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**“It is a sham process with participation.”**

**Ten forms of citizen participation for sustainable development in the Norwegian Arctic**

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## Abstract

This study examined practices of citizen participation at the municipal level and the role of sustainability in this context in various municipalities in Nordland, Finnmark, and Troms in the Norwegian Arctic. Analysis of transcripts from 75 interviews identified 10 forms of citizen participation in planning processes and meetings aimed at discussing local challenges and possible solutions. Only two of these forms give citizens the opportunity to influence decisions, but only in matters that are less relevant to their future and the next generation. A link to the Sustainable Development Goals is prominent in all forms, but while citizens emphasize the importance of focusing on climate adaptation, nature conservation, and local values, local authorities see green industry, power plants, and the economy as fundamental. Since current practice of participation in the Norwegian Arctic hardly leads to citizens' influence, their priorities don't affect the decisions that are made.

## Author Summary

Citizen participation is widely seen as important for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, such as climate action. I studied the current practice of citizen participation that occurs in municipalities in the Norwegian Arctic. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 75 citizens with very diverse backgrounds, I explored what opportunities citizens have to influence local decisions on important matters that affect their future and the next generations. I focused in particular on the role of sustainability. I identified 10 forms of citizen participation. Although broad citizen participation is anchored in various Norwegian laws, most of the forms that I found in practice turned out to be merely symbolic and cosmetic: they do not give citizens any real opportunity to help identify the key challenges that local governments should address, nor to influence local decisions. Only two of the forms gave citizens some influence, but only on

less essential issues (e.g., construction of a golf course, overtourism, and establishment of a bike park), not on truly important sustainability issues that affect their future and future generations (e.g., industrial activities, nature conservation, climate adaptation). In addition, in practice, participants are often cherry-picked such that critical voices are not included.

## Introduction

With less than 5 years left, the UN [1] warned that only 17 percent of the SDG targets are on track. Two important goals that affect all others, SDG13 (Climate Action) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals), receive low scores [1]. Greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase, and the past ten years 2015-2024 have been the ten warmest years on record, with natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, heat waves, and droughts [2]. The area experiencing the most rapid climate change, which in turn will affect ecosystems and communities across the globe, is the Arctic [3,4]. Participation and involvement of a broad spectrum of actors is a key factor for the successful implementation of the SDGs [5,6]. Thus, it is more important than ever that everyone contributes to climate action.

The Aarhus Convention [7] is particularly interesting in this context. It links human rights and environmental rights, obliges people to take care of the planet for the next generation, and emphasizes the importance of citizen participation in decision-making processes that have consequences for sustainable development.

European countries implemented the Aarhus Convention, amongst others, warranting citizen participation in spatial planning and development in municipalities. In Norway, sustainable development and participation have been incorporated into regulations and laws governing planning and construction processes since the mid-1900s. In addition, Norway invests in green energy and green industry. Still, Norway extracts and exports petroleum and practices

large-scale fish farming, thereby contributing to climate change and doing harm to the marine environment. Like other countries, Norway is experiencing the consequences of climate change. Municipalities in the Norwegian Arctic are more vulnerable to climate change than the average municipality in Norway [8].

Northern Norway can, therefore, be an interesting case study for examining practices involving citizen participation at the municipal level and the role of sustainability in participatory processes.

This paper addresses four research questions:

A) What forms of citizen participation related to planning processes, discussion of local challenges, and solutions to these can be identified in the Norwegian Arctic?

B) What characterizes the forms identified in A)?

C) What opportunities do the forms identified give citizens to influence decisions in the municipalities where they live?

D) How does sustainability appear in the forms identified in A) and the opportunities identified in C)?

### **Citizen participation and sustainability in a Norwegian and European context**

Norway has a long tradition of a developed democracy, where municipalities have scope for action in planning processes within established national frameworks. This is also believed to be the reason why Norway and other northern and western European countries report fewer obstacles to the implementation of the Aarhus Convention than Eastern and Southern Europe [9]. The fact that Norway does not report any challenges does not necessarily mean that they do not exist in practice, where lay citizens and municipalities (local authorities, planners, etc.) cooperate on developing different plans.

In Norway, participation is institutionalized through the Planning and Building Act, which specifies who is responsible for organizing participation, when, etc. A dedicated section §5 *Participation* specifies that "anyone who submits a draft plan shall facilitate participation," and groups with special needs must be included in participation. This grants citizens the opportunity to participate, but the law does not clarify how participation should be understood and practiced. National authorities set parameters for planning every four years. Municipalities have freedom within these boundaries. Other actors, such as private businesses that submit plans, can also be required to organize participation. Planning in Norway often involves cooperation between different actors. Market actors play a significant role through their access to capital [9,10].

The law's purpose clearly links to sustainability: "The law shall promote sustainable development for the benefit of the individual, society and future generations" [11], which in turn regulates the scope of action of plan developers, including citizens. Such environmental policy and future-oriented regulation strengthen democracy through opportunities for citizen participation and seem a good starting point for the country's chances of achieving the SDGs.

The law's vague definition of the term "participation" is compensated for by a comprehensive guidance document [12] that clarifies what participation is, the meaning of participation and organization. Participation is understood as the right of citizens "to take part in" and to "influence public assessment and decision-making processes." (p. 8). The guidance highlights 4 objectives of participation: including good solutions, citizen engagement, democratic participation in local communities, and the creation of a sound basis for decision-making. It therewith grants citizens the right to co-develop the community in which they live. The document repeatedly stresses the importance of involving local knowledge and experience, which is considered a "resource" in planning and can "add new aspects" and "nuance" professional and expert knowledge. The population's active role in planning and decision-

making processes is highlighted to contribute to sustainable solutions, to safeguard shared values and basic living conditions (p. 8).

