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– UNRAVELLING THE ROLES OF ACTIVE RESIDENTS IN A POLITICALLY CHALLENGING CONTEXT: An Exploration in Cairo

AYA ELWAGEEH, MAARTEN VAN HAM AND REINOUT KLEINHANS

Abstract

Capital cities struggle with population growth that challenges existing infrastructure and affects the quality of urban life. The failure of local governments to manage urban deterioration motivates active resident groups to improve their neighborhoods, but they struggle to play a role in neighborhood governance in contexts where citizens' engagement in public affairs is restricted. In this article we aim to understand active residents' roles in the neighborhood governance process and how these roles unfold in a context that challenges citizen engagement in public life. We adopted a case study methodology and interviewed active residents and local officials from selected districts in Cairo, which revealed that active residents' influence is limited mostly to neighborhood management and implementation activities. In this limited space, the role of active residents is confined to either that of the 'fixer' who restores existing services, or that of the struggling and intermittent 'self-provider', neither of whom can influence policy formulation. This study provides a structured and zoomed-out view of local activism in Cairo, offering a starting point for scholars and decision makers seeking to enhance active residents' roles in Cairo.

Introduction

Active residents initiate and join in collective activities to improve conditions in their neighborhoods. In these collective activities they may collaborate with existing institutions, or confront them, or remain isolated from them.[1] Such activities represent a form of activism, as active residents claim their right to be involved in urban improvement of their city. In this article we consider local activism as all initiatives by active residents attempting to play a role in the urban improvement of their neighborhoods.

Some studies have focused on local activism in countries whose political context discourages active citizen engagement in governance. Many of these studies have highlighted resistive and often confrontational practices known as 'insurgent citizenship'.[2] However, such practices do not fully capture local activism in contexts where authoritarian regimes are intolerant of political activity.[3] The few studies on such challenging contexts discussed limited local activism practices in which basic conditions such as protection of civil rights, freedom of speech and independent authorities cannot

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1 Miguel Angel Martínez Lopez, 'Framing urban movements, contesting global capitalism and liberal democracy', in Ngai Ming Yip, Miguel Angel Martínez Lopez and Xiaoyi Sun (eds.), *Contested cities and urban activism* (Singapore: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2019) pp. 25–45.

2 James Holston, 'Insurgent citizenship: disjunction of democracy and modernity in Brazil', in James Holston, *Insurgent citizenship: disjunctions of democracy and modernity in Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Charlotte Lemanski, *Citizenship and infrastructure practices and identities of citizens and the state* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); Faranak Miraftab, 'Insurgent planning: situating radical planning in the global South', *Planning Theory* 8.1 (2009), pp. 32–50.

3 Asef Bayat, *Life as politics: how ordinary people change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Engin F. Isin, 'Citizenship studies and the Middle East', in Roel Meijer and Nils Butenschøn (eds.), *The crisis of citizenship in the Arab world* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 511–34; Xi Chen, 'Civic and noncivic activism under autocracy: shifting political space for popular collective action', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 25.SI (September 2020), pp. 623–40.

be found.[4] In our article 'Active citizenship and neighborhood governance' we suggested that active residents practice local activism in a non-confrontational, selective and service-centered manner to improve the urban conditions of their neighborhoods.[5] However, it is unclear how this limited local activism affects neighborhood governance processes in these challenging contexts.

By focusing on the city of Cairo, we aim to add to an understanding of the roles active residents can play in neighborhood governance processes and how these roles unfold in a culture that challenges citizen involvement in public life. Context is central to shaping the role of active residents in their neighborhoods.[6] Cairo is an exemplary case of a context that discourages active citizens from engaging in urban governance. It is a metropolitan city in Egypt's economically struggling and authoritarian-ruled country. State–citizen dynamics in Egypt are described as hostile to citizen engagement and discouraging of public participation in urban planning and governance.[7] We investigate the perspective of local officials and active residents from various districts in Cairo to achieve a better understanding of the possible roles of active residents in this challenging context.

This article is structured as follows: in the second section we provide an overview of Cairo's local governance structure and the limited involvement of residents in urban affairs. In section three we present a theoretical framework for active citizen roles and the manifestation thereof in neighborhood governance. Section four describes the application of this framework through semi-structured interviews with local officials and active residents in nine Cairo districts. In section five we discuss the roles of active resident groups in Cairo and their impact on various dimensions of neighborhood governance. In the concluding section we reflect on the roles we uncovered.

Urban deterioration and limited involvement of residents in local governance in Cairo

Cairo is Egypt's capital and the center of the state government, investments and mobility.[8] The Cairo Governorate consists of a main agglomeration, three new urban communities (NUCs) and the New Administrative Capital (NAC)[9] since 2022 (see Figure 1).[10] The main agglomeration's local government structure comprises a governorate office and 38 subordinate district offices. Each NUC is managed by a municipal agency that follows the New Urban Communities Authority.[11] As for the NAC, its local government arrangement is unclear.

4 Andrea Cornwall and Vera Schattan P. Coelho, 'Spaces for change? The politics of participation in new democratic arenas', in Andrea Cornwall and Vera Schattan P. Coelho (eds.), *Spaces for change? The politics of citizen participation in new democratic arenas* (London: Zed Books, 2007), pp. 1–29; John Gaventa, 'Triumph, deficit or contestation? Deepening the "deepening democracy" debate' (2006), www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop (accessed 14 February 2024); Lopez, 'Framing urban movements'.

5 Aya Elwageeh, Maarten van Ham and Reinout Kleinhans, 'Active citizenship and neighborhood governance; North-Western literature and global South realities', *Sociology and Anthropology* 8.2 (2020), pp. 36–48.

6 Cornwall and Coelho, 'Spaces for change?'

7 Steve Connelly, 'Participation in a hostile state: how do planners act to shape public engagement in politically difficult environments?', *Planning Practice & Research* 25.3 (2010), pp. 333–51.

8 David Sims, *Understanding Cairo: the logic of a city out of control* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012).

9 The NAC, introduced in 2015, serves as a new center for governance, residence and work in Cairo and is situated 45 kilometers east of the main city, between Cairo and the Red Sea. It spans 714 square kilometers and accommodates 15 million people.

10 *The Official Gazette*, 'Decision of the President of the Arab Republic of Egypt No. 314 of 2022', Publication number 314.24 (2022) [WWW document]. URL https://gate.ahram.org.eg/media/News/2022/7/20/2022-637939190908282519-828.pdf (accessed 14 February 2024).

11 The New Urban Communities Authority was established in 1979 to create new cities and formulate development strategies for these, ensure good management, offer residential land to individuals and investors and provide subsidized residential projects for young adults.

