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Are good intentions enough? Evaluating social sustainability in urban development projects through the capability approach

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ABSTRACT

Social sustainability is a multidimensional concept sensitive to the contexts of its application. This study explores how it is interpreted and applied in urban planning practices in which general social sustainability goals are translated into specific urban design interventions. Building upon Sen's Capability Approach (CA), we analyse the gap between the operationalization of social sustainability goals in Urban Development Projects (UDPs) from the perspective of urban planners, and the following experiences of the residents in the developed urban areas. By applying a capability-based evaluative framework to a UDP in Amsterdam, the study reveals that residents value distinct urban functionings and experience different enabling factors related to urban social sustainability. We conclude that the CA provides an operationalizable framework for assessing how social sustainability goals defined at the early stage of UDPs translate in the actual capabilities of the urban residents for whom those very goals were conceived.

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1. Introduction: the gap between intended and experienced social sustainability outcomes in urban development projects

Social sustainability strives to improve the life conditions for people who live now and who will live in the future (Chiu 2003). It is a value-laden and multidimensional concept that incorporates multiple understandings and aspects of life. Social equity, diversity, inclusion, cohesion, participation, collective and individual well-being are examples of the many concepts that converge towards the idea of social sustainability.

To date, no consensus was reached on how social sustainability should be conceptualized and evaluated (Larimian and Sadeghi 2019). In recent years, the respective 'evaluative domain' – 'what' socially sustainable arrangements consist of in concrete terms – has developed in different directions. Scholars evaluating the concept recognize a shifting

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focus from the more 'tangible' aspects of social sustainability – such as employment and housing – to the more 'intangible' ones like well-being and sense of community (Colantonio and Dixon 2009; Shirazi and Keivani 2017). Since these latter aspects cannot be evaluated independently from the specific contextual conditions of one's living environment, situated practices of social sustainability evaluation are now increasingly called for within this literature (Shirazi and Keivani 2017).

Urban development projects (UDPs) represent a relatively unexplored domain within the application of these evaluation practices. UDPs are 'large-scale transformations of urban land through real estate development ventures, often implemented by a partnership arrangement between the public and the private sector' (Kim 2022, 1), where the land is – different than in large-scale infrastructure projects – produced for human occupation. Often, these transformative projects involve processes of place governance involving different stakeholders in the identification of the area's development-relevant goals – from improving energy efficiency to promoting social inclusiveness – and throughout the phases of project conception, construction and delivery (Adams and Tiesdell 2012; Daamen 2010; Healey 2010; Taşan-Kok 2010).

Goals like promoting social cohesion or well-being are often framed by planners under the umbrella term of urban social sustainability (Colantonio and Dixon 2009). The same concept is also used to devise criteria and indicators of 'socially sustainable' urban environments. Therefore, in the framework of UDPs, the concept of urban social sustainability facilitates the formulation of a multiplicity of relevant goals, helping to identify relevant design interventions. At the same time, it supports the identification of indicators for evaluating a given project's social outcomes. Using the metaphor of language, it could be said that in the notion of urban social sustainability both the practice of urban planning and of urban evaluation find a vocabulary suitable for articulating both the tangible and intangible social goals that UDPs are meant to pursue, and the indicators suitable for evaluating them.

By assessing on contemporary Dutch urban planning practices that relied on the concept of urban social sustainability to identify and implement such goals, this study addresses two methodological challenges. The first regards the challenge of converting the broad notion of urban social sustainability into the specific goals that different UDPs are ostensibly meant to achieve in the context of their realization. The multidimensionality and genericity – thus, also subjective interpretability – of the concept renders its translation into concrete urban interventions a complex endeavour. Subsequently, the actual outcomes of such interventions may not align with the original goals that these were meant to pursue, and may not correspond with the experiences of those who (will) reside in the developed areas.

The second challenge addressed by our study relates to the scarcity of analytical frameworks that can support the evaluation of urban social sustainability throughout the stages of project-conception (i.e. 'ex ante'), project-development (i.e. 'ex durante') and project-delivery ('ex post'). While a vast literature on the operationalization of social sustainability in the built environment exists (see e.g. Dixon and Woodcraft 2013; Hamiduddin 2015; Langergaard 2019), few if any studies have focused on the evaluation of the intended social sustainability goals throughout processes of urban transformation, up to including documentation of the lived experiences of residents regarding achieved (or unachieved) social sustainability goals.

Building upon a recent theoretical contribution on the application of the Capability Approach (CA) (Sen 1999) to urban development questions (Janssen, Daamen, and Verdaas 2021), this article documents the 'ex post' evaluation of how the actors involved in one urban development project in northern Amsterdam have conceptualized, operationalized and experienced a set of social sustainability goals. To do so, we devised a capability-based evaluative framework to detect gaps between the 'intended' and the 'experienced' urban social sustainability outcomes. We mainly gathered data through semi-structured interviews with multiple parties involved in the project, including a significant sample of the current residents in the area. The interviews aimed to capture the (in)consistencies between how social sustainability goals were formulated by the urban planners in charge of the project, and how these were subsequently experienced by residents. By relating the findings of the interviews to a set of 'urban functionings' (Basta 2017), the study shows the added value of applying a capabilities-based approach to the evaluation of urban social sustainability at the local level of UDPs – with ample attention for its crucial intangible dimensions.

The remainder of the article is divided into four parts. Section 2 elaborates on the conceptual intersection between human capabilities and urban social sustainability, and introduces the capability-based evaluative framework we designed using this intersectional understanding. Section 3 then discusses the application of the framework to the case study in Amsterdam, while Section 4 presents the findings of the case study. Section 5 collects our concluding reflections, and discusses how the findings contribute to the overarching research question regarding ways to bridge the gap between desired and realized social sustainability goals in UDPs in the future.

2. Urban social sustainability through the lens of the Capability Approach

2.1. The enabling relations between humans and their living environment

The Capability Approach is a well-known normative framework that devises an idea of social justice and enables the evaluation of human welfare and development (Sen 1979, 2005, 2009). In this section, we summarize the aspects of it that are most relevant to our application to the case study described in Section 3.

Amartya Sen's original articulation of the CA builds upon the concept of human capabilities. Such a concept focuses the evaluation of human welfare on an individual's concrete freedoms to function – that is, of doing and being – in ways that she has reason to value. As such, human beings are conceptualized as being inherently diverse and, at the same time, also orientated toward their self-development and well-being. Crucial for achieving the latter are the concrete freedoms that individuals have in their own context of life: human development requires, and is consequent to, freedom (Sen 1999).