This aligns with a review of empirical literature showing that citizen participation can contribute to enriching solutions to local challenges, making planning processes more transparent, and ensuring that decisions are better tailored to citizens' needs [13].

Despite the fact that Norwegian authorities emphasize the importance of citizen participation at all levels of planning processes, there is little evidence that this is widespread practice in Norwegian municipalities. A report focusing on citizen involvement and co-creation shows that citizens are mostly seen as important sources of innovative ideas, but not as partners in evaluating those ideas, developing, testing, and implementing new solutions [14]. The organized meetings do not necessarily invite citizens to a dialogue on planning issues that address local values, the future of municipalities, content, and the ecological development of the area, because the agendas of the meetings have predefined limits on what people can contribute and much of the actual planning is done before citizen participation begins [15]. The quality of local people's involvement and their ability to influence decisions also depends on the quality of approaches to participation [16]. The authors show that a multi-method approach usually extends over a longer period and provides more opportunities for participation at different levels than a single-method or stand-alone arrangement. A study focusing on cultural heritage planning and management shows that citizens have little opportunity to influence decisions at the municipal level beyond the elections [17]. In the planning and development of public health services, [16] shows that participation varies from providing information to citizens to a real opportunity to influence decisions.

Regarding the right to participate, Bliksvær *et al.* [18] show that direct representation of persons with developmental disabilities has only been developed in a few municipalities in Norway. A report by Proba Samfunnsanalyse [19] shows, among other things, that councils

for young people, older people and people with disabilities do little systematic work to incorporate the views and interests of their members. However, information about who sits on the councils is also missing from municipal websites. As I understand it, this implies that only a few voices have the opportunity to participate and exert influence. Another thematic study focusing on energy policy participation shows local people's weak collective involvement [20]. At the international level, I see similar findings [21].

The Guide mentioned above provides various recommendations on how participation can be implemented in such a way that it leads to good, forward-looking plans and ensures legitimacy. The focus is on the importance of including citizens in all aspects of plan development, and it emphasizes that involvement must not begin late in the process, because it is difficult to have a real say in the formulation of plans at that stage. The importance of dialogue in all phases of planning processes is also mentioned, with reference to §5-2 of the Act [11]. In addition, it recommends using digital platforms and tools to increase transparency and ensure broader participation. This is also recommended in a white paper on local democracy [22].

Both in Norway and other European countries, local authorities have adopted various digital tools in participatory processes. However, such participation faces similar challenges to traditional participation in that it does not improve opportunities for politically marginalized groups, does not facilitate dialogue, and does not guarantee that participation will lead to influence [23]. Still, digital platforms can enrich participation if used in addition to other channels and opportunities for influence depend on the institutional context [24].

When it comes to Norwegian people's involvement in participatory processes, not many people choose to participate in organized meetings for citizen participation, which weakens people's ability to influence decisions [25]. Low engagement in participatory processes is not just a Norwegian phenomenon. This is also a trend at the international level and goes beyond

voting itself [26]. One reason for this is that people do not feel that they are being listened to and that their suggestions have any influence on decisions that affect their lives.

### **Sustainability goals and focus on climate in collaborative processes**

The Norwegian Planning and Building Act [11] enshrines a focus on sustainability, but many political documents also mention reducing greenhouse gas emissions and climate adaptation. White Paper 25 (2024–2025) [27] states that municipalities have "considerable scope and potential for climate action" (p. 152). This work, but also the focus on biodiversity and areas for outdoor recreation, must be integrated into social and spatial planning, which increases the complexity of the challenges to be addressed by municipalities. The complexity of current planning has consequences for the knowledge and skills that municipalities must have [27]. Firstly, municipalities must have knowledge of the local natural areas, of current and future climate change, biological diversity, and the consequences that decisions may have for the environment, climate, and nature.

White Paper 27 (2022-2023) [28] has a clear focus on climate and sustainability by outlining areas of challenge that municipalities are expected to address: climate-related challenges that will have consequences for both nature and society (p. 5), preservation of biodiversity and ecosystems, focus on carbon capture and storage, plans for stormwater management, focus on green industry that provides attractive jobs and renewable energy. Still, it mentions that both industry and green energy require large areas, but the document states that despite land use, green industry and energy can lead to sustainable development in the long term. Despite the clear prioritization of industry and power plants throughout the document, the authorities acknowledge that the reduction of land areas (especially forests, mires, and peatlands) will lead to greenhouse gas emissions, vulnerable ecosystems with a weak capacity to withstand climate change, and a reduction in biodiversity (p. 25). Indeed, incorporating science,



technology, and innovations into achieving the SDGs comes with many challenges and requires national planning, resource and capacity building, engagement, and partnerships [29].

White Paper 27 (2022-2023) [28] sets clear expectations for local authorities to focus on participation. Participation is described as complementary to electoral democracy (p. 159), it should start as early as possible, and "participation by those who live and work in the area is necessary to bring local knowledge and experience-based knowledge into the decision-making process" (p. 9).

In summary, Norwegian national policy strongly focuses on the SDGs and, more specifically, on green solutions, climate mitigation and adaptation, and public participation, but clear requirements for participation in decision-making processes only appear in other documents, not in legislation. The authorities also have a strong focus on renewable energy and green industry.

## **Theoretical framework**

Research questions B), C) and D) were addressed by analyzing the results from research question A) and relevant data material in light of two typologies aimed at citizen participation.