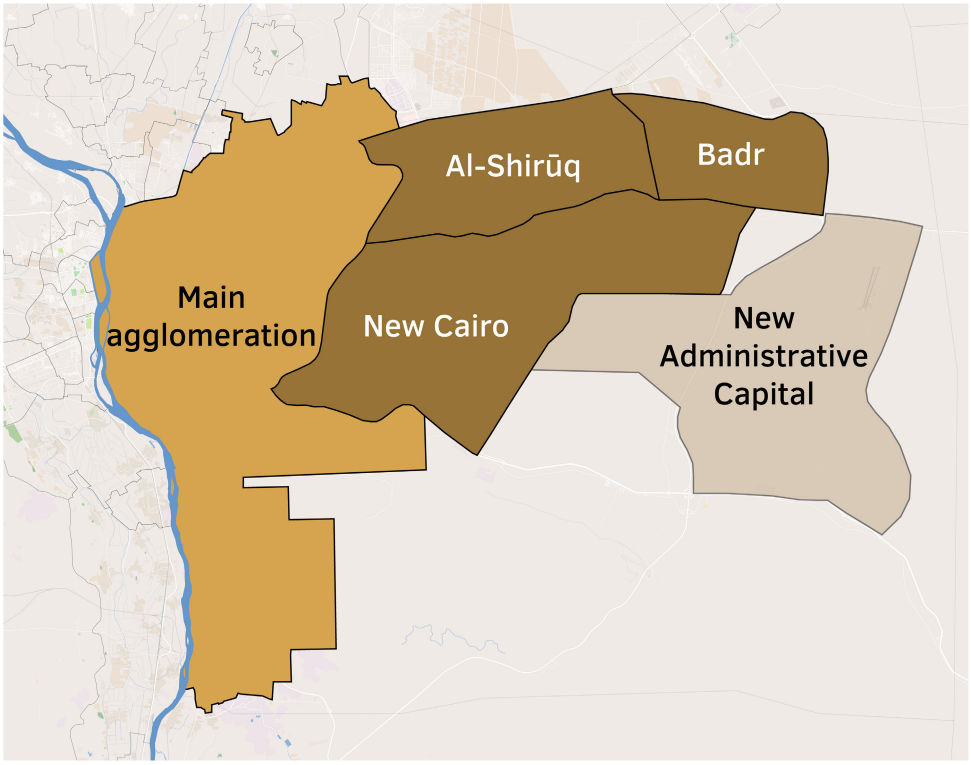

FIGURE 1 The urban structure of the Cairo Governorate (map produced by the authors using a map by Thomas Brinkhoff titled 'Greater Cairo (Egypt): districts–population statistics, charts and map', 1 July 2021) https://www.citypopulation.de/en/egypt/greatercairo/ (accessed 1 July 2021).

Cairo, with its population of over 10 million,[12] has experienced rapid urban growth, which has put pressure on its amenities and built environment,[13] especially in the main agglomeration that is the focus of this study. The city addresses these urban challenges in a centralized manner, which has resulted in defective identification of urban development priorities[14] and unbalanced budgetary allocations for improving existing neighborhoods.[15] Furthermore, the district's local government system is characterized by bureaucracy and has limited power and resources.[16] As a result—although at varying levels—Cairo's different socio-economic neighborhoods have

12 CAPMAS (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics) (2022) [WWW document]. URL https://www.capmas.gov.eg/HomePage.aspx (accessed 14 February 2024).

13 GOPP, 'Greater Cairo urban development strategy—Part I: future vision and strategic directions' (Cairo: GOPP, 2012), https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-05/greater_cairo_urban_development_strategy.pdf (accessed 14 February 2024).

14 Hassan Elmouelhi, 'New Administrative Capital in Cairo: power, urban development vs. social injustice—an Egyptian model of neoliberalism', in Ala Al-Hamarneh, Jonas Margraff and Nadine Scharfenort (eds.), *Neoliberale Urbanisierung* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2019), pp. 214–54.

15 Yahia Shawkat and Amira Khalil, 'The built environment budget 15/16: an analysis of spatial justice in Egypt', The Built Environmental Observatory (2016), [WWW document]. URL http://marsadomran.info/en/policy_analysis/2016/11/589/ (accessed 14 February 2024); Yahia Shawkat and Amira Khalil, 'The built environment budget 15/16: urban development', The Built Environmental Observatory (2016), [WWW document]. URL http://marsadomran.info/en/policy_analysis/2016/11/675/ (accessed 14 February 2024).

16 Sims, *Understanding Cairo*; *Tadamun*, 'Policy alert: why did the revolution stop at the municipal level?' (2013) [WWW document]. URL http://www.tadamun.co/why-did-the-revolution-stop-at-the-municipal-level/?lang=en#.Xjmxo_lKjcs (accessed 14 February 2024).

suffered similar urban deterioration related to garbage collection, sewerage systems, maintenance of road surfaces, street lights, public parks and public space infringements.[17]

Cairo's governor, who is appointed by the president, allocates the budget and sets priorities for urban development and service provision.[18] His mandate extends to specific sectors, such as local roads, solid waste management, street lights, public gardens, civil defense and local development support programs related to health, education and culture.[19] These sectors have a decidedly low dedicated budget in Egypt,[20] and the governor makes decisions about projects only once he has received the fiscal budget from the governorate. Around 82% of the governorate's budget is centralized, while the rest is derived from local taxes and fees.[21] The central government also appoints the district heads, who are mandated to implement and manage infrastructure projects and public services within their geographical boundaries.[22] They implement state-led urban policies and plans and are supported by specialized departments responsible for managing public services such as garbage collection, building-control activities and local street maintenance.[23] But even these managerial tasks are challenging as a result of increased urban deterioration, building violations and infringements on public spaces in Cairo.

Local governance arrangements in Cairo are politically challenging, as they do not provide any channels for residents to become involved in the governance of their neighborhoods. Neither do they allow many activities for mobilizing residents. In the past, residents were represented at governorate and district levels through elected local popular councils (LPCs),[24] but in practice, these were inactive and only played an advisory role. After the 2011 revolution, LPCs were abolished because they remained loyal to the old regime. Since then, efforts have been made to draft a new law to regulate the election of LPCs, which has disrupted their operations, leaving citizens without elected local government representatives. Government-appointed district officials have therefore been drawing up the annual district development plans on their own.[25]

In addition, the state's urban plans and development projects in Cairo occur without resident involvement. For instance, inner-city roads were widened and overpass bridges were constructed to connect the main agglomeration with the NAC without informing or involving residents.[26] These construction projects had a negative impact on urban quality, as they involved removing greenery, parks and housing.[27] However,

17 Aya Elwageeh, Reinout Kleinhans and Maarten van Ham, 'Exploring local activism in the neighborhoods of Cairo', *Journal of Urban Affairs* 45.3 (2023), pp. 546–69.

18 Elmashat, Hamada, Radwan, Abdelrahman, Refaat, '(النظام المحلي في مصر)' [Local system in Egypt] (Cairo: Civic Education for Participation program, 2012) [WWW document]. URL http:// www. cefp- edu. com/ en/ Curri culum/ Content/5 (accessed 14 February 2024).

19 Marwa M. Abdel-Latif, 'Paradigms for spatial planning' (PhD dissertation, Department of Planning and Urban Design, Faculty of Engineering, Ain Shams University, Cairo, 2013).

20 *Tadamun*, 'Policy alert: who pays for local administration?' (2013) [WWW document]. URL http://www.tadamun.co/who-pays-for-local-administration/?lang=en#.XjmxpvlKjcs (accessed 14 February 2024).

21 Yahia Shawkat and MennatuAllah Hendawy, 'The built environment budget 16/17—Part I: An overview of spatial justice', The Built Environmental Observatory (2017) [WWW document]. URL http://marsadomran.info/en/policy_analysis/2017/05/800/ (accessed 14 February 2024).

22 Elmashat *et al*., 'Local system in Egypt'.

23 Sims, *Understanding Cairo*; *Tadamun*, 'Policy alert: who pays for local administration?'

24 *Tadamun*, 'Local popular councils (LPC)' (2016) [WWW document]. URL http://www.tadamun.co/?post_type=gov-entity&p=830&lang=en&lang=en#.WwlSYUiFNPY (accessed 14 February 2024).

25 Alaa Braneya and Hala Fouda, 'ماذا ننتظر من قانون الإدارة المحلية الجديد' [What do we expect from the new local administration law?]', Almarsad Almasry by Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies, 28 December 2019 [WWW document]. URL https://marsad.ecsstudies.com/16069/ (accessed 14 February 2024).

26 Ayat Alhabbal, 'بدء أعمال إزالة عمارات الماظة دون قرار معلن.. والسكان: نرفض والتعويضات غير مناسبة' [The removal of Almaza Buildings starts without a declared decision … and residents say we refuse and compensation is inappropriate], *Almasry Alyoum*, 27 October 2021 [WWW document]. URL https:// www. almas ryaly oum. com/ news/ detai ls/ 2448469 (accessed 14 February 2024).