While the centrality of freedom and of the related institutions and resources for individuals' self-realization is well-established in political philosophy (Rawls 1971), Sen posed an unprecedented emphasis on the contextual factors that contribute to individual outcomes. He observed that the same rights and means, in different institutional or social contexts, may enable different functionings; at the same time, even in the same context, individual features like physical and mental abilities may convert those resources into very different beings and doings. The idea of justice that permeates the CA is thus not

focused on principles of distribution of basic resources 'à la' Rawls, but on what such resources enable specific people to do and become. The following evaluative practice thus expands the 'evaluative domain' of human welfare to conversion factors such as age, gender, intellectual abilities and physical impairments: in short, to the realm of one's individual circumstances. As such, the CA shifts the attention from institutions and means to the relations between humans and their unique context (Basta 2016). It is therefore not surprising that Sen's original formulation of the CA and the 'relational focus' of the respective evaluation framework have penetrated the theoretical reflection in urban studies (Anand 2018; Basta 2016; Biswas 2019; Deneulin 2014; Fancello and Tsoukiàs 2021; Frediani 2021).

In parallel, the junctures between individuals and their living environment have also been discussed in relation to the notion of urban social sustainability. Capability scholars have argued that in cities, 'human well-being does not only lie in what each individual is being able to do but in the quality of his/her social relations' (Deneulin 2014, 8–9). Therefore, the evaluative focus of urban social sustainability does not only concern the human-spatial relation, but also particularly emphasizes inter-human relations, including the intangible qualities of one's living environment such as its peacefulness and sense of cohesion. Since social sustainability is ultimately about 'how individuals, communities and societies live with each other' (Colantonio and Dixon 2009, 4), most social sustainability scholars include the dimensions of social equity, social capital and sustainability of community within their analyses (Dempsey et al. 2009; Glasson and Wood 2009; Hamiduddin 2015; Weingartner and Moberg 2014; Woodcraft 2012).

Net of their distinct emphases, the common denominator between the human capabilities literature focused on the urban realm and the urban social sustainability literature focused on the quality of interhuman relations are the 'enabling relations' between people and their living environment across its built, natural and social dimensions. For the scope of this study, urban social sustainability was therefore articulated as the set of context-specific conditions that enable relations between citizens and their living environment conducive to individual and collective well-being. Consistent with this definition, the framework described in the following section places an evaluative focus on individuals, and on the 'enabling relations' that are conducive to pursuing their well-being in relation to urban space and with others.[1]

2.2. A capability-based evaluative framework: from urban social sustainability indicators to sustainable urban functionings

The notion of social sustainability is often used as an 'umbrella term' in the framework of urban development projects by the actors involved in their realization of articulating relevant social goals. UDPs could therefore be seen as 'local devices' through which broader sustainability objectives are translated into concrete urban transformations. From the methodological viewpoint, such translation often implies converting 'intangible' social goals – e.g. fostering social cohesion – into a set of operationalizable criteria – e.g. people's participation in social activities – and measurable indicators – e.g. a number of residents participating in local associations or in relevant initiatives.

While the identification of such indicators is essential to evaluate if social sustainability goals set and realized by UDPs are consistent with the experiences of citizens, few

studies have proposed evaluative frameworks applicable to the neighbourhood scale typical of UDPs. Tangible indicators like affordable housing, schools, grocery shops (Bramley et al. 2006), as well as intangible ones like social networks and levels of participation (Dixon and Woodcraft 2013), are documented in literature, but are often too generic to capture the uniqueness that characterizes the relational conditions between individuals and their living environment in the context of a single urban development project. As argued by Shirazi and Keivani (2018), many studies on social sustainability assessment are not tailored to applications at the neighbourhood scale, and tend to overlook the experiences of their inhabitants.

Based on these premises, Sen's original articulation of the CA offers a useful starting point to assess the social sustainability outcomes of one urban development project in northern Amsterdam. More precisely, we use the CA-perspective to identify a set of qualitative indicators sensitive to both the tangible and the intangible 'enabling relations' between people and the immediate living environment constituted by the neighbourhood object of renewal. Drawing on the concept of 'urban functionings' (Basta 2017), which attends to the basic 'doings and beings' that constitute the urban dimension of people's life such as inhabiting, moving, recreating, and socializing, and on an existing set of social sustainability indicators relevant to the built environment (Janssen, Daamen, and Verdaas 2021), we identified the capabilities-based indicators reported in Table 1. Such indicators were then applied as reference indicators for performing the interviews reported in Section 3. Here, the questions aimed to clarify whether an actual individual capability was realized in relation to a given general function – that is, if the interviewee experienced a 'real opportunity' to, for example, interact with neighbours or people working in the area.

Table 1. Converting urban social sustainability indicators into relevant urban functionings.

	Urban social sustainability indicators	Sustainable urban functionings
Tangible	Decent housing	Inhabiting affordably and comfortably
	Jobs	Working at a viable distance from home
	Schools	Going to school at a viable distance from home
	Transport	Transporting yourself from home to another place
	Public Spaces	Making use of parks, squares, playgrounds and any publicly accessible space
	Recreation	Enjoying leisure according to one's own preferences in the urban area examined
	Healthcare	Having adequate access to healthcare at a viable distance from home
	Urban Design	Benefitting from adequate architectural design in one's surroundings
Intangible	Social networks	Building and maintaining social relations
	Feeling of community	Feeling part of and contributing to the community's life
	Social interaction	Interacting with people living or working in the area
	Safety	Being and feeling safe
	Well-being	Experiencing individual and collective well-being
	Feeling of belonging	Identifying oneself with the area's character and its social fabric
	Cultural expression	Participating in and contributing to valued cultural activities
	Existence of informal groups and associations	Joining informal groups as well as formal associations
	Representation by local governments	Being informed about and involved in local government initiatives
	Levels of participation	Being actively involved in initiatives for collective matters in the urban area examined
	Levels of influence	Accessing the means necessary for voicing one's own perspectives and stakes regarding local matters

It is important to underscore that our capabilities-based indicators were articulated in such a way as to capture the 'relational conditions' between these indicators and a sample of individuals living in the area. For example, the urban social sustainability indicator 'public space' could lead a researcher to measure the surface of available public space in the area. We rearticulate this indicator as 'making use of public space' in order to capture, through the interviews, whether and how different people actually make use of the space depending on their specific abilities and preferences. Extending this reasoning to all the urban social sustainability indicators in Table 1, we obtained the overview of urban functionings listed in the same table.

Re-articulating urban social sustainability indicators with the language of urban functionings and individuals' respective capabilities shifts the evaluative focus of urban social sustainability from aggregate to individual experiences. By doing so, the framework documents how each person experiences and contributes to sustainable social outcomes. The added value of such a framework is that it enables us to detect the ways in which different people convert urban resources into individual capabilities depending on a broad set of personal features (Sen 2009) and social and environmental factors (Robeyns 2017). At the same time, the framework captures what value each individual attaches to the capabilities that they achieve, or would desire to achieve.

3. Goals, interventions and experiences: evaluating the social sustainability outcomes in a UDP in Amsterdam

3.1. The Buiksloterham&Co project

Buiksloterham&Co is a mixed-use urban development project of 2.9 hectares that includes approximately 580 new dwellings, planned to be delivered between 2019 and 2024. The project is located in a wider area in development in the northern part of the city of Amsterdam (Buiksloterham), where 100 hectares of terrain are transitioning from a former industrial harbour to a multifunctional area (Gemeente Amsterdam 2020; Projectbureau Noordwaarts 2007).

Endorsed in a manifest signed by 21 stakeholders (Gladek et al. 2015), the Buiksloterham redevelopment area was envisioned as a 'living lab' for circular urban development. The manifest contains multiple sustainability ambitions, ranging from achieving energy self-sufficiency and 'zero waste' material streams, to fostering diversity, inclusion and livability. While Buiksloterham&Co engages with the general circularity goals set for the larger urban area, it also gives specific attention to social sustainability goals, both in the formulation of wider planning goals (Gladek et al. 2015) and in the concrete urban design interventions (Klaassen, Hof, and Cutsem 2019; Studio Ninedots et al. 2015).

On the neighbourhood scale, (i.e. the urban area of Buiksloterham&Co, excluded the wider area in development), the urban design consists of a high diversity of tenure types, income groups and dwelling typologies. For instance, seven-floor apartment blocks are placed next to townhouses, and social housing apartments are placed next to free-market apartments and houses for sale. Moreover, as part of the urban design, housing blocks are placed around collective gardens where homeowners share ownership of the gardens. These gardens are planned to be semi-publicly accessible, thus open for other residents in the area. At the time of conducting the interviews, the gardens had not been realized yet.

A specific aspect of the project to which our case study has dedicated particular attention is the realization of three social housing apartment blocks. Each block includes one collective facilities room. The three rooms are located at the entrances of the buildings and include laundry machines, bookshelves, a coffee machine, plants, table and chairs, couches and a bike repair service that every tenant of the apartment block may use. The realization of the three facilities rooms resulted from the collaboration between the social housing provider (de Alliantie), responsible for the construction of the social housing blocks, and the healthcare organization (Philadelphia), which is dedicated to people with minor mental disabilities. In the phase of project's conception, the latter organization pre-booked 24 social housing units to rent to their clients. It also assumed responsibility for the management and maintenance of the collective facilities, in return for using the rooms for day care activities of their clients (Klaassen, Hof, and Cutsem 2019). Moreover, the healthcare organization committed itself to guaranteeing the development of activities in the collective facilities rooms in such a way as to facilitate the process of community-building among the tenants of the social housing blocks. This was realized through the provision of coaches, i.e. health care professionals, in the collective facilities rooms for seven days a week, 10–12 hours per day, who also provided day care services for clients of the healthcare organization. Finally, immediately after the buildings had been delivered and the first tenants had moved in, the healthcare organization created and managed a WhatsApp-group for all tenants of the social housing apartment blocks.

Altogether, five main design interventions to advance social sustainability are observed in this project: the mixed urban design, the collective gardens, the collective facilities, the regular provision of coaches and the creation of a social media platform. Because of the explicit attention to socially vulnerable groups and for their integration in larger urban development projects like the one examined here, Buiksloterham&Co is a project that exemplifies social sustainability goal-driven urban transformation. As such, it was identified as a suitable case study to investigate how such goals align with the sustainable urban functionings and enabled capabilities of residents in the area, with particular attention to the mix of residents in the social housing blocks.

3.2. Data collection

Case study data were collected through the analysis of official project documents and semi-structured interviews with the planners and residents involved in the project. Among the documents were municipal planning reports such as a masterplan for the wider region (BVR & DRO Amsterdam 2003) and the investment decisions for Buiksloterham&Co (Projectbureau Noordwaarts 2007; Gemeente Amsterdam 2020), the urban design plan for Buiksloterham&Co (Studio Ninedots et al. 2015), the legal contract concerning the common facilities between the housing developer and healthcare organization (Klaassen, Hof, and Cutsem, 2019), and the vision document of the manifest (Gladek et al. 2015). While document analysis provided the generic information reported in the previous section, the information most relevant to the scope of our exercise was collected through interviews.

These were conducted between June and October 2020[2], when the case study area was under construction. At the time, five residential buildings were already inhabited, including the three social housing buildings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with

nine stakeholders involved in the project – namely, representatives from the social housing provider, the healthcare organization, the municipality, the urban design company and a non-profit 'citylab' in the wider area under development – and with 14 residents who had moved into one of the five residential buildings within the last 1.5 years (see roles and background information of interviewees in Appendices 1 and 2). All interviews were conducted individually.

The former group of interviewees was labelled as the planners' group and the latter as the residents' group. The sampling of the latter group was done in three distinct ways: a call to participate in the interviews was – with support of the social housing provider – posted in the residents' WhatsApp-group, the same call was distributed on paper in the mailboxes of the surrounding housing blocks, and residents were approached 'on the spot' at the project location. No residents who responded to our call were rejected. The sole criterion for residents to participate in the interviews was to reside in the area of the project. As quota to arrive at a final, diverse selection of participants in the residents' group, we checked whether our sample included at least two variations in the categories age, tenure, housing composition and occupation (see Appendix 2). Therefore, while our study did not aim to evaluate social sustainability specifically related to persons with mental disabilities, the interview sample included one resident who was a client of Philadelphia. Moreover, while the sampling of interviewees focused on the social housing dwellings in particular, it also included two interviewees who resided in the surrounding buildings. The majority of interviews were conducted at the housing blocks, either in one of the collective facilities room or in the interviewee's apartment. By contrast, the majority of interviews with planners were conducted through online video calls. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed with Atlas.TI.

The content and the structure of the interviews were different for the two sub-groups of planners and residents. The interviews with planners were structured by means of an interview guide that included open-ended questions about their perceived 'goals' of social sustainability for the urban area development (i.e. how they conceptualized social sustainability), and how these were advanced through the project's 'interventions' (i.e. how project goals were operationalized). By comparison, the residents' interviews were structured on the basis of the sustainable urban functioning indicators reported in Table 1. When applying these indicators in the context of the interviews, we simplified the language to make them clear to participants. For example, 'being actively involved in initiatives for collective matters in the urban area examined' became 'taking initiative for one's own neighbourhood'. Furthermore, some functionings were split into a few more concrete ones ('enjoying leisure according to one's own preferences in the urban area examined' became, among others, 'making use of cafes or restaurants' and 'doing sports'). In addition, select functionings with high-level genericity which were not considered relevant to the sampled residents and to the scope of our exercise were not included in the interviews (e.g. 'benefitting from adequate physical design in the urban area examined'). An overview of this 'adjusted' list of sustainable urban functionings selected for the case study is provided in Appendix 3. Finally, to facilitate the articulation and interpretation of how the resident interviewees valued the set of functionings relevant to the area examined, we composed one or more propositions per functioning that were submitted to interviewees. Interviewees were asked to react to them by

'agree, disagree or neutral' and to explain their judgements. The propositions corresponding to the adjusted urban functionings are also listed in Appendix 3.

3.3. Data analysis

Since the scope of the interviews was different for the sub-groups of planners and residents, the two sets of transcripts were analysed differently. The transcripts of planners' interviews were descriptively coded based on the elements 'goals of social sustainability' and 'project interventions for social sustainability', and subsequently analysed based on the linkages that the planners made between them during the interviews. This analysis, presented in section 4.1, captures how the realized interventions in the case study project relate to the planners' conceptualizations of social sustainability goals.

The analysis of the residents' interviews instead focused on the valued urban functionings, and on the 'enabling relations' between individual residents and their living environments conducive to social sustainability outcomes. Subsequently, we related this analysis to the outcomes identified by planners in terms of project interventions realized in the developed urban area. In this way, we reconcile the 'planners' perspective with the 'residents' perspective: our analysis assesses the extent to which the designed interventions, related to planners' conceptualizations of social sustainability goals, meet residents' actual experiences of social sustainability.

To emphasize the merits of our capability-based evaluative framework, the findings of our analysis underscore the diversity of ways in which different residents articulated their valued functionings. We captured this diversity by detecting the 'interpersonal variation' and the 'interpretive variation' in residents' value judgments, which emerged while analyzing the interview transcripts. The results of this analysis are reported in section 4.2. Building upon this, we also noted how the interviewees converted their valued functionings into actual capabilities. To do so, we identified each interviewee's conversion factors – that is, each individual's capacity to function in the valued way depending on extrinsic (e.g. the urban environment and other human beings in one's living environment) and intrinsic (e.g. personal) features. Such factors are illustrated in section 4.2.

Taken together, this analysis sheds light on the gap between planner-led interventions aimed at enhancing social sustainability, and the valued functionings and capabilities conducive to social sustainability understood from the perspective of residents. For practical purposes, the overview of the conversion factors is limited to the four sustainable urban functionings that residents lingered the most during the interviews. These functionings are therefore not the most valued functionings per se, but those that emerged as the most relevant to illustrate the discrepancy between 'intended' and 'experienced' social sustainability outcomes. This and other results are reported in the following section.

4. Findings: how social sustainability was intended and experienced in the Buiksloterham&Co project in Amsterdam

4.1. How social sustainability was intended: goals and interventions

The analysis of the interviews revealed how planners framed social sustainability goals and how these goals were translated into five concrete interventions in the area, such

as the collective buildings' facilities. This conceptualization is illustrated in Figure 1 below. The five interventions refer to the ones listed in the case description in 3.1. The thirteen distinct goals result from the interviews with the planners sub-group. The figure illustrates the social sustainability goals mentioned by interviewees, as well as the frequency of their mention. It also shows how planners expected specific interventions to directly affect the underlying goal (e.g. 'social interaction') and, directly or indirectly, another goal for social sustainability (e.g. 'social inclusion').

A first observation regarding the project goals is that social sustainability was not frequently mentioned as a goal as such. Instead, the interviewed planners articulated social sustainability ambitions by referring to multiple notions like 'social interaction', 'sense of community' and 'social circularity', an interesting term that some of them used to describe the practice of exchanging social services among neighbours such as babysitting or doing the laundry. Moreover, a second general observation regarding the five project interventions is that they include both 'physical-oriented' interventions – like the different types and tenure of housing and the collective facilities – and 'relational-oriented interventions' – like the establishment of connectivity between the residents in the area by means of social media tools and the provision of coaches. As such, it can be observed that both tangible and intangible aspects of social sustainability were explicitly accounted for by the interviewed planners in the phase of the project's conception.

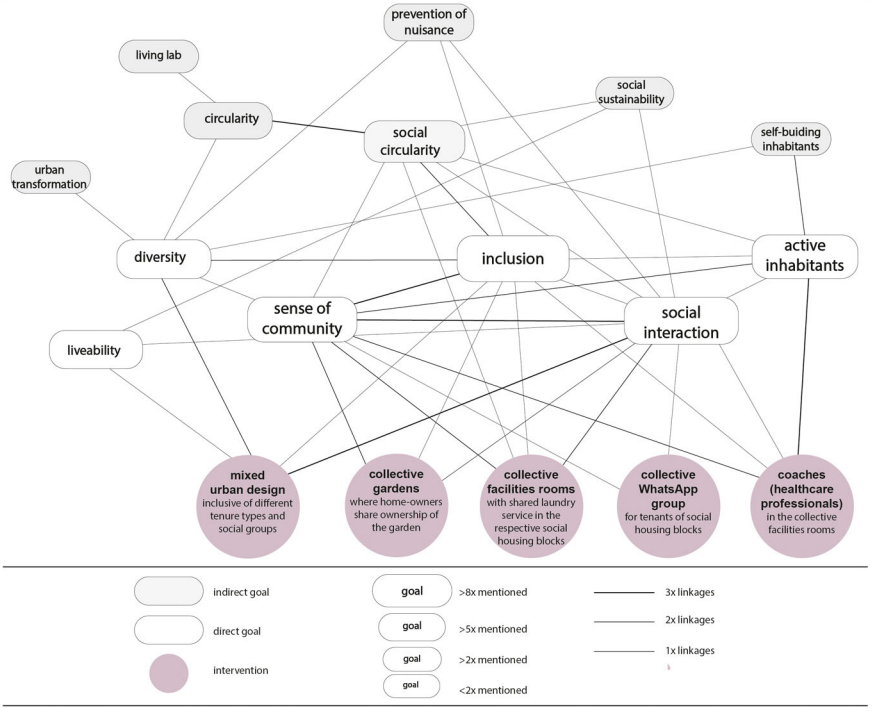

Figure 1. Linkages between interventions and project goals for social sustainability according to the sub-group of planners involved in the Buiksloterham&Co project.

Regarding the linkages between the goals and interventions, we observe that planners envisioned that social sustainability would be advanced through the mutual enforcement of the various interventions and the effects that these could produce. When explaining the aims behind one of the project interventions, interviewees frequently gestured towards underlying goals that they expected to be met as a side-effect of the other goals. This led to a chain of intended effects around one single intervention, as became evident from this planner's perspective on the common facilities rooms:

> By means of a lot of integration, a lot of interaction, you can soften the invisible wall around an area that says 'those people are the trouble-makers'. It makes it easier to talk to each other, and easier to solve problems when they occur (planner interviewee no.3).[3]

Similar intended mutual enforcements were observed between goals such as 'social inclusion' and 'social circularity', or between 'diversity' and 'sense of community'.

This particular conceptualization and operationalization of social sustainability is permeated by notions of diversity and relationality. The envisioned diversity is understood to emerge concretely from the mix of tenure types, social groups, and dwelling typologies included in and made accessible by the project. The underlying idea was that the resulting living environment would: 'really become a mix. It should not be like 'look, that is where the social housing tenants live', but that it really becomes inclusive and that everybody feels welcome and happy' (planner interviewee no.1). The envisioned relationality instead emerges from the provision of collective spaces in combination with other, relational-oriented, interventions such as the coaches present in the collective facilities: 'because we are there, we know about certain ideas among residents. … we can be the 'lube oil' for such initiatives to actually take place, we have been dedicated time to support them' (planner interviewee no.6). The operationalization in Buiksloterham&Co was thus guided by the normative idea that interaction between and 'activation' of residents could emerge as a result of designed relations between physical space and human-based support provided in the new urban area. Such an operationalization seems to address the 'enabling relations' that, as we previously argued, are essential for a capability-based understanding of urban social sustainability (Section 2). Yet the envisioned relationality observed among planners' conceptions of social sustainability was potentially overestimated in the conceptualization phase. For instance, whereas a dominant line of reasoning among planner interviewees was that 'diversity of people leads to social interaction, this interaction leads to sense of community and social cohesion, and finally, this altogether leads to so-called "social circularity", this is no guarantee that such a relationality is actually experienced by the ones for which such social sustainability goals are defined. In the following section of this analysis, our capabilities-based framework focuses on the experiences of residents living in Buiksloterham&Co for a set of sustainable urban functionings.

4.2. How social sustainability was experienced: valued functionings and conversion factors

In contrast with the planners' articulation of social sustainability, which was driven by criteria such as diversity, inclusiveness and relationality, the capabilities-based frame adopted for the analysis of the residents' interviews sheds a contrasting

Table 2. Variations in value judgements about sustainable urban functionings according to the subgroup of residents in the area of the Buiksloterham&Co project.

Sustainable urban functioning	Interpersonal variation	Interpretive variation	Typical quotes
Going to school, internship, or work at an accessible distance from home	Low	High	Interviewee no.1: 'It would be nice if it is somewhat nearby, but it is not necessary' Interviewee no.9: 'I don't mind to travel a bit. I find "what" more important than "where"', Interviewee no.2: 'I just prefer to have it close to home, preferably in Amsterdam-Noord'.
Transporting yourself from home to another place	Low	High	Interviewee no.8: 'Here it is very badly accessible, definitely. The ferry runs only up to 7 o'clock' Interviewee no.4: 'What I really like here, is the ferry, it is only 200 meters from here'
Making use of parks, squares, playgrounds in the urban area examined	Low	Low	Interviewee no.3: 'Yes, that is important. That you don't have to leave your neighbourhood for parks and squares'
Doing shopping (besides groceries) in one's own neighbourhood	Low	Low	Interviewee no.9: 'No that is not needed, I can take my bike for that'.
Doing sports in one's own neighbourhood	Medium	Low	Interviewee no.1: 'Yes, I find it important to do that close to home' Interviewee no.9: 'No, I can also bike a bit for that.. .. Quality is more important than the location'
Participating in cultural activities in one's own neighbourhood	High	Medium	Interviewee no.6: 'Yes, absolutely. Isn't it nice, to have some creativity around?' Interviewee no.4: 'Maybe it is nicer if it is somewhere else, so that you can visit another place. I don't need a national museum in my neighbourhood'
Engaging with own social contacts in the neighbourhood	Medium	Low	Interviewee no.13: 'No.. If friends come here all the way to Amsterdam, they come to eat and drink here, so we don't need to go out' Interviewee no.10: 'Yes, I even have two bikes here so that we can go a bit further too'
Feeling part of a community	Low	High	Interviewee no.2: 'Still, it is sort of nice if you feel that you know some people, that if feels safe, and there is some social control' Interviewee no.2: 'I am sort of a community-building person myself, I cook 4–5 times per week for the neighbours' Interviewee no.7: 'On the one hand I like the dynamics, on the other hand I am happy to live in a large city with some anonymity'
Interacting with neighbours	Low	High	Interviewee no.7: 'Yes, it is nice. We don't need to visit each other all the time, but just knowing a little bit what is happening' Interviewee no.8: 'I prefer to be anonymous. … The people who live next to me, that is important, to drop my keys in case that I lose them' Interviewee no.6: 'Look, you don't need to know each other's life history. But just to making a chat, that I find important'
Identifying oneself with the neighbourhood	Low	High	Interviewee no.3: 'What I find important, is that it is clean. No garbage in the street'. Interviewee no.6: 'The circular aspect appealed to me'
Joining groups or initiatives in one's own neighbourhood	Medium	High	Interviewee no.8: 'No, not at all, I am not a group-person' Interviewee no.10: 'For a while, maybe yes,

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Sustainable urban functioning	Interpersonal variation	Interpretive variation	Typical quotes
			but I don't want to have to stay forever. A singing workshop for example I could do'. Interviewee no.4: 'On the one hand I like to be involved. But really joining, no, because I don't want any obligations anymore'
Being informed by the local government	Low	Low	Interviewee no.12: 'Because many things are happening here, and it is your living environment, it is nice to know what is going on'.
Taking initiative for one's own neighbourhood	Low	High	Interviewee no.9: 'I would like to do those kinds of things, but I have many other things to do, so it has to fit within what you are doing already'.
Influencing the urban environment in one's own neighbourhood	High	Low	Interviewee no.1: 'Yes, I would like to do that. As long as I don't have to spend too much time into it' Interviewee no.7: 'Well … I assume that urban designers and architects have well thought about it'.

light on the social sustainability outcomes of the project. Concerning how the interviewed residents valued our proposed set of sustainable urban functionings, two main variations emerged (see Table 2). The first ('interpersonal variation') relates to the extent to which certain functionings were valued by different residents (e.g. 'doing sports' was valued by one resident but not by the other). The second regards how these functionings were enabled in practice according to each individual's interpretation, e.g. whether a valued interaction would consist of 'smiling to other neighbours while passing by' rather than 'having activities together'. This latter variation sums up to the 'interpretive variation' mentioned in Section 3, and it is the most relevant to our findings and conclusions.

Remarkably, relatively few functionings scored 'high' on 'interpersonal variation', meaning that there were only a handful of situations in which the participants judged the importance of a functioning differently. More than whether a given functioning was important or not to a participant, the notable variation regarded the actual interpretation of a functioning. For instance, while nearly all participants indicated that 'feeling part of a community' was a valuable functioning, it differed greatly among participants whether this meant, for instance, 'having a feeling that you could ask your neighbours a favor sometimes' or 'actively being involved in community activities'.

This variation can be interpreted in different ways. First, the articulation of some functionings – e.g. 'identifying yourself with the neighbourhood' – gave room for more interpretation than others – e.g. 'doing sports in one's own neighbourhood'. Second, in line with Sen's respective formulation, generally one's valued functionings reflect one's own individual values and priorities, and as such, society's inherent pluralism (Sen 2009). For instance, while the functioning 'interacting with neighbours' was typically valued by all participants, some attached 'contour conditions' to it like 'as long as I can also stay somewhat anonymous'. Likewise, the functioning 'taking initiative for the neighbourhood' was typically followed by a condition 'as long as I don't have to be part of a formal group with expectations'. These answers highlight how the criteria of relationality

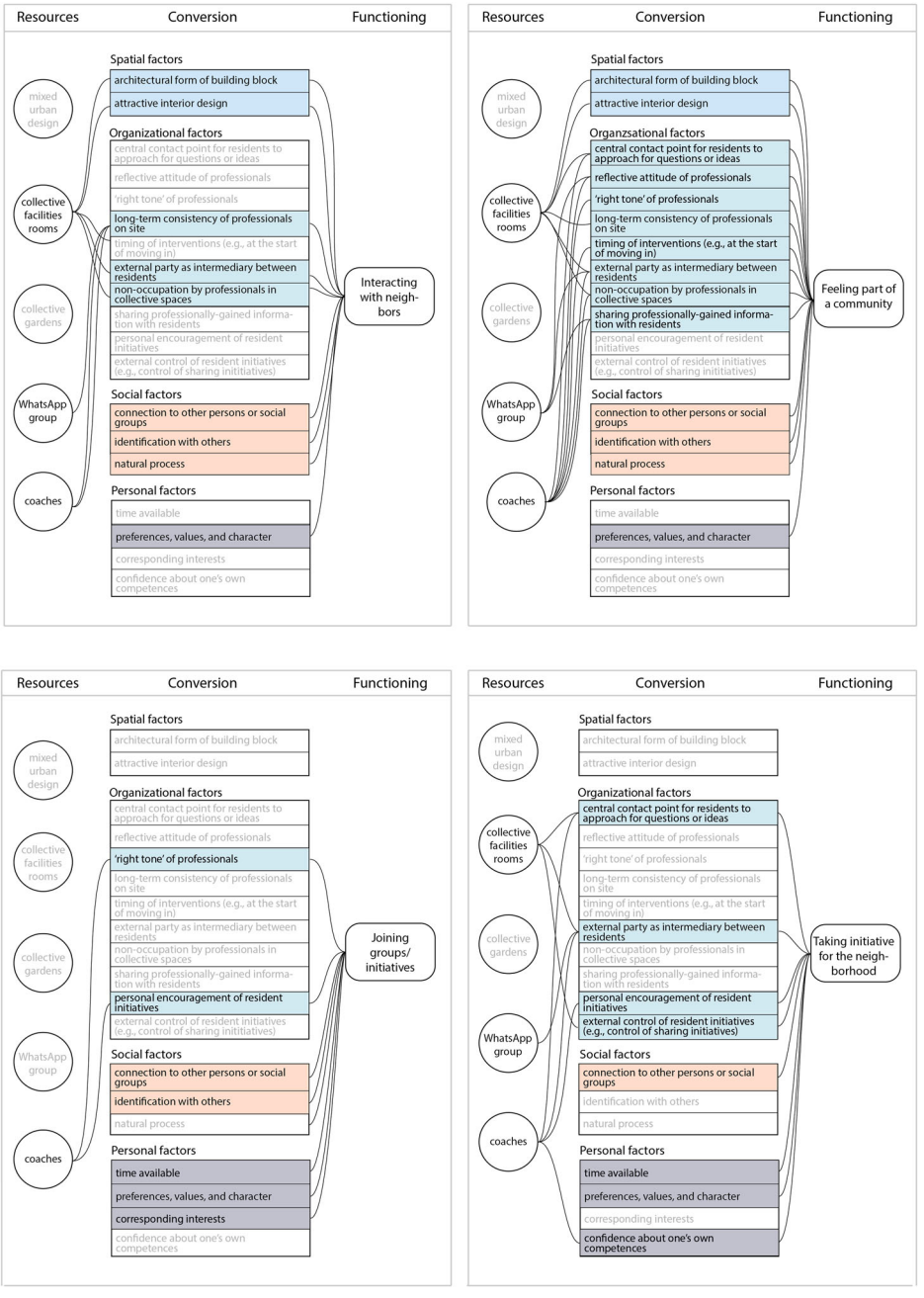

Figure 2. Conversion factors that inhabitants experienced between resources and actual performance of four functionings.

– much valued by the interviewed planners – may be experienced very differently 'on the ground': privacy and anonymity may be valued just as much as, or more than, social interaction. Likewise, contributing to a collective aim may be valued as much as preserving one's own independency. This and other observations are collected in Table 2.

Beyond the value judgements regarding the relevant urban functionings, Figure 2 presents the conversion factors that we found to be crucial to enable residents to perform four specific functionings. The figure conceptually distinguishes between the five project interventions as 'resources' on the one hand, and all other factors relating to the enablements from resources to capabilities as 'conversion factors' on the other. Here, our analysis explores how a person's capabilities relate to factors in the urban environment (i.e. spatial resources and spatial conversion factors), to the ways that the urban environment is managed by humans (i.e. organizational resources and organizational conversion factors), to other humans in the urban area developed (i.e. social conversion factors), or to specific personal conditions (personal conversion factors).

The main contribution of Figure 2 is that it sheds light on how the realized project interventions affect the capabilities of residents in different ways. For instance, the figure reveals a diversity in the ways that residents convert a resource into a performed functioning. While for some residents the laundry service in the collective facilities rooms indeed had the effect as intended by the planners – 'you will have a chat once in a while that you would not have otherwise' (resident interviewee no.1), others did not experience this effect: 'Going to do the laundry downstairs and having a chat? Not the case. Besides, I would not even desire that. I mean, I am just doing the laundry, I am wearing my sweatpants and slippers, you know' (resident interviewee no.7). In addition, by distinguishing between spatial, organizational, social and personal conversion factors, the figure provides insight about how distinct functionings relate to people's living environment in specific ways. For instance, the functioning 'feeling part of a community' reveals the most linkages to organizational conversion factors, which in turn relate to the work that was done by the coaches in Buiksloterham&Co. In contrast, the functioning 'interacting with neighbours' shows a stronger connection to spatial conversion factors, such as the architectural form of the building block (i.e. a square-shaped balustrade around a common courtyard) and an attractive interior design. These differences thus reveal how the project interventions affect the distinct sustainable urban functionings in different ways. Finally, by including 'other' factors than the provided project interventions in the analysis of conversion factors, Figure 2 provides information about what functionings are less affected by project interventions, and more dependent on other, social or personal, conversion factors. For instance, whether residents would actually 'join a group or initiative in the neighbourhood' is determined more dominantly by personal factors such as whether a person has time or whether it matches the specific interests of that person, than the availability of the collective facilities rooms per se.

5. Conclusions

The title of this paper started with the question 'are good intentions enough?'. The phrase refers to the methodological question regarding how the translation of the broad notion of social sustainability into specific goals and interventions within the local context of an urban development project (UDP) can find correspondence with the experiences of those living in the developed areas. Our case study of the Buiksloterham&Co UDP in northern Amsterdam applied a capabilities-based analytical framework to evaluate how social sustainability goals were conceptualized by the planners in charge of the project, how these converged into the operationalization of specific project interventions, and how these

interventions then played a role in the experiences of social sustainability by the residents living in the project area. These findings enable us to reflect on the theoretical relevance and analytical robustness of the capability-based framework we devised.

By referring to a set of relevant sustainable urban functionings in the evaluation of social sustainability outcomes, we were able to identify variations in which such functionings are valued and interpreted at a local level by different residents, and in which residents in the urban area examined convert project interventions into enhanced performances. Juxtaposing the analysis of the resident interviews to the analysis of how planners envisioned the realization of social sustainability reveals some significant differences. The relationality between different goals and interventions observed in planners' conceptualization of social sustainability – i.e. as one comprehensive, causal picture of how social sustainability comes about – was not experienced as such by residents living in the urban area. In fact, among residents, distinct functionings of social sustainability did not necessarily relate to one another: a person could value 'feeling part of a community' while not valuing 'participating in neighbourhood activities'. Rather, relationality was observed in the different ways that provided resources enabled residents to actually perform their valued functionings. These enablers related to multiple contextual factors, ranging from spatial aspects such as the architectural form of a building, to organizational, social and personal aspects such as 'the right tone' of professionals, 'the connection to other persons living in the area', or 'personal preferences'. While some of these aspects referred to the realized project interventions in the case study area, the high degree of variation in individual experiences, underscores the importance of capturing social sustainability outcomes in local areas not only through the availability of realized design interventions, but through the evaluation of the relational conditions between individuals and their living environment.

The insight into how the capability-perspective is distinct from how planners perceive social sustainability opens the door for questioning how the CA could be prescriptive for re-designing operationalization processes in UDPs in order to incorporate social sustainability goals in a more resident outcomes-attuned way**.** Unlike seeing project interventions as the mere operational form of social sustainability goals, the CA includes both interventions, residents' functionings and the conversion factors between them in its framework. The richer picture this produces is useful for designing planning processes because it gives hints about the extent to which certain intended outcomes can actually be achieved. For example, the analysis revealed the limitations of what is 'designable' – a personal conversion factor such as a resident's 'available time' is simply out of reach for planners. A better understanding of what factors, other than physical design interventions, are influential to experience social sustainability is relevant because it can lower the expectations of social investments done in projects. In addition, it can enable thoughtful discussions about what resources should be invested in within UDPs and what should not. Finally, the approach can encourage the design of innovative solutions in urban development projects that tackle the conversion factors that inhabitants experience. For instance, if residents appear reluctant to maintain a collective garden because they are insecure about their planting skills, a simple solution could be to inform residents about garden maintenance (and not to pave the garden because it is underutilized).

Applying the Capability Approach to urban development projects also raises new questions about the improvements that could be made within UDP processes to

expand people's performed functionings (or capabilities) in urban areas, beyond merely providing physical resources in urban areas. Such improvements could be the result of 'local capability studies' in the early planning phases of UDPs. Indeed, governance processes around UDPs can be designed in such a way that residents' views on valued 'urban capability' are incorporated early on, making project investments more effective and evidence-based. In other words, the contribution of the CA to UDPs stretches further than merely an evaluative perspective on social sustainability outcomes in urban areas. Instead, it provides a novel 'language' for translating the broad concept of social sustainability into specific, locally-dependent goals and interventions. In order to understand better how this could work, further research can focus on the analysis of the governance processes around UDPs, and on the question what role 'urban capability' could play in them.

The study presented in this paper has limitations. The empirical research is of a qualitative nature and includes a small number of residents, who are not representative for the entire Buiksloterham&Co project or any other urban area. Moreover, a certain bias on behalf of the researcher was not be preventable in the research – another researcher could have arrived with different interpretations of participant experiences. For these reasons, the findings should be seen as an initial exploration for social sustainability's operationalization in urban development projects. Future research may find that 'more' urban functionings are important for social sustainability than the ones identified in this research, or that 'other' conversion factors are essential in achieving social sustainability.

The contribution of this study is thus mainly a methodological one, related to how to apply a capability-perspective to social sustainability goals in urban development projects. Our study is not meant as a definitive evaluation of social sustainability in the Buiksloterham&Co project, or as a final definition on social sustainability's operational form in the built environment. Instead, we hope to inspire further research and academic debate that contributes to the challenge of planning and developing (more) socially sustainable urban areas. Because the Capability Approach interprets social sustainability based on people's inherent diversity and unique circumstances, it offers a way to fill the operational gap between the general notion of social sustainability and its specific interpretation in specific urban areas. Only when such a comprehensive and interpretive perspective to social sustainability is incorporated in planning processes can intentions for social sustainability be on track to become 'good enough'.

Notes

1. According to some scholars, a potential limit of the Capability Approach in informing the identification of indicators of social sustainability is its focus on the individual rather than on the collective 'scale' of the relevant evaluation (Deneulin 2014; Pelenc, Bazile, and Ceruti 2015). Such limitation is discussed in the studies that reflected on the notion of collective capabilities (e.g. Evans 2002; Ibrahim 2006). Whilst the relevant debate is out of the scope of this article, we find it important to emphasize that Sen's insistence on individuals as the proper 'unit of analysis' of human development and welfare is not intended to discard the relevance of collective agency and experience, but solely to valorize the uniqueness of each individual person and of her contextual, relational, circumstances. That is why this study embraced Sen's relevant position.

2. The data were collected in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although research activities such as site visits and on-site interviews were slightly constrained by the health measures in place, the data collection was relatively unaffected. Desirable, additional methods like participant-observations and focus-groups could, however, not be used.
3. Citations were translated from Dutch to English by authors.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study can be requested from the corresponding author.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: professional roles of planner interviewees

Inter-viewee no.	Stakeholder	Organization	Role in organization
1	Social housing provider	de Alliantie	Project coordination
2	Social housing provider	de Alliantie	Area development
3	Social housing provider	de Alliantie	Project development
4	Healthcare organisation	Philadelphia	Work and day care
5	Healthcare organisation	Philadelphia	Work and day care
6	Healthcare organisation	Philadelphia	Housing
7	Municipality	Gemeente Amsterdam	Sustainability and spatial development
8	Non-profit Citylab	Stadslab	Founder
9	Urban designer	Studio Ninedots	Founder

Appendix 2: background information of resident interviewees

Inter-viewee no.	Age range	Household composition	Tenure	Tenure via Philadelphia	Occupation
1	46-55	Living together with child	Social rental housing	No	Unemployed/ full-time mother
2	26-35	Single	Social rental housing	Yes	Employed
3	56-66	Living together with partner	Social rental housing	No	Retired
4	67-75	Living together with partner	Social rental housing	No	Retired
5	56-66	Single	Social rental housing	No	Employed
6	36-45	Single	Social rental housing	No	Employed
7	26-35	Single	Social rental housing	No	Employed
8	56-66	Single	Social rental housing	No	Retired / employed on a freelance base
9	26-35	Single	Social rental housing	No	Employed
10	56-66	Single	Social rental housing	No	Unemployed / health insurance act
11	26-35	Living together with partner & child	Social rental housing	No	Unemployed
12	18-25	Living together with 1 or more others	Liberalized rental housing	No	Student
13	67-75	Single	Liberalized rental housing	No	Retired
14	18-25	Living with grandmother as caregiver	Social rental housing	No	Student

Appendix 3: Sub-group of sustainable urban functionings applied to the residents' interviews and examples of their verbal articulation during them

Sustainable urban functionings	Adjusted urban functionings for application to the case-study	Propositions applied during the interviews
Inhabiting affordably and comfortably	Left out of this study scope	-
Working at viable distance from home Going to school at viable distance from home	Going to school, internship, or work at an accessible distance from home	It is important for me that my work, internship or education is located in my own neighbourhood rather than elsewhere
Transporting yourself from home to another place	Transporting yourself from home to another place	Accessibility was a strong condition for me when I searched for a home. As long as the accessibility is good, the location of my home does not matter
Making use of parks, squares, playgrounds and any publicly accessible space	Making use of parks, squares, playgrounds in the urban area examined	I find it important to go to parks, squares or playgrounds in my own neighbourhood instead of elsewhere.
Enjoying leisure according to one's own preferences in the urban area examined	Making use of cafes or restaurants Doing shopping (besides groceries) in one's own neighbourhood Doing sports in one's own neighbourhood	I find it important to visit cafes or restaurants in my own neighbourhood instead of elsewhere. I find it important to do shopping (besides groceries) in my own neighbourhood than elsewhere I find it important to do sports in my own neighbourhood than elsewhere.
Having adequate access to healthcare at viable distance from home	Left out of this study scope	-
Benefitting from adequate architectural design in one's surroundings	Left out of this study scope	-
Building and maintaining social relations	Engaging with own social contacts in the neighbourhood	If I have friends of family visiting, I prefer to do something in my neighbourhood, such as going to a cafe, park, square or shops.
Feeling part of and contributing to the community's life	Feeling part of a community	A neighbourhood is nicer to live in when it is a true community.
Interacting with people living or working in the area	Interacting with neighbours	I find it important to know my neighbours well. I enjoy knowing my neighbours, but I don't want to spend much time on it. I prefer to be anonymous than having regular (weekly) contact with my neighbours
Being and feeling safe	Left out of this study scope	-
Experiencing individual and collective well-being	Left out of this study scope	-
Identifying oneself with the area's character and its social fabric	Identifying oneself with the neighbourhood	I don't care much about the identity (or, the vibe or character) of my neighbourhood, as long as I have a nice home
Participating in and contributing to valued cultural activities	Participating in cultural activities in one's own neighbourhood	It is important for me to participate in cultural activities (such as music, art, or religion) in my neighbourhood
Joining informal groups as well as formal associations	Joining groups or initiatives in one's own neighbourhood	I find it important to join groups in my neighbourhood such as a neighbourhood association
Being informed about and involved in local government initiatives	Being informed by the local government	I find it important to be informed about what the municipality is doing in my neighbourhood
Being actively involved in initiatives for collective matters in the urban area examined	Taking initiative for the neighbourhood	The more people take initiative for the neighbourhood, the better the vibe in the neighbourhood gets.
Accessing the means necessary for voicing one's own perspectives and stakes regarding local matters	Influencing the urban environment in one's own neighbourhood	I do not feel the need to think along with the design of my neighbourhood