Arnstein's seminal ladder of citizen participation [30] distinguishes eight steps, each illustrating the expansion of rights and opportunities that citizens have: manipulation (with no opportunity for participation), therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control (where citizens have clear influence). It distinguishes between participation without influence and participation with real influence on plans or programs that are being developed. Manipulation and therapy refer to absence of citizen participation and are used to "educate" or "cure" the participants [30]. Informing and consultation are seen as symbolic participation, where citizens are given information and the opportunity to express their views, but these forms offer no guarantee that participation will

result in influence. Placation is participation at a slightly higher level than the two preceding forms, where citizens are given the right to offer advice, objections and suggestions, but these usually have no bearing on the final product. Partnership gives citizens the opportunity to enter into cooperation with decision-makers and can also result in compromises that have a certain degree of influence on the final product. The last two steps give citizens a real opportunity to influence decisions, and the last step also gives them control. Arnstein points out that real influence on decisions is difficult to accomplish in practice and is most often achieved through struggle (e.g., demonstrations). Overall, Arnstein's model provides an important starting point for understanding that participation that leads (or does not lead) to influence on decisions has significant gradations.

Fung's Cube of Democracy [31] complements Arnstein's ladder, but focuses in more detail on how the various participation designs affect democratic values: legitimacy, justice, and the effectiveness of public action. To understand the potential and limitations of different types of citizen participation, Fung believes it is important to consider questions such as: Which citizens participate? How do they communicate? What is the relationship between their proposals, objections and conclusions on the one hand, and public policy and action on the other? Fung summarizes these questions in three dimensions: selection of participants, method of communication and degree of influence. These three dimensions span up Fung's Cube.

Fung [31] describes many different designs for selecting participants. For instance, public meetings where anyone who wishes to participate can contribute suggestions, comments, etc. According to Fung, those who choose to participate are often not representative of the population. These may be wealthy and well-educated people or people with specific interests or strong opinions.

Fung signals that open participation meetings can also be problematic and unnecessary, and that the right choice of participants can contribute to more legitimate, fair, and effective decisions, solutions, or actions. One such design could be meetings with specific organizations or group representatives (parent committee, youth representatives, etc.) or a random selection of citizens covering gender, different interests, age, background, and the like. Such a random selection can contribute to effective, legitimate and fair meetings that lead to decisions that benefit the majority of people, but the communicative aspect between the participants (administration, politicians, the population, etc.) also plays a crucial role.

The information provided by those in power should be clear and understandable, but if only one-way communication is used, this will weaken democracy and influence decisions. Other forms of communication may include: a) discussion meetings on relevant issues where all contributions are welcome, b) dialogue meetings involving citizens at all stages of, for example, planning, c) public meetings where many people attend, but only a few express their opinions, while the rest act as an audience, and d) those in power listen to suggestions from the audience and promise to discuss them later, but these have no significant impact on decisions. Forms that allow citizens to participate in processes relevant to them are considered more legitimate and effective [31]. These can also show participants that an issue can be understood in different ways, which can further contribute to changing one's perceptions and understanding that there are different needs and different solutions. Regarding forms of communication, Fung concludes that "public participation at its best operates in synergy with representation and administration to yield more desirable practices and outcomes of collective decision making and action" (p. 66).

In addition, Fung provides several examples of how well-planned participation enriches decisions, makes them more relevant to society, and how citizens' knowledge, experience, and creativity make solutions to societal challenges more robust and forward-looking. Inclusive

and representative participation processes that also focus on forms of communication that engage and intensify participation can strengthen legitimacy [31]. Fairness is often about who has the right and opportunity to participate and whether decisions benefit society or only selected groups. Therefore, the processes in which citizens are invited to participate should aim to strengthen these dimensions. Effectiveness can be enhanced by including citizens in later stages where proposals for decisions are evaluated and adopted or solutions are assessed and prioritized. Lay citizens may have the necessary experience, local knowledge, and innovative solutions because they are freer from outdated wisdom and methods of experts or professionals [31].

## **Case Norwegian Arctic**

This study is part of the French project CLIMArctic (from the regional to the global impact of climate change in the Arctic: an interdisciplinary perspective), where one of the work packages focuses on the interaction between human choices and actions at a local level (Arctic areas) and nature and climate. The areas focused on in this article are located north of the Arctic Circle and constitute Norway's Arctic region, comprising the counties of Nordland, Troms, and Finnmark. In line with the Norwegian authorities, I use a broader definition of the Arctic. White Paper 9 (2020–2021) [32] defines the Arctic as “the sea and land areas between the North Pole and the Arctic Circle. This is the most common definition of the Arctic (for practical reasons, we choose to follow the county border and define the entire county of Nordland as part of the Arctic)” p.9. Arctic areas, including the Norwegian Arctic, are facing rapid climate change that will have consequences for ecosystems and communities living in these areas and for the rest of the planet [3,4].

## **Method of data collection**

In this article, I use parts of interviews with residents from three Norwegian counties, Nordland, Troms, and Finnmark, collected between June and October 2024. I used semi-structured interviews with questions prepared in advance, but which allowed the interviewees to bring up other relevant topics. The interviewees were asked, among other things, whether they felt that municipalities (municipal councils, planners, administrators, etc.) invite residents to discuss local challenges and solutions to these, and whether there is any form of dialogue on selected issues. Some brought up these topics without me asking them. The overall context for the interviews was climate and environmental change, sustainability, and societal challenges that residents considered relevant.

During the analysis, I found that some responses related to the questions addressed in this paper were very short or unclear. I contacted those from whom I wanted more information at the beginning of 2025. I received responses from everyone except two people, and one did not want to say more than what had already been said. The context and interview questions, as well as my own background, created a framework for what could be said and further articulated in this article. My background comprises natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, and I also have the necessary cultural, historical, and linguistic expertise. A total of 75 people aged between 26 and 80 of different genders, educational backgrounds, experiences and positions were interviewed. The contact information for the residents was found on public websites such as schools, universities, organizations, municipalities and companies, and the interviewees also helped identify other relevant actors (snowball sampling). If any interviewee mentioned specific important individuals, organizations, positions, or other entities, then they were also contacted. 53 of 75 interviewees are from Narvik municipality with approximately 21,500 inhabitants. Supporting Information S2 provides details about the interviews.