27 Dalia Aly and Branka Dimitrijevic, 'Public green space quantity and distribution in Cairo, Egypt', *Journal of Engineering and Applied Science* 69.1 (2022), p. 15; Mohamed Elkhateeb, 'The bridges are coming! How local planners continue to cut through the fabric of Cairo by building mega highways and flyovers through its neighborhoods', *The SUbMonitor*, 25 May 2020 [WWW document]. URL https://thesubmonitor.com/post/61908 5882534887425/the-bridges-are-coming-how-local-planners (accessed 14 February 2024).

within Cairo's politically challenging context, residents faced constraints to opposing these projects because of the central government's repressive practices,[28] including a protest law[29] that restricts citizens' right to protest through unrealistic procedures for organizing protests and excessive and unclear sanctions regarding punishment of violators.[30] The Press and Information Regulation Law further restricts citizens and empowers authorities to censor news media and block online content.[31] The law therefore limits freedom of speech, especially on social media, as citizens may be accused of spreading fake news when criticizing government decisions.[32] Lack of channels for resident engagement in local governance and restrictions on public discourse limit residents' ability to express their opinions and prevent many public activities that would enable local activism.

Previous research has shown that active resident groups in Cairo focus on improving, maintaining and beautifying neighborhood public areas. A number of researchers have explored the tactics of some of these active resident groups, highlighted their attempts at social innovation, captured some of their characteristics and introduced their activities as parallel urban practices in planning and governance.[33] Only a few studies have investigated the views of active resident groups to understand their practices relating to and attitudes towards neighborhood management.[34] These studies focused on the challenges local activists faced within specific neighborhoods or individual resident groups. However, no studies have combined the perspectives of officials and active residents, and there is a lack of research on the various resident groups' roles in Cairo's neighborhood governance. Consequently, current understanding of local activism in Cairo lacks a comprehensive view of its limitations and contributions to local governance in the districts.

A theoretical framework for the roles of active resident groups

In the past three decades, the concept of governance has evolved into a complex multidimensional process that involves multiple actors steering and realizing public policies and services at different spatial scales.[35] The term 'governance' incorporates different types of governing, with varying degrees of citizen involvement in managing

28 Mona Harb, 'Report of the regional consultation workshop on urban rights activism in the Arab region', 2019 [WWW document]. URL https://www.activearabvoices.org/uploads/8/0/8/4/80849840/urban_citizens_-_v.1.5_-_digital.pdf (accessed 14 February 2024).

29 Mohsen Selem, 'ننشر نص قانون التظاهر بالجريدة الرسمية' [The demonstration law in *The Official Gazette*], Alwafd Electronic Gate, 24 November 2013 [WWW document]. URL https://alwafd.news/اخبار-عاجلة/578584-ننشر-نص-قانون-التظاهر-بعد-التصديق-عليه (accessed 14 February 2024).

30 Mohamed Abdelaal, 'Egypt's public protest law 2013: a boost to freedom or a further restriction?' *US-China Law Review* 11, 7 June 2014 [WWW document]. URL https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2440939 (accessed 14 February 2024).

31 Philipp M. Lutscher and Neil Ketchley, 'Online repression and tactical evasion: evidence from the 2020 Day of Anger protests in Egypt', *Democratization* 30.2 (2023), pp. 325–45.

32 See Nancy Demerdash, 'Archival critique and activism: memory, preservation, and digital visual cultures in post-revolutionary Egyptian heterotopias', *Journal of the African Literature Association* 15.3 (2021), pp. 446–66.

33 Kareem Ibrahim and Diane Singerman, 'Urban Egypt: on the road from revolution to the state? Governance, the built environment, and social justice', *Égypte/Monde Arabe* 11 (April 2014), pp. 101–20; Yahia Shawkat, Omnia Khalil and Ahmed Zaazaa, 'Parallel urban practice in Egypt' (Cairo: UN-HABITAT, 2015); Ahmed S. Abd Elrahman, 'Tactical urbanism: "A pop-up local change for Cairo's built environment"', *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences* 216 (April 2016), pp. 224–35; Mohamed El-Azzazy and Ahmed Zaazaa, 'Urban Trojan: urban social innovations in Egypt between the hands of researchers, the community and public authorities', *PlaNext—Next Generation Planning* 5 (January 2017), pp. 61–77; Elwageeh, *et al*., 'Exploring local activism in the neighborhoods of Cairo'.

34 See Asya El-Meehy, 'Egypt's popular committees: from moments of madness to NGO dilemmas', *Middle East Report*, 9 November 2012 [WWW document]. URL https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/35482921/el-meehy265_1.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1537192918&Signature=SWf5rN3A7IG0Yy0zN8awNsIz3CI%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B filename%3DEgypts_Popular_Committees_From_Mom (accessed 14 February 2024); Khaled Galal Ahmed, 'Instinctive participation: community-initiated mechanisms for managing and maintaining urban poor settlements in Cairo, Egypt', *Urban Research and Practice* 12.4 (2019), pp. 341–71.

35 Peter Somerville, 'Multiscalarity and neighborhood governance', *Public Policy and Administration* 26.1 (2011), pp. 81–105; Rikke Arnouts, Mariëlle van der Zouwen and Bas Arts, 'Analysing governance modes and shifts—governance arrangements in Dutch nature policy', *Forest Policy and Economics* 16 (March 2012), pp. 43–50.

public affairs.[36] Active citizens attempt to engage in different governance activities by switching strategies to achieve their goals in the various governance modes, and thus their roles in local governance vary. In the next subsection, we develop a theoretical framework based on existing literature to explore the roles of active citizen groups in various governing activities.

– The roles of active resident groups described in existing literature

Many scholars have examined the various roles of residents in shaping their urban environment. The well-known 'ladder of participation'[37] examined the various levels of citizen engagement in governance and thus their possible influence on governing activities. It classified citizen engagement based on their level of power and control over decision-making processes. This ladder and its revised versions[38] depict the hierarchy of participation and describe the roles of active citizens based only on their ability to control outcomes, without much consideration for the dynamics of processes and actors that may affect the outcome.

Besides classifying citizens' level of power and control, scholars have analyzed the practices of active residents in an attempt to understand their possible effects on governance processes.[39] Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa highlighted four main approaches to citizen participation: (1) the user approach, (2) the self-provisioning approach, (3) social and advocacy movements and (4) the accountability approach.[40] Other studies have analyzed the focus of active residents and their relationship with local government entities.[41] Based on these studies and the aforementioned four main approaches to citizen participation,[42] we deduced the four roles of active residents, their distinct focus, their nature of interaction with authorities, and their power dynamics as (1) user, (2) self-provider, (3) advocate and (4) maker.

The 'user' role focuses on residents' involvement in neighborhood governance to enhance the efficiency of local services and facilitate urban improvements. In this role, citizens interact with authorities on a consultation basis, advising decision makers on service performance and urban improvement plans.[43] The role of residents thus shifts from mere beneficiaries to users whose feedback affects decision making.[44] However, there is a risk of power imbalance between active residents and authorities in this role,[45] as the consultative nature of the interaction limits residents' influence to merely enhancing decision makers' plans.

36 Thomas Mattijssen, Arjen Buijs, Birgit Elands and Bas Arts, 'The "green" and "self" in green self-governance—a study of 264 green space initiatives by citizens', *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 2.1 (2018), pp. 96–113.
37 Sherry R. Arnstein, 'A ladder of citizen participation', *Journal of the American Planning Association* 35.4 (1969), pp. 216–24.
38 See, for example, Danny Burns, Robin Hambleton and Paul Hoggett, *The politics of decentralisation* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1994); Peris S. Jones, 'Urban regeneration's poisoned chalice: is there an impasse in (community) participation-based policy?', *Urban Studies* 40.3 (2003), pp. 581–601.
39 See, for example, John Ackerman, 'Co-governance for accountability: beyond "exit" and "voice"', *World Development* 32.3 (2004), pp. 447–63; Arnouts *et al*., 'Analysing governance modes and shifts'; Thomas J.M. Mattijssen, Arjen A.E. Buijs, Birgit H.M. Elands, Bas J.M. Arts, Rosalie I. van Dam and Josine L.M. Donders, 'The transformative potential of active citizenship: understanding changes in local governance practices', *Sustainability* 11.20 (2019), p. 5781.
40 Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa, 'From users and choosers to makers and shapers: repositioning participation in social policy', *IDS Bulletin* 31.4 (2000), pp. 50–62.
41 See David W. Walker, 'Citizen-driven reform of local-level basic services: community-based performance monitoring', *Development in Practice* 19.8 (2009), pp. 1035–51; Tony Bovaird and Elke Loeffler, 'From engagement to co-production: the contribution of users and communities to outcomes and public value', *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 23.4 (2012), pp. 1119–38; A.B. Teernstra and Fenne M. Pinkster, 'Participation in neighborhood regeneration: achievements of residents in a Dutch disadvantaged neighborhood', *Urban Research and Practice* 9.1 (2016), pp. 56–79; Robert J. Chaskin and David Micah Greenberg, 'Between public and private action', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 44.2 (2015), pp. 248–67; Rhys Andrews and David Turner, 'Modelling the impact of community engagement on local democracy', *Local Economy* 21.4 (2006), pp. 378–90.
42 Cornwall and Gaventa, 'From users and choosers to makers and shapers'.
43 Walker, 'Citizen-driven reform of local-level basic services'.
44 Cornwall and Gaventa, 'From users and choosers to makers and shapers'.
45 Andrews and Turner, 'Modelling the impact of community engagement on local democracy'.

The 'self-provider' role focuses on bridging the gap between residents' actual needs and the services and urban improvements provided by the state.[46] While self-provider residents may coordinate with the state to comply with laws and regulations,[47] they depend on their own resources for their independence from state interference. In some cases, residents provide particular services as an alternative option to state-provided services. In other cases, residents provide collective services to meet a need that the state has neglected entirely.[48] The independent nature of interactions with local authorities allows active residents a certain amount of control over improving neighborhoods in their own way.

The 'advocate' role focuses on holding the state accountable for providing social and civil rights, including the right to local services and urban improvements and the right of citizens to engage in neighborhoods' improvement.[49] Advocate residents achieve their goals by pressuring local government actors to be accountable and answerable. Their practices range from lobbying to public media campaigns, lawsuits and protests. These practices may lead to confrontational interactions with local authorities, which may jeopardize advocates' ability to obtain support from[50] and establish cooperation with authorities.[51]

Finally, the 'maker' role focuses on active residents' contributions to creating local policies and actions for urban improvement in their neighborhoods. It is a collaboration-based, co-productive role that involves active residents directly participating in decision making through deliberation.[52] In this role, residents pool their resources with those provided by the authorities, giving both actors a certain amount of control and influence over the governance activity. The 'maker' role is likely to be practiced through formal agreements and in institutionalized spaces to allow for citizens' participation in governance.[53]

Each of these four roles offers a distinct focus and specific interaction patterns with authorities and power dynamics to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of active residents' contributions to urban improvement. It is important to point out that these roles are not mutually exclusive: active residents can simultaneously take on multiple roles in governance activities. In the subsection that follows, we turn to these governance activities and how the four roles manifest within them.

– The representation of active residents' roles in neighborhood governance

Ideally, effective involvement of active residents in neighborhood governance embraces 'both strategic and service planning and the detail of service delivery at neighborhood level'.[54] In practice, however, the governance activities that active residents can participate in may be limited. Previous studies broke down neighborhood governance into a wide range of activities, including planning urban improvements, design and delivery of services, financing and budget allocation, policymaking, regulation

46 Cornwall and Gaventa, 'From users and choosers to makers and shapers'.
47 Tony Bovaird, 'Beyond engagement and participation: user and community coproduction of public services', *Public Administration Review* 67.5 (2007), pp. 846–60.
48 See, for example Victor Pestoff, Stephen P. Osborne and Taco Brandsen, 'Patterns of co-production in public services', *Public Management Review* 8.4 (2006), pp. 591–95; Diana Mitlin, 'With and beyond the state—co-production as a route to political influence, power and transformation for grassroots organizations', *Environment and Urbanization* 20.2 (2008), pp. 339–60.
49 Tessa Brannan, Peter John and Gerry Stoker, 'Active citizenship and effective public services and programmes: how can we know what really works?', *Urban Studies* 43.5/6 (2006), pp. 993–1008.
50 Mattijssen *et al*., 'The "green" and "self" in green self-governance'.
51 Chaskin and Greenberg, 'Between public and private action'.
52 *Ibid*.
53 See, for example, Ackerman, 'Co-governance for accountability'.
54 Iain Docherty, Robina Goodlad and Ronan Paddison, 'Civic culture, community and citizen participation in contrasting neighborhoods', *Urban Studies* 38.12 (2001), pp. 2225–50.

setting, operation and management, and monitoring and evaluation.[55] In these studies, scholars used three main dimensions to encompass governance activities: formulation, implementation and management.

The 'formulation' dimension consists of developing and deciding on local policies, urban improvement plans and services in the neighborhood.[56] In this dimension, Cairo's residents may engage in the district's annual development plan, the city's urban improvement plans, local taxes or fee proposals, and amendments to building regulations. The 'implementation' dimension concerns the production and implementation of proposed approved plans and policies.[57] Cairo's residents may therefore engage in activities such as redesigning local streets and parks, funding urban improvements or using their human resources to implement these improvements. Finally, the 'management' dimension includes operating, monitoring and maintaining the implemented services and urban improvements.[58] In this dimension, Cairo's residents may engage in activities such as requesting repairs, reporting violations on buildings and public spaces and upgrading local streets and gardens.

Having deduced the four main roles of active residents and the three dimensions of neighborhood governance, we extracted information on the governance activities found in the literature on the user, self-provider, advocate and maker roles. We used this information to determine the governance dimension in which these activities were located and structured them in a theoretical framework, as shown in Table 1. However, active resident groups are dynamic, and a single group may assume various roles within a local governance dimension or across dimensions. Therefore, it is important not to apply this framework as a rigid template into which activities must conform precisely to one of the four roles. Instead, it is essential to remain open to discovering residents' activities that may shape new roles.

Methods, data collection and limitations

We used semi-structured interviews to enable local officials and active residents to express their perspectives on the role of active residents in neighborhood governance in Cairo. As neither official nor public records existed about active resident groups in the city, we used the groups we had identified in our study of 2020 to find active residents; in this study we identified 18 active resident groups in formal areas from 13 districts through desktop research on local newspapers and on Facebook.[59] According to the General Organization of Physical Planning in Egypt, these formal areas have no unplanned or unsafe areas.[60] The active groups in these areas are therefore concerned

55 See Burns *et al*., *The politics of decentralisation*; Taco Brandsen and Victor Pestoff, 'Co-production, the third sector and the delivery of public services', *Public Management Review* 8.4 (2006), pp. 493–501; Brannan *et al*., 'Active citizenship and effective public services and programmes'; Hilary Silver, Alan Scott and Yuri Kazepov, 'Participation in urban contention and deliberation', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 34.3 (2010), pp. 453–77; Bovaird and Loeffler, 'From engagement to co-production'; Robert Mark Silverman and Kelly L. Patterson, 'Community- and neighborhood-based organisations in the United States', in Susan J. Smith (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of Housing and Home*, Volume 1 (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2012), pp. 186–93.

56 Silver *et al*., 'Participation in urban contention and deliberation'; Bovaird and Loeffler, 'From engagement to co-production'.

57 Brandsen and Pestoff, 'Co-production, the third sector and the delivery of public services'.

58 See, for example, Brandsen and Pestoff, 'Co-production, the third sector and the delivery of public services'; Samuel Paul and Gopkumar K. Thampi, 'Citizen report cards score in India', *Capacity.Org* 31 (August 2007) [WWW document]. URL http://www.anti-corruption.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Capacity-Issue-31-August-2007-Accountability.pdf#page=10 (accessed 14 February 2024); Inspections and Public Service, 'Inspections and public service: a division of the Department of Neighborhoods' (2021) [WWW document]. URL https://web.archive.org/web/20230925235424/https://www.houstontx.gov/ips/ (accessed 14 February 2024).

59 Elwageeh *et al*., 'Exploring local activism in the neighborhoods of Cairo'.

60 Based on the 'Unplanned areas in the main urban mass' map in GOPP ('Greater Cairo urban development strategy').

TABLE 1 Different roles of active resident groups and their representation in the neighborhood governance process

Dimensions of Neighborhood Governance	Roles of Active Resident Groups			
	User	**Self-provider**	**Advocate**	**Maker**
Formulation	• Comment on and review proposed plans and policies and/or • Propose ideas for urban improvements	• Decide on policies, plans and budgets	• Pressure authorities to adopt specific policies and plans and/or • Protest against policies and plans	• Negotiate and deliberate on budget, policies and plans
Implementation	• Report low-quality implementation of urban improvements and services	• Execute and/or fund services or urban improvements	• Oppose the designs and/or execution of urban improvements and services	• Jointly supervise, implement and fund urban improvements and services
Management	• Report urban deterioration and service degradation	• Operate and maintain services and public spaces	• Protest against poor operation and maintenance of local services and public spaces	• Jointly monitor, operate and maintain local services and urban improvements

SOURCE: Authors' research

about urban deterioration in their neighborhoods and are attempting to improve them. We distinguished between two types of groups: first, organized active groups in the form of unions, associations and cooperatives and, secondly, unorganized groups that exist only on social media. Organized groups have a regulated organizational structure and formal channels to raise resources, as shown in Table 2.

The unorganized groups we identified have names that include the qualifier 'coalition' or 'initiative'. When these groups gather many online followers, the founders are encouraged to take action. Most unorganized groups have one or two fixed founder members who act as administrators of the social media platform. These groups rarely have financial resources, as they do not follow formal regulations that allow them to collect membership fees or donations from people.

In total, 21 active resident groups were identified. We approached the administrators of these active groups via their social media platforms. Groups from neighborhoods in Al-Zaytūn, Ḥilwān, May 15 and ʿīn Shams districts did not respond. The administrators of a group in Al-Waylī district mentioned that they were not interested in discussing their activities owing to the many challenges they faced from local authorities. We targeted two active members (if available) from each group. We interviewed 19 active members from 15 active resident groups in nine districts. These were all members of active groups that had been founded after 2011, except for Associations 1 and 2 and Cooperative 1 (see Appendix).

The nine districts are characterized by their different densities, populations and urban characteristics (see Figure 2). All were constructed and had experienced significant urban growth in the 1800s and 1900s. Neighborhoods in Al-Azbakiya, Gharb, Al-Maʿādī, Miṣr Al-Gadīda and Al-Nuzha, with their unique architectural and urban character and rich history, are classified as heritage areas by the National Organization for Urban Harmony (NOUH).[61] The active groups from these neighborhoods often use this categorization to advocate against urban deterioration. The districts range from city-center districts, such as Al-Azbakiya, to districts with municipal-scale importance, such as East Nasr City (ENC). Figure 2 also shows significant variation in land use, type of residential buildings and urban patterns among the nine districts and the neighborhoods of the same district. The districts are therefore not internally homogenous. Based on information about residents' work and occupation status, we deduced that the socio-economic levels of residents in these districts range from middle- to high-income, except Ḥadāʾik Al-Qubba and Al-Muqaṭṭam, whose residents had mixed socio-economic backgrounds.[62]

The highly educated professionals we interviewed—mainly middle-aged adults and some older persons—reflected the districts' socio-economic status. Male founders and administrators dominated in most groups, except in Gharb, ENC and Al-Maʿādī, where female administrators led the groups. However, online discussions in these groups had active participation from individuals of both genders.

We focused on contacting local officials from the same districts as the active groups during data collection, so as to include active members and local officials who interacted with each other. We interviewed the heads of all districts except Al-Nuzha district; here we interviewed a delegate who had been chosen by the head of the district to be interviewed on their behalf, namely the head of the public relations unit.

The questions we asked active members related to the focus of their groups, their tactics to improve their neighborhoods, their interactions and relationships with local authorities and the challenges they faced. The questions we raised with officials were

61 NOUH seeks to enhance the visual appeal of buildings, urban spaces and monuments nationwide by emphasizing their aesthetic value. It also identifies buildings and areas with heritage value based on their cultural significance.

62 Abdelbasser A. Mohamed and David Stanek, 'Income inequality, socio-economic status, and residential segregation in greater Cairo: 1986–2006', in Maarten van Ham, Tiit Tammaru, Rūta Ubarevičienė and Heleen Janssen (eds.), *Urban socio-economic segregation and income inequality: a global perspective* (Cham: Springer, 2021), pp. 49–69.

TABLE 2 Types of organized active resident groups in Cairo

	Unions	Associations	Cooperatives
Organizational Structure	• Elected board of directors • Occupants of apartments are members	• Board of directors • Subscribing residents are members • Limited possibility of subscribers from outside the neighborhood	• Elected board of directors • Owners of apartments are members
Resources	• Subscriptions from apartments • Donations	• Membership fees • Donations • Grants	• Bank revenues from maintenance deposits • Revenues from renting assets

SOURCE: Authors' research

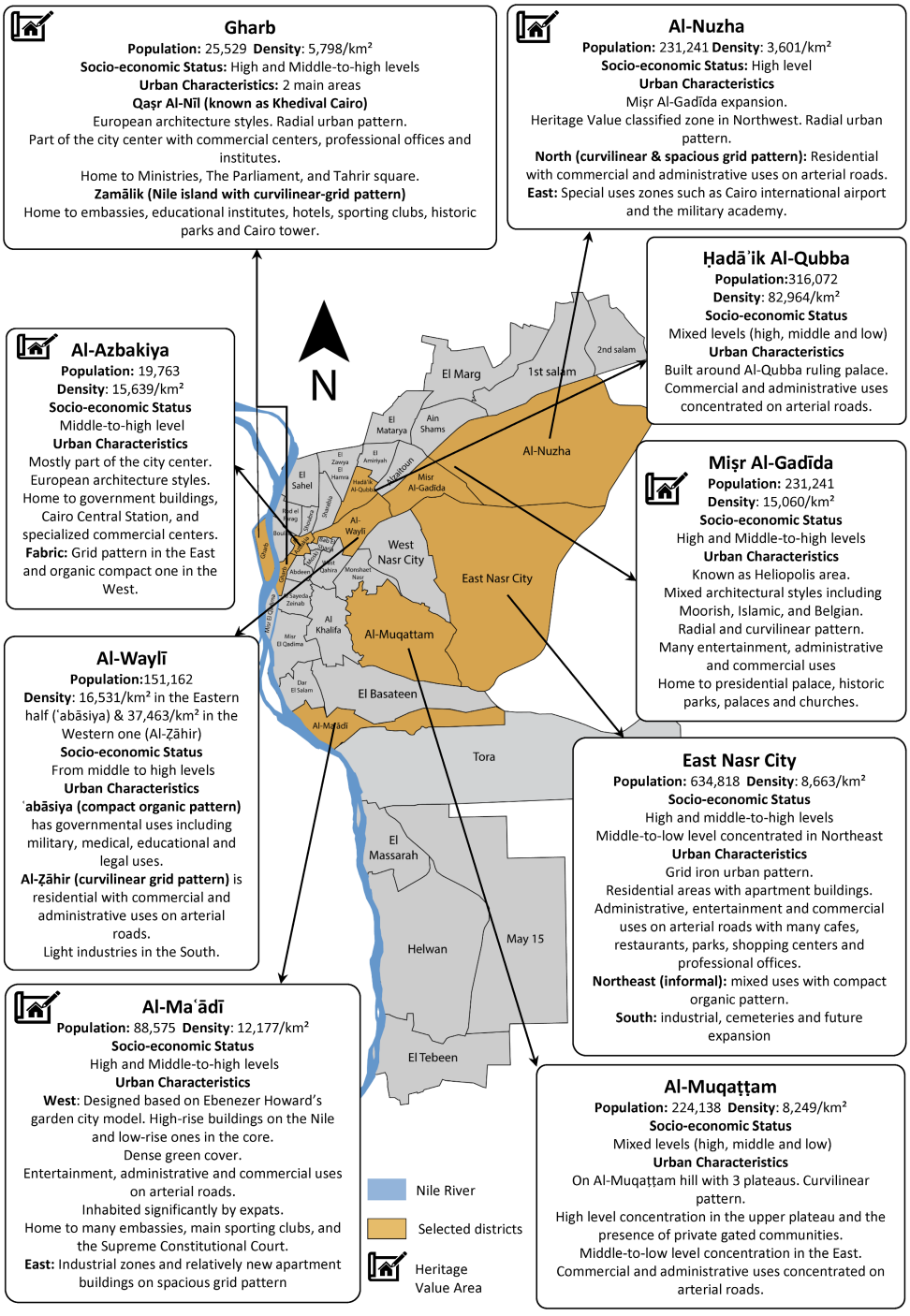

FIGURE 2 Map and overview of the nine districts in this study (map and diagram produced by the authors based on a map from cairo.gov.eg; see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cairo300.jpg; colors, updated boundaries and translation: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/ legalcode, accessed 1 July 2021).

aimed at investigating the forms of participation of active resident groups in improving the neighborhood, officials' reactions to the activities of these groups, their channels of communication with the active groups and the challenges of interacting with active groups.

Interviews took place in 2019 and 2020. We contacted local officials after acquiring security permits and endorsement letters from Ain Shams University in Cairo and the Cairo Governorate's office. Interviews with local officials lasted around 45 to 60 minutes, whereas interviews with active members lasted around 45 to 90 minutes. We anonymized respondents from the active groups and allocated a reference code to each person linked to their type of organization. Similarly, we identify officials and active members by their codes as either Official (number) and Member (number) (see Appendix). Finally, to ensure active members' anonymity and safety, we associated active groups with districts instead of neighborhoods to make it more difficult to identify specific neighborhoods or members. However, this came at the cost of describing the exact neighborhoods and active members. Nonetheless, such precautions are vital for data collection and presentation in politically sensitive contexts.[63]

– Data processing

Interviews were conducted in Arabic and audio-recorded, except for interviews with Officials 6 and 7 and Members 10, 17 and 19, who refused permission to be recorded. We transcribed the recorded interviews, and during the interviews we were unable to record, we took notes and documented as much information as possible immediately afterwards. Data processing included deductive coding based on the theoretical framework in Table 1 and exploratory open coding, followed by cross-case synthesis and comparison analyses.

From each interview, we extracted excerpts about governance activities that included the presence of active resident groups. Each governance activity was then coded to determine the governance dimension in which this activity was performed. Afterward, we ran a second coding round to determine the role (user, advocate, self-provider and maker) each activity represented. In addition, we adopted an open coding technique to allow for unanticipated or absent governance activities.

In our cross-case synthesis and comparison analyses of the interviews of active members, we first grouped excerpts that described each role. We then compared these to help us better understand the interactions between local actors in this role from the perspective of the active residents. Next, we conducted the same analysis on the excerpts from our interviews with officials to allow us to better understand the interactions between local actors from the perspective of the officials. Finally, we compared the roles of active residents identified in the officials' excerpts with those identified in the active members' excerpts to examine the similarities and differences in perspective of the two groups of respondents.

– Limitations

The results of our study should be considered within its cross-sectional nature and within the context of research limitations related to Egypt's politically challenging situation. First, although informal and less visible patterns of local activism seem to be spreading in Cairo's neighborhoods, lack of official or public records of active resident groups limited our research, so we had to rely on the active groups we could find on social media and whose members agreed to be interviewed. We were only able to interview members from 15 of the 21 active groups we identified. However, as we found

63 See Eva Bellin, Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Yoshiko Herrera and Diane Singerman (eds.), 'Research transparency in authoritarian and repressive contexts', final report of QTD Working Group IV.1 on: authoritarian/ repressive political regimes (2018) [WWW document]. URL https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3333496 (accessed 14 February 2024).

common descriptions of specific activities in specific dimensions of local governance among our respondents, we believe our results uncovered the most common roles and most frequent practices of local activism in Cairo's formal neighborhoods. Owing to its cross-sectional nature, our study does not cover longitudinal variation or change in the roles of the active groups studied.

Results

Table 3 presents a summary of the overview of respondents' roles. There are several specific findings. First, none of our respondents mentioned the 'maker' role during their interviews, in contrast to the three other roles. Secondly, many respondents stated that they identified no governance roles for active resident groups, especially in the formulation dimension of governance. Thirdly, respondents described a practice that combined various user, advocate and maker characteristics and could be classified as a distinct role, which we labeled the 'fixer' role. We discuss this empirically based extension of the original framework (see Table 1) in more detail later in this article.

When focusing on the perceptions of the interviewed officials, we found a strong consensus within each dimension of neighborhood governance. Almost all officials agreed on 'no role' for active residents in the formulation dimension, the 'self-provider' role in the implementation and management dimensions and the 'fixer' role in the management dimension. This consensus is interesting, especially as officials highlighted the absence of government rules for dealing with active residents and involving civil society in local governance. This consensus suggests the presence of a general perspective on citizen involvement at the local government level, even if it is implicit.

Active members generally described themselves as taking on more roles than the officials acknowledged. The activities of most active groups were found to be limited to two roles across governance dimensions, except for three active groups from Al-Maʿādī, Miṣr Al-Gadīda and ENC districts, which played three roles. Likewise, most groups' activities represented only one role within each dimension, except for a few groups that had diversified their activities and reported taking on two roles. Next, we focus on each role and explain in more detail how local actors perceived each in the context of neighborhood governance in Cairo.

– No role for active residents

When respondents were asked about resident groups' contributions to governance activities, such as drawing up annual plans or prioritizing urban improvements for their districts, many officials and some members stated that these tasks were only performed by 'professional' district officials:

> The residents have nothing to do with the annual plan … District office directors set priorities according to the degree of deterioration. They are engineers who know everything in the district, street by street (Official 1).

> We do not follow the district office's activities or interfere with their plans … As a citizen, I cannot say to an official that I want to do this and that in this street now. These decisions are beyond our competence. Specialized government authorities are responsible for the district, and they draw up the necessary plans—not you nor I (Member 5).

Some officials added that involving residents in the formulation dimension would not be beneficial, as it was impossible to satisfy all residents. Similarly, some members regarded their interference in such governance activities as a lost cause, as politicians and government entities have the power to influence policies and urban improvement plans and designs, unlike civil society:

TABLE 3 Roles of active resident groups in neighborhood governance processes in Cairo, as identified by active members and officials

		Formulation		Implementation		Management	
District	**Active Group Code**	**Active Members**	**District Officials**	**Active Members**	**District Officials**	**Active Members**	**District Officials**
Al-Waylī	UG (3)	No role (NR)	User	No role (NR)	Self-provider (S-P)	Fixer	Fixer
Miṣr Al-Gadīda	Association (1)	User & Advocate	User	S-P & Advocate	S-P	Fixer	S-P & Fixer
Al-Nuzha	UG (1)	NR	NR	NR	S-P	Fixer	S-P & Fixer
	UG (2)	Advocate	NR	Advocate	S-P	Fixer	S-P & Fixer
Ḥadāʾik Al-Qubba	UG (4)	User	NR	NR	S-P	Fixer	S-P & Fixer
Al-Azbakiya	Union (1)	NR	NR	S-P	S-P	S-P & Fixer	S-P & Fixer
Al-Maʿādī	Association (2)	Advocate	NR	S-P & Advocate	S-P	S-P & Fixer	S-P & Fixer
	Union (2)	Advocate	NR	S-P	S-P	S-P	S-P & Fixer
Al-Muqaṭṭam	UG (5)	User	NR	NR	S-P	NR	S-P & Fixer
ENC	UG (8)	NR	NR	User	S-P	Fixer	S-P & Fixer
	UG (6)	NR	NR	S-P	S-P	Fixer	S-P & Fixer
	UG (7)	NR	NR	S-P	S-P	S-P & Fixer	S-P & Fixer
	Union (3)	NR	NR	S-P	S-P	S-P & Fixer	S-P & Fixer
	Cooperative	Advocate	NR	S-P	S-P	S-P & Fixer	S-P & Fixer
Gharb	Association (3)	NR	NR	S-P	S-P	Fixer	S-P & Fixer

NOTE: The abbreviation UG refers to unorganized group
SOURCE: Authors' research

> I hope one of the residents following our group is a member of Parliament … When these members ask officials for a service specific to a neighborhood, the next day, their requests are addressed (Member 2).

Few members stated that they identified no role for active residents in the implementation and management dimensions. Besides pointing out the aforementioned power imbalance, they regarded any involvement in implementing urban improvements alone or in collaboration with the local authorities as non-productive, as the implementation of urban improvements was strongly linked to managing these improvements later. Therefore, they did not see a possible role for active residents in implementation if the active group could not guarantee subsequent upkeep and management.

> We want to cooperate with the district office in planting trees on the sidewalk … But if we were to put money and effort into the neighborhood, there must be something in return. Someone should look after these trees. We do not want to find them damaged after a few months. Will there be anyone who looks after them, or will this work be for nothing? (Member 11).

– The 'user' role of active residents

The 'user' role was described in the formulation dimension by a few officials and members and in the implementation dimension by one active member only. Members described this role as an 'outlet, channel and platform' for residents to present their suggestions for urban improvement. In the formulation dimension, active groups posted suggestions on their social media platforms or proposed them to the district office. However, active residents know that they cannot influence officials' adoption of these suggestions:

> We [the groups' admins and members] only post ideas on the page and hope an official will see them. However, we don't address a particular official … We suggested that the head of the district should be elected. Or that the fixed amount that residents pay for garbage collection should not go to the ministry but to district offices and be used for local street cleanups … Unfortunately, local officials cannot do anything about these suggestions. These are state policy issues that need to be changed at higher levels. We hope someone from our followers can reach out to someone 'up there' and adopt these ideas (Member 4).

The officials mentioned that the ideas active resident groups posted on social media platforms were sometimes beneficial. They described them as a 'reference, indicator and guide' to the needs of residents throughout the year. District employees may refer to these ideas when drawing up their annual plans, although the active groups were neither present at the meetings nor did officials ask them to share their ideas. Moreover, resident groups were not informed of plans that officials claimed to have been inspired by them, and when the authorities, for example, consulted Association 1 regarding the renovation of some buildings and squares, members' ideas and comments were ignored, as the officials disagreed with these.

Only one member from UG 8 described a 'user' role in the implementation dimension, which involved reporting corruption within the district office and the failure of district office employees to apply laws and procedures:

> A contractor used poor materials to resurface a road. There was no technical supervision from the district office. I took a technical report prepared by a resident and submitted it to the public prosecution office … Exposing these

> violations takes time, as the department [involved] may avoid the accusation once or twice. Hopefully, the authorities will investigate these violations seriously when we report the same issue repeatedly (Member 18).

– The 'advocate' role of active residents

Some members stated that the 'advocate' role existed in the formulation and implementation dimensions, when active groups practiced what they described as the right to 'defend, protect and fight for' their districts against the government's plans for and implementation of urban improvements. As stated earlier, only the government can formulate urban improvement plans for districts, and often these plans are contrary to the residents' needs and aspirations for their neighborhoods or even reduce existing urban quality. In reaction, some active groups take on an 'advocate' role to have these plans altered or halted through social media campaigns and petitions, and by soliciting members of Parliament and high-profile officials to influence government decisions. Only Association 2 resorted to litigation in a few incidents, and all groups avoided organizing protests or public gatherings.

Active members who described this role lived in districts with heritage-value classification, such as Miṣr Al-Gadīda, Al-Maʿādī and Al-Nuzha. This classification provides important motivation to these groups, and they often use it to strengthen their opposition to urban transformations that threaten the heritage value of their district:

> Last year, the district office issued 40 demolition permits for villas in one month, so we [the association members] were terrified of [the government] constructing high-rise buildings instead of these villas. Such construction would transform the heritage value and urban fabric, which was unacceptable. Another group and ours organized a meeting with the district official for the residents, but it became frantic, and verbal accusations were made. Most of the active groups became discouraged afterwards (Member 9).

Despite describing this advocate role in the Cairo context, active members expressed difficulty practicing it or having a tangible effect on the neighborhood, stating that the higher the level of the government entity that developed an urban improvement plan, the more difficult it was to oppose it. For instance, the two neighboring districts of Miṣr Al-Gadīda and Al-Nuzha were part of the government's plan to connect the main agglomeration with the NAC. Despite the opposition of Association 1 to this plan, it was implemented rapidly without any modifications:

> We [the association members] fought on social media and television and talked to governorate officials. Even the NOUH, responsible for protecting our neighborhood, knew nothing about these projects. No entities knew what was happening … We have limits on escalating actions. People used to organize protests, but now there is no choice. We can only appeal to a member of Parliament, but who can stand in front of X?[64] … Even litigation is useless, because we will make a lawsuit about what? The damage was already done (Member 8).

No official referred to active residents taking on an 'advocate' role. When we asked officials about their perception of the active groups who opposed urban improvement projects, they responded that they regarded their actions as damaging. Some officials believed that 'advocate' groups were generally opposed to government plans as they had no knowledge of the governorate's general vision and were unwilling to wait for results.

64 X denotes an entity with sovereign power that has lately become involved in most of the state's urban projects.

Other officials stated that active groups should stop questioning the government's vision for developing their district and appreciate its efforts despite its limited resources. Officials used expressions such as 'acknowledge the efforts of the state', 'focus on advantages' and 'do not doubt the state's achievements' to highlight what they expected from active resident groups.

– The 'self-provider' role of active residents

The 'self-provider' role dominated officials' and many members' perceptions of the role of active residents in the implementation and management dimensions. There are two types of self-provided urban improvements in Cairo. The most dominant are intermittent campaigns for paving, tiling, repainting facades and walls, planting trees and upgrading parks. When we asked respondents about their motivation for performing these activities, they explained that their groups initiated these campaigns after realizing the limited resources of district offices to improve and maintain their district. It may take years before necessary urban improvements are included in the district's annual plan:

> Whenever we [the groups' admins] approach the district office with a request, they apologize that they do not have enough resources and workers … So we asked whether, as the government would not help us and their resources were limited, we could rely on ourselves to improve the area (Member 13).

The second type of self-provided urban improvement is offering an extra service to address a negative phenomenon, such as private security services to reduce break-ins and theft and prevent informal street vendors and tuk-tuks from entering specific neighborhoods. This type of improvement involved active groups implementing urban improvements and extending their activities to operate and maintain them. Members who mentioned this role regarded it as the only way to provide services and urban improvements independently to ensure the stability they required for the life they desired:

> Our properties were being burgled, and our families were at risk of kidnapping. No one would have done it for us if we [residents] had not acted [regarding the security issue] … There are priority needs. A reliable security service is the number one priority (Member 15).

According to respondents, the 'self-provider' role requires financial and human resources and a legal status that allows regular fundraising. If the active residents can meet these requirements, they can acquire permits from the district office for their planned urban improvement activity. State requirements provide an explanation as to why most members describing this role were part of organized active groups. Nevertheless, it is difficult to raise resources and acquire legal status, and active members highlighted these aspects as their main challenges:

> The laws allow for establishing unions … When many residents wanted us to start a union, it became difficult to get a delegation from 25% of the residents … Many people did not want to give us a copy of their ID to prove their willingness to support us. Few active groups can fulfill the conditions to become unions (Member 15).

Self-provided improvements often risk being discontinued and deteriorating after a short period because the active groups are unable to maintain them. This risk of discontinuation is particularly prominent if unorganized groups (such as UG 7) play this role:

> We [group members] organized campaigns to clean the streets, paint substations and fences and install road signs … But we cannot always be the ones who bring workers and tools, so we can only do this occasionally (Member 13).

The officials described the active groups who performed this role as 'partners and supporters' of the government. District offices occasionally support these self-provision activities by making workers and vehicles from their offices available. They confirm that this role lightens the burdens of the district offices to some extent and provides solutions outside the realm of bureaucratic procedures and weak resources. Furthermore, some officials favored this role to the extent that they blamed residents for not taking on this role more often when expressing their opinions on active groups' involvement in the urban improvement of districts:

> When the office improves an area, the residents react: You fixed this, but you neglected that! This is useless; we do the bigger part, and you, as citizens, work together and complete the rest (Official 1).

The officials emphasized the importance of extending this role to cover the maintenance and operation of implemented urban improvements. To them, this extension is a sustainable form of active resident participation, in contrast to some active groups' irregular campaigns.

– The 'fixer' role of active residents

All officials and most active members described a particular role for active resident groups in (only) the management dimension that did not align well with the predefined four roles (see Table 1). We named this the 'fixer' role, as it is focused on fixing-service and urban-deterioration related problems directly, quickly and at the lowest level of local government. Officials described the groups in this role as 'detectors, reporters and monitors' of problems in their district. In their role as 'fixers', residents detect problems in the neighborhood and report them to the district office to take the necessary action. Problems include broken lampposts, garbage piles, sewage overflow, damaged sidewalks, deteriorating parks, and unlicensed tuk-tuks, street vendors and commercial activities. When we asked the active members about the relevance of this role, many stated that this was the primary way in which their groups contributed to improving the neighborhood and serving the residents:

> We [group admins] are the link between the residents and the officials who are responsible for resolving residents' complaints. We report the complaint, request a response and return with an answer to the residents … This is how we try to play a role in improving our neighborhood. We pursue residents' complaints to the end of the road (Member 1).

The 'fixer' role is practiced in two stages. First, residents share information on an urban deterioration problem extensively on the active groups' platforms, and the active group in turn reports these complaints to the district office. At this stage, the members describe themselves as 'links, coordinators and mediators' between the residents and officials to ensure that the relevant departments in the district office are made aware of these complaints:

> We [the union's board] submitted more than 386 reports in four months regarding sewerage and more than 148 reports about street lighting … We are quick, and social media has achieved this. The entire population of the area is on our Facebook page … When a resident sees a problem on his way to work, he

> takes a photo and informs us. I make a phone call and prompt the resolution of the problem (Member 15).

Secondly, the active groups follow up on complaints persistently and, as they describe it, 'insist' on a response from officials. When we asked on what basis they used this tactic, most active members emphasized that they capitalized on their personal connections with officials, local leaders and journalists to push the district office to respond. They also described striving for balance between urging officials to respond and simultaneously avoiding clashes that might damage their relationships with officials:

> The main purpose is to serve the residents. We [group admins] focus on the problem. A problem might be garbage piled up in the street. The goal is to remove it, not to criticize and insult the officials. If the resident aims to solve the problem, we will report it to officials without making a scene … From experience, officials welcome a friendly attitude (Member 5).

Because many groups have adopted the 'fixer' role, both members and officials perceive it in a positive light. Many respondents consider it a constructive form of activism instead of, as some stated, 'just spreading negativity'. Even some officials stated that residents who requested repairs deserved an answer, in contrast to passive residents:

> When a person asks for cleanliness in his area, if the office answers, he will maintain it, but for those who do not ask, I [district officer] will clean, and they will dump their garbage again the next day, so I give priority to the ones who ask for the service (Official 3).

The 'fixer' role entails a relationship of mutual dependence between active residents and officials. Officials encourage 'fixer' groups by providing various communication channels, such as the complaints center in the district office, Facebook pages and private WhatsApp groups with leaders of active groups. Despite this, many members complain about a lack of response from officials at times, or about having to submit the same complaint repeatedly without achieving a permanent resolution despite persistent reporting and follow-up. These increased complaints indicated that active members are dissatisfied with the effectiveness of the 'fixer' role:

> The district office always welcomes us and promises to solve the problem, but nothing happens afterwards … We keep reporting the absence of the district's gardeners. Sometimes, they do not send anyone. Sometimes, when we insist, they send a few gardeners, but they stay for three or four days and then disappear again (Member 13).

When we asked the active members about the feasibility of continuing with this role, they highlighted that, despite their dissatisfaction, it helped them solve urban deterioration problems without clashing with officials. Even temporary repairs and occasional instances of accountability from officials encouraged active groups to continue adopting this role:

> I do not say that we are in heaven, but a fair number of problems were resolved when we [group admins] reported them. Honestly, it is not always effective. But we cannot interfere and will not interfere in how authorities do their job (Member 1).

As district offices usually fail to monitor problems and follow up on repairs, officials also depend on the 'fixer' active groups to perform one of their primary functions in operation and maintenance. Consequently, officials perceive the 'fixer' role as complementary to the district office employees' role, describing these active groups as the 'eyes' of the district office:

> The (district) office has four employees who perform monitoring tasks, but how could they cover the whole district? … The active residents monitor the area with my employees (Official 2).

Many members whose groups took on a 'fixer' role added that they 'rewarded' officials by publishing district office actions on their platforms. Such appreciation encourages officials to welcome the 'fixer' role of active groups, as it improved their public image:

> Now, when we [group admins] go to the official again, he is ready to cooperate more and is happy because he knows that we will share the [district] office's response with the residents and the people will listen to us (Member 3).

The 'fixer' role combines the attributes of the 'user', 'advocate' and 'maker' roles. These residents not only report urban deterioration as 'users', but go further by following up on reports and emphasizing the accountability of local officials. They also advocate for change through media coverage and campaigns, while avoiding confrontations that might strain their relationships with officials. The 'fixer' role involves mutual dependence and joint activities, and resembles the collaborative monitoring and maintenance of the 'maker' role. However, 'fixer' residents do not share power and influence with officials in these joint activities. Although officials depend on 'fixer' residents to report and follow up on problems to compensate for the district offices' shