the community? | Who are responsible for maintaining public areas, buildings and equipment? | Who are responsible for mobilizing citizens to take part in governance processes? |
| Co-creation | How to strengthen social robustness through collaboration? | Can new facilities be created by pooling public, private and civil resources? | Are new forms of co-governance to strengthen the ownership, capacity and legitimacy of community development needed? |

officials look to the local communities for solutions. However, what the precise role of the local community should be, and the conditions for the community to fulfil this role, is rarely spelled out. Our findings highlight both the importance and the challenges of co-creation.

On the on hand, co-creation may unleash untapped resources from each actor and build community, that is, the social ties between people, which is at the core of neighborhood sustainability. On the other hand, co-creation as an ingredient in sustainable transition processes needs to be developed with caution, captured nicely by the following questions: "How do we sustain, and enhance, societal welfare, social cohesion, equal opportunities and equitable distribution of wealth in the light of current pressures on welfare states?" (Frantzeskaki and Wittmayer 2019, 136). Which values, habits, and physical structures are so dear to people that they should be sheltered from transformation (Vallance, Perkins, and Dixon 2011)? How will change processes influence power relations—empowering some and disempowering others, intentionally or unintentionally (Avelino et al. 2019)?

Social sustainability, with co-creational reforms as an integrated part, thus requires continuous and cautious scrutiny, effort, and development. As such, we find it particularly suitable that our final contribution in this paper points towards promising pathways for developing community social sustainability further. We formulate a set of questions emerging at the interface of the identified foundational characteristics and supportive structures. We see potential for using them as a guideline when mapping the contextual circumstances in a particular community, but also as a guide for new research, as the questions indicate interesting settings and thematic approaches in need of further exploration.

The table addresses how neighborhood, every-day, and governance sustainability can benefit from a strengthened focus on equity, capacity building, role distribution, and co-creation. It deciphers the somewhat complex landscape of social, physical, and political concerns, and the actors engaged or disengaged in developing them in a sustainable manner. When applied in community development, the questions raised in each cell of the table may be used as indicators of the unique contextual situation of that exact community. Ideally, it helps to identify concerns in need of attention, and capacities to engage and/or amplify or adjust in the process. Likewise, the table can be used by researchers to define research questions and provide direction for data collection. Table 5 is thus a first step in unpacking topical challenges and agendas when further operationalizing and/or implementing community social sustainability. Our hope is that it alleviates complexity and inspires new initiatives.

## 6 | Conclusion

Community social sustainability is more needed than ever to tackle the overlapping and mutually reinforcing welfare,

climate, biodiversity, and security crises of our time. However, its exact meaning is vague, both in theory and practice. A clear motivation for this paper was to identify the most crucial aspects of social sustainability to make it easier for planners, politicians, and civil society actors to formulate goals and create sound policies. Our suggested set of foundational characteristics provide a fruitful starting point for community planning and development. By highlighting social robustness and social equity as cornerstones of social sustainability, we give direction to community assessments and policies. But we also show how these qualities depend on support from co-governance and co-creation. Such collaborative structures are however weakly developed in most local governments and communities. To strengthen community social sustainability thus requires building of new institutions, both at the community and city level. The paper takes these institutional aspects of community social sustainability a step further by suggesting a set of supportive conditions that are critical to create socially sustainable trajectories at the community level. Baked into these conditions are principal questions of interest to research. Among others, we need more knowledge on how to define equitable place development; how to identify public measures capable of building social robustness without exacerbating social inequalities within and between communities; and finally, we need research exploring new, innovative institutional solutions capable of addressing social sustainability issues across sectors and levels of the local political-administrative apparatus. The suggested guide for community social sustainability indicates additional questions but may also serve as a framework for place development and planning.

## Acknowledgments

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Endnotes

[1] For more information, consult Backcasting — a natural step when operationalising sustainable development. (chalmers.se).

[2] For Norwegian readers, each of the methods used are elaborated in reports (Hofstad et al. 2021, 2023; Hofstad, Vedeld, et al. 2022; Hofstad, Mouratidis, et al. 2022).

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