## **Practical aspects**

The interviews were conducted online via Teams, by telephone, and on Signal. They lasted between 20 and 120 minutes (an average of 30 minutes). Complying with informed consent procedures, the interviewees received written information about the project, their rights, and anonymity. Some interviewees asked to be sent interview questions in advance and everyone who requested this was sent the information. All interviews were conducted in Norwegian and transcribed using "Autotekst: NB Whisper verbatim" developed by the University of Oslo. Furthermore, all transcripts were read and corrected manually during the analysis process.

### **Method of analysis**

Assisted by NVivo-14, I applied an inductive thematic approach [33] to identify forms of participation and some of its characteristics. This implies that the forms identified are based on people's perceptions of participation (how they cooperate or engage in dialogue with, among others, the municipality). The inductive approach provided little depth to the research question B). This led me to choose two typologies, Arnstein's ladder of participation [30] and Fung's Cube of Democracy [31], for further analysis of the forms identified. This part of the analysis is normative, using the typologies to examine both the characteristics of the forms of participation and the opportunities they offer citizens to influence decisions in the communities they live. In addition, I examine how the results relate to relevant national policy documents presented in the introduction. Research question D) is answered using an inductive approach, where I specifically looked at what the interviewees say about sustainability in connection with participation. Lastly, I examine all the results in light of relevant national policy documents.

### **Ethics Statement**

This study was performed in compliance with the “AGENCE NATIONALE DE LA RECHERCHE (ANR): PROJECT CLIMArctic – PPR OCEAN ET CLIMAT Data

Management Plan” that was approved by ANR in November 2023. University of Bergen’s institutional review board for research projects involving human participants and personal data, RETTE, confirmed (ID: F4260) that the interview procedure and protocol comply with all ethical and legal requirements for recruitment, anonymization, consent procedures, and GDPR (EU’s General Data Protection Regulation). Informed consent to participate in this study was granted prior to the interviews by all participants.

## Results

The analysis identified 10 forms of citizen participation in municipal planning and participation processes aimed at identifying local challenges and finding good solutions together. To preserve anonymity, only Narvik municipality (53 interviewees) is mentioned by name. The remaining 22 are from the other municipalities (Supporting Information S1 lists the municipalities covered). The participants' age, education, position, name, and occupation have been anonymized. I have also removed the names of certain companies and some specific places (marked with XX). I interviewed lay citizens, municipal employees (planners, administrators, politicians, etc.), and others who are responsible for organizing participation. I have distinguished between their statements where relevant. For example, one of the forms of participation was only mentioned by those I refer to as organizers. (Norwegian policy documents use the term “municipality” when referring to responsible parties in planning processes. Here, I have chosen to refer to the same actors as “organizers.” Private industries and others who draw up plans relating to, for example, development are also required to organize public participation meetings, but it is still the municipalities that are responsible for ensuring that participation is organized.)

## Ten forms of citizen participation

Table 1 lists the forms of participation identified. Below, I illustrate each form with interview statements. Supporting Information S3 provides a more comprehensive overview.

Table 1. Forms of citizen participation in planning processes

Identified forms of citizen participation
F1. Participation through one’s network
F2. Digital participation (information meetings, opportunity to send opinions and suggestions, but no guarantee that these will influence decisions)
F3. Cooperative participation and workshops (but only in cases with specific themes) And examples of topics people cannot contribute to
F4. Information meetings, (can give opportunities for people's feedback or suggestions, but no guarantee of influence)
F5. Participation through elected politicians or elections.
F6. Participation through organizations and committees
F7. Participation through political involvement, (you have to become a politician) or contact the municipality by yourself
F8. Participation through people's movement, demonstration, or resistance
F9. Participation where local people are seen as equal participants
F10. Non-participation

Form F1 was identified in statements made by citizens from small municipalities. This form takes place randomly, that is, without being organized in advance. It is said that *everyone knows everyone* and that *people talk to each other often* (with administration and politicians) in town, in shops, cafés, etc. However, despite the fact that participation takes place through almost private conversations and even though this participation does not take place in a way



where several people meet and share their thoughts, ideas, concerns, and possible solutions and discuss them, the interviewees say that they feel that they *are heard* and that it is *easy to share their thoughts and concerns with those who make decisions*. At the same time, F1 can create uncertainty and a lack of transparency. The conversations are not documented. No one can trace who said what and in what context. In addition, some older people mentioned that increasing difficulty getting out makes them rarely see the organizers anymore. One person said *it had been a year since I last spoke to the potential organizers*.

Form F2 was identified among citizens living in Narvik municipality. Digital participation is described as *innovative, creating a broad impact, great engagement, and involvement*. Organizers mention that they *have received over 1,000 inputs* at one of these participatory meetings. The analysis shows specific advantages of F2: a) define who can participate, b) participation without having to attend in person (this can benefit several groups, as not everyone is able to attend in person at the chosen times), c) sharing ideas anonymously, and d) public access to documents. Point a) was mainly mentioned by organizers: *We can control who we want to hear from* (and young people are specifically mentioned).

In connection with point b), several respondents emphasized that they did not need to attend a meeting and raise their hands to say something. Point c) was particularly emphasized by citizens who had opinions that they considered critical of other voices in their municipality. They felt that they could say what they thought without being labeled as *negative*. The last point, d), shows the potential of the digital format for creating openness in planning processes and other matters. For example: *Suddenly, everything became public; you could read and be part of it*. Despite the fact that this form generates a lot of engagement among lay citizens, it is not a form that is being further developed and practiced to any great extent. The interviewees mentioned: *There have been few such activities since the coronavirus pandemic, and some said that they had not heard of any further events of this kind*.

The interviewees mentioned two disadvantages of F2. Organizers mentioned a lot of work afterwards and delays. Lay citizens mentioned that they were disappointed when they could not see their input in the final decisions. One of the interviewees said: I haven't heard how all the input was evaluated and processed further.

Form F3 is mentioned by several citizens living in larger municipalities (population over 14,000, including Narvik) and gives citizens the opportunity to interact with organizers or participate in workshops on specific topics only. In summary, the following themes are mentioned: *overtourism, construction of a golf course, investigation of what can create positivity in a specific municipality, establishment of a bicycle park, establishment of a restaurant, development of outdoor spaces for young people with a focus on climate footprint, finding shortcuts in a city, focus on sidewalks for people with special needs, including families with small children, and related plans to build Håkvik harbor* (Supporting Information S3). What is also prominent in stories about such topics is that not all citizens are always asked or invited to participate. *In connection with proposals for a land use plan [construction of Håkvik harbor], the administration was supposed to visit the various villages and districts to hear what was on the minds of those who live there. I was not invited, nor were many of the others I know, because they knew we would ask critical questions.* There are several examples from larger municipalities where only selected groups and individuals are invited to meetings with organizers. Another example: *The XX department has built a bicycle park that was completed this summer. This is a positive activity and something good. However, it has subsequently emerged that many of those who live in the surrounding area were not asked or consulted. It was simply built without taking important aspects into account. For example, traffic safety.* Perhaps in processes like this, there needs to be better involvement. In all the stories related to F3, it emerges that the organizers select who they

want to participate and which voices are given the opportunity to participate, but critical, questioning, and negative voices are not included.

In contrast to the above topics, there are topics where people cannot participate: *the location of industrial buildings and the need to establish industry, the need to establish green industry, health-related challenges, the consequences of climate change or climate measures, and climate and environmental issues*. An example of this: *In decisions related to whether to build such factories, etc., people are not involved in the decision-making process. Their opinions are not included in the discussions*. Several people have expressed their views on climate and nature issues: *I have not seen any meetings where the municipality asks people for help with this, i.e. the consequences of climate change or climate measures, and I don't think I have ever heard of any participation meetings on climate and the environment*. In addition, almost all of the interviewees mentioned that none of the meetings had the goal of finding solutions to challenges faced by the municipalities they live in.

Despite the fact that it is stated that F3 is based on cooperation, it causes uncertainty and mistrust towards organizers. This is because lay citizens cannot participate in important matters and because, as I understand it, only certain groups/individuals are invited, and those who are not invited are often those who are affected by the plans and decisions. Some examples of uncertainty are: *I wonder what the municipality does with all the tips and advice they get from people. They have a bad reputation; people don't feel that they are being heard*. Another respondent talks about the participation meeting with young people: *It seems that only the proposals that fit with what the municipality wants and stands for were taken forward. It is not a completely democratic process*.

Another interesting aspect of F3 is that the contrasting themes of where participation is welcome and where it is not create conflicting participation practices that affect people's everyday lives and have consequences for the sustainable development of municipalities. One

of the organizers says: *We see that tourism affects the local people so strongly that we have to involve them in order to get their input on, among other things, what areas we think it is okay for tourists to visit and what areas we would prefer to have to ourselves, so that we can live a normal life. So it has to go hand in hand.* Later in the interview, the same person says: *We fully understand that the local people are affected by both business development and industry. We have some challenges around an industrial area in the municipality, where those who live around the industrial area are starting to feel the pain of living close to an industrial area. There is an odour nuisance. There is a noise nuisance. But it will always be the case that not everyone will get their way. The municipality must always weigh up what is socially sensible against the wishes and suggestions of individuals.* Those who were almost equal to the organizers in the participatory process on tourism issues are suddenly deprived of the right to have their wishes and proposals accepted when industry is at stake. Instead of “local people,” they are now labeled “individuals”.

F4, public information meetings, is mentioned by the majority and is considered unfair by more than half of those who mentioned it. Words used to describe this are *sham process* (skinnprosess/ skinnmanøvr), *nonsense involvement* (tulleinvolvering) or *rubber-stamping* (sandpåstrøing). For example, *it's just nonsense involvement. They let people participate a little, and they hold hearings just before the holidays. But when it comes to the big, important issues that affect generations, such as conflicting initiatives like establishing industry and tourism on the one hand and nature on the other, there is no real involvement.* And another interviewee says: *Rubber-stamping is really about making it seem like you're involved, but you have very little influence on the decisions that are made. But at least they are invited, informed about issues and plans, and given the opportunity to express their opinions.*

Several people who talk about F4 also mention the fact that *municipalities are at least required by national authorities to hold information meetings.* Some of these meetings allow

lay citizens to contribute, but it is rare for their suggestions and ideas to be included in the final plans and decisions. *Public meetings are held, but none of the signals that come out of them are taken further in the planning process. It's only because it says that public meetings must be held and that citizens must be involved. None of the input that came during the planning process was taken into account in the planning document. So, in a way, it's just a sham. Something you do. A discipline that has no value other than that it says you have to do it.* Citizens' statements are also confirmed by some organizers: *We have become better at involving the local people in the processes surrounding our major plans, but then people don't recognize themselves when the final plan comes back, meaning they don't feel that their input has been taken into account by the municipality. And then it doesn't help that you've had a large and broad process. People see that there was no point.*

F4 creates mistrust among citizens: *I am left with the feeling that if someone has agreed that this is how it should be, then that is how it will be. We are told that this is the best for everyone. And then it doesn't really become a real discussion [at the information meetings].*

Several other statements include the words *best for everyone*, which the organizers seem to use as an argument intended to create acceptance.

F4's most striking feature is that it offers very limited opportunities for participation: *We have some information meetings, but I don't feel that the average person on the street has any influence in this municipality.*

Another statement that comes up again and again in the interviews is that the organizers assign certain characteristics (*negative* or *opponent*) to critics: *So, you are quickly labeled as negative if you are critical. And: If you ask critical questions, you are seen as an opponent, as someone who wants to stagnate the development of our municipality.* Being a negative person or an opponent is not welcome, according to the respondents, and as I interpret it, the organizers' proposals, ideas, plans, and decisions have positive intentions: *And XX goes out*

491 *and says that everyone has to be positive and that everything that is done is done to increase*  
 492 *the population and quality of life.*

493 F5 is mentioned by those who are unfamiliar with the Participation Act and practices related  
 494 to it, or by those who do not feel that they can participate in any way other than by voting in  
 495 elections (national and local). *I think there is good cooperation in local politics among those*  
 496 *in power in Narvik. I think they work well together in relation to the challenges they face. So I*  
 497 *don't think I can say that they have gone out and asked the local people about possible*  
 498 *solutions and challenges; they are able to solve them themselves.* An interviewee from  
 499 another municipality stated: *My voice is who I vote for in politics. I have to cast my vote in*  
 500 *elections and participate in political meetings.*

501 The politicians confirm that political meetings are held where *people are invited* and that they  
 502 *listen to their electorate.* This form does not guarantee that people's suggestions and ideas will  
 503 be included in final decisions or plans, but people feel that *local politicians are receptive.*  
 504 However, some politicians and other citizens have mentioned that not all parties and not all  
 505 issues are heard by the organizers.

506 F5 is mentioned by a few people (from different municipalities). It is therefore difficult to  
 507 provide further interpretations of this form.

508 F6 is participation through organizations and committees and is a form mentioned by several  
 509 people from different municipalities. F6 is used both in addition to other forms and stand-  
 510 alone. Citizens can participate and obtain necessary information through *district councils,*  
 511 *sports clubs, parents' working committees, village development teams and neighborhood*  
 512 *committees.* Experience with F6 includes: *people are not heard, the distance is too great*  
 513 *between citizens and organizers, and it remains at the written or verbal level.* A few  
 514 interviewees mentioned that this form is a good way to participate. The rest say that lay

515 citizens are not heard: *People run out of energy because they are not heard, so participation*  
 516 *is difficult. And I don't feel that the municipality is really reaching out to listen, no.*

517 The organizers themselves are divided into two groups. In one group, respondents believe that  
 518 F6 provides good opportunities for participation and that it is often *the committees themselves*  
 519 *that fail to show up* (Supporting Information S3), while respondents from the other group say  
 520 that they themselves are not very good at taking suggestions from the committees and  
 521 organizations and using them in the decisions that are made.

522 F6 has some weaknesses that may explain why the interviewees feel that they are not being  
 523 heard: *a distance* between organizers and lay citizens and that people are forgotten by the  
 524 organizers. Equal cooperation or mutual dialogue is not mentioned in relation to F6, but it is  
 525 still possible to get important ideas or thoughts across: *They [organizers] listen to the*  
 526 *organizations from time to time, but it is not without a struggle.*

527 F7 is less widespread: people who want to participate must get directly involved in politics or  
 528 contact the administration themselves. Still, it is mentioned as both effective and virtually the  
 529 only form that can help people to be heard. The interviewees use strong and commanding  
 530 words such as “have to”: *There is only one way to participate, and that is through politics.*  
 531 *You have to get involved in politics, i.e., become a politician. And: You actually have to go to*  
 532 *them [the municipality] yourself and tell them what you think. You have the opportunity to do*  
 533 *so, but you may not be asked specifically.*

534 F8, people's movements, demonstrations, or resistance, is seen as highly effective.  
 535 Interviewees mention that *politicians and the administration will not go against an angry*  
 536 *crowd*. In Narvik municipality, two major issues engaged people. One is the attempt to close  
 537 the emergency room and maternity ward at the hospital (Supporting Information S3) and the  
 538 other is the planning of the Håkvik port. *They [the administration] were influenced by people*



*in another case in addition to the hospital case. They had a municipal plan that said they were going to build a new port out here in a suburb called Håkvik. [...] It is a very protected area that is biologically interesting. A very large quay was to be built, and there was a lot of uproar from the people who live there and also from environmentalists in Narvik. This led the politicians to decide to put this plan up for discussion for the entire municipality and reconsider it. So it is currently under review. So I would say that they listened to the people if they show strong opposition. Several of those interviewed believed that resistance and demonstrations are the most effective way to be heard: Things like that help here. That's how you can get involved (Supporting Information S3).*

What characterizes F8 is that people with different positions, professions, and backgrounds stand together and try to fight (be heard) on issues that may affect the most vulnerable members of society and the natural environment in which they live. Several people mentioned that when they got together for the hospital case, it was because they had sick parents, small children, or knew someone who was pregnant or was pregnant themselves.

F9 is equal participation and is a very rare form. It is only mentioned by organizers, citizens with important positions, or former employees of the administration. *I have participated in many public meetings where residents could give suggestions and opinions; community plans, city center plans, and preventive plans for children and young people are some examples. Of course, my role means that I have this type of dialogue with the municipality more often. But in general, I experience openness in relation to development work and the major measures the municipality wants to take for future solutions. The municipality definitely takes input from "ordinary" citizens seriously and integrates it.*

The fact that none of the lay citizens mentioned this form does not necessarily mean that it does not exist.



F10 is mentioned by a few people from different municipalities. This form does not allow for participation and usually applies to organizers other than the municipal administration, such as various companies that are owned by or under municipal supervision: *I know of some of the planning developments in Narvik [company] where none of the residents have been involved.*

### **Results from a theory-driven analysis**

Arnstein's typology [30] was used to examine the difference between degrees of influence that lay citizens can have in participation processes (see method section). All 10 forms of participation were also analyzed, considering Fung's dimensions [31] to clarify the significance of these forms for citizens' opportunities to influence decisions, and to show what characterizes the forms. In addition, I examined the ten forms in light of the requirements and expectations of the Norwegian authorities. F10 (no participation) can be placed at the lowest level of Arnstein's ladder and is not in line with the Planning and Building Act, which stipulates that everyone, even those who cannot participate directly, must be guaranteed this opportunity. F7 (becoming a politician) may provide real opportunities for participation, but since it is not possible for all residents to become politicians, it is difficult to assess this form against Arnstein's ladder, and there are no indications in Norwegian policy documents that participation is intended to take place through this form.

F5 (participation through political elections and through locally elected politicians) appears most likely because some of the interviewees are not aware of their rights to participate in planning processes. The Election Act and the Planning and Building Act are two separate laws in Norway. These give citizens different rights, and both support democracy.

F1 is participation through personal contacts in small municipalities where everyone knows everyone. None of the steps in Arnstein's ladder can be linked to this form, nor can I see that the Norwegian authorities present a private conversation with the organizers as part of citizen

participation. In summary, forms F1, F5, F7 and F10 cannot be described as citizen participation in light of Norwegian policy documents, even though some of these lead to a certain degree of influence (by certain individuals in society). These forms are also difficult to place in Arnstein's ladder model. They are not very transparent and do not give citizens equal opportunities to participate in the sustainable development of local communities.

F2, digital participation, is at the symbolic level, that is, between steps 3 and 5 in Arnstein's model. Participants receive information and are given the opportunity to express themselves, but based on the results, only one out of 53 in Narvik municipality stated that residents' comments are integrated into decisions and that residents see their suggestions in the final documents. Paragraph 5 of the Norwegian Planning and Building Act [11] and other political documents do not directly require that residents' voices be included in final decisions, but recommend it. However, the use of digital tools in participation processes is recommended in several policy documents in order to streamline planning processes, make them more transparent and facilitate dialogue with citizens (e.g. [34]). My results cannot confirm that digital forms of participation lead to dialogue or make the process more efficient. On the contrary, several of the interviewees mentioned that they do not experience any form of dialogue between decision-makers and themselves when digital tools are used in participation.

F3 is often used in addition to other forms and gives citizens (the most selected ones) a real opportunity to participate, but only in specific areas. The organizers often select the participants themselves or restrict participation based on criteria (e.g., age). Nevertheless, F3 can be placed at Arnstein's level of partnership, which is characterized by citizens and organizers entering into almost equal relationships where they can discuss and agree. Proposals from citizens are also integrated into the final decisions. Arnstein shows that this process is not new, because those who have the power to decide will still want to keep it on their side. In practice, this means that if residents' proposals conflict with the organizers'

plans, the organizers will still get their way. Fung [31] sees selective participation as a good way to design participation if those selected represent the interests and concerns of the average resident. In my study, the majority expressed the view that F3 cannot be regarded as genuine participation in planning processes because the issues (construction of a golf course, tourist trails or, for example, the establishment of a bicycle park) are separate from issues over which they have no influence (industry, nature conservation or climate adaptation). The interviewees are also dissatisfied with the selection of participants because it cannot be considered representative. F3 only ensures cosmetic participation because the issues relating to climate adaptation, biodiversity conservation, values and the next generation are not open to real participation. Viewing F3 in light of the Norwegian policy documents from Introduction, they are partly in line with the national authorities, as they recommend involving citizens in topics other than industry, construction, climate adaptation, etc. However, Section 5 of the Planning and Building Act [11] and the document National Expectations for Regional and Municipal Planning 2023–2027 [34] clearly state that citizens must be involved in municipal planning other than that ensured through F3.

On Arnstein's ladder [30], F4 (information) can be placed on the step called Informing, but based on the results above, I see that it draws to some extent on the characteristics of the Therapy step because participants are given “diagnoses” such as negative, or opponent. Such attitudes are undesirable in the eyes of the organizers because they undermine well-being and the municipality's development in terms of attracting industries that create jobs. Fung [31] writes that this type of communication between those in power and citizens weakens democracy and influences decisions (often in a way that creates distance between decision-makers and citizens). The policy documents mention public meetings as one of the ways to organize participation [35], but at the same time there is a requirement for involving residents

at all stages of the planning process, engaging in dialogue with people, and considering their knowledge as useful in the planning [12].

F6 is participation through committees and organizations. Based on my findings, it also has a more symbolic role due to the distance between citizens and organizers and because representatives do not feel that they are being heard. In the example of the Guide [12], it is also specified that local organizations feel that they are mainly involved only in phases where important premises have already been established (p.11). Both the policy documents and Fung [31] view this form of participation positively because organizations, local committees, associations, etc. often have representatives from the general public, but Fung [31] warns that this dimension can only support democratic values if the communicative dimension and the dimension of influence are perceived as fair.

F8 (movement, protest, and resistance) is the only form that leads to citizens being heard and their proposals, wishes, and solutions being given a real position in decisions. Arnstein does not have a specific step for such participation, but writes that in most cases where power is distributed between those in power and citizens, citizens take it. The interviewees from all municipalities mentioned that this is the form that most often leads to them being heard. At the same time, it is difficult to link this form to the Norwegian Planning and Building Act.

F9 is equal participation, but analysis using typologies and policy documents is difficult to apply to this form because only a few organizers mentioned it, and only a few lay people (with important positions or former employees in administration) confirmed that this form exists.

Fung's typology also focuses on how participatory design affects the legitimacy, justice, and effectiveness of public action. My analysis shows that F3 supports effectiveness and legitimacy to a certain extent, but because it only gives citizens the opportunity to participate

in selected topics, it is not perceived as fair. F9 can support all three democratic values, but since I only have statements about this from a few participants, further research is needed.

## **Sustainable suggestions and solutions**

Statements about sustainable suggestions and solutions and about unsustainable practices can be found across all the identified forms of citizen participation. There are many different ideas, experiences and interests among the 75 interviewees from the Norwegian Arctic. However, the following themes recur: *sustainability in schools* (teaching children this concept and giving them tasks that shape their understanding and critical thinking), *sustainability at university* (integrated into various subjects and linked to waste sorting, cycling to work and paid parking), *sustainable tourism*, *the organization of the World Championships in Narvik* (almost all interviewees from Narvik believed that this event is socially and economically sustainable and will not have a negative impact on nature), *fish farming* (almost all 75 believe that this industry is important and sustainable), *the development of green industry*, *the economy*, *the health sector*, *the use of electric cars* and *population size* (for more examples of sustainability see Supporting Information S2).

The organizers mainly associate the word sustainability with the economy, industry, fish farming, jobs, and population. Specific to Narvik, the organization of the World Championships and the use of electric cars are also mentioned. It is emphasized that municipalities with poor economies must prioritize jobs and industry: *Narvik is an industrial town and is perhaps characterized by a focus on development, expansion, and job creation rather than on preserving nature and the environment. There is a perception that Narvik has a lot of nature, mountains, and untouched wilderness, so there is plenty to draw from.*

Some politicians, planners, and companies in Narvik mention that sustainability has gained a strong position in all discussions, proposals, and plans in all municipalities in Northern

Norway because it is an expectation and requirement from the national authorities. In the introduction, I showed that the focus on sustainability and the achievement of the SDGs is evident in many national policy documents. I also showed that the planning framework for the years 2023–2027 attempts to balance the need to focus on climate and biodiversity with the need to build green industry and power plants. This is reflected in practice in the municipalities interviewed: *I definitely notice an increasing focus on sustainability. Fortunately, national expectations have been set for us to incorporate a climate perspective into everything we do. We must take this focus into account in all political proposals and assessments we make. And we must assess things in relation to the UN's climate goals and similar. [...], but I don't feel that there has been any major change in what we decide.* There are several similar statements in my corpus: *I feel that there is more talk than action when it comes to sustainability in the municipality. I rarely see a conscious approach to sustainability, whether it is about reducing emissions or protecting nature. They do make some attempts now and then. You can't be a municipality today without talking about sustainability. But I don't feel that resources are being used to ensure that there is a good enough basis for decision-making to say that this is a future-oriented, sustainable choice.* The statements show that incorporating national requirements separates sustainable practices into verbal/written practices and action-oriented practices, with the latter affecting people's local values and their lives. For example: *(1) Not many of the plans that focus on climate and the environment have been implemented and (2) If we are to be able to get the exciting jobs that young people want, so that we can have more children and more tax revenue, then it is not so important whether we have industry in our outdoor recreation areas, because that is where the jobs are. But for those of us who already live here, it's absolutely awful to see us losing the outdoor recreation areas we have. They are very valuable in our lives. And nature issues and climate issues always lose out.*

## Conclusion

This study examined the practices of citizen participation at the municipal level, and the role of sustainability therein, in various municipalities in the counties of Nordland, Finnmark and Troms in the Norwegian Arctic. Analysis of the transcripts of 75 interviews identified 10 forms (table 1) of citizen participation in planning processes and meetings aimed at discussing local challenges and possible solutions.

Only two of these forms give citizens the opportunity to influence decisions (F3 and F9); the rest can be characterized as symbolic and cosmetic participation. F3 – collaboration and workshops – is characterized by participation in selected issues only (e.g., construction of a golf course, overtourism, and establishment of a bike park) while participants are often cherry-picked (those who are positive and do not ask critical questions are chosen). Although proposals from those participating are often integrated into decisions, the results show that the majority do not consider F3 to be genuine. The issues on which people can participate are not linked to truly important matters such as industry, nature conservation, or climate adaptation, which affect their future and the next generation, over which they thus have no real influence. F9 – participation where local people are seen as equal participants – seems not common in practice and requires further research because only a few organizers and lay people (with important positions or former employees in the administration) mentioned it.

The findings mainly show that citizens generally don't trust local authorities in relation to participation processes and final decisions, no matter what form. Overall, there is little basis for highlighting any of the forms as legitimate or fair.

A link to the SDGs is prominent in all forms, but while citizens emphasize the importance of focusing on climate adaptation, nature conservation and local values, local authorities see green industry, power plants and the economy as fundamental. Since in practice, participation

hardly grants citizens' influence, their priorities do not shape the decisions that are made. National policy documents attempt to balance the focus on green industry, which requires large areas of land, with the focus on climate and nature. It is difficult to see from my findings how these focuses can be reconciled in practice. This may be due to the fact that the authorities' requirements for participation (based on dialogue and inclusion of local knowledge) at all stages of the planning process are mainly practiced at a minimum level, where citizens are informed and can contribute their own ideas and suggestions, but these do not have much influence on the decisions.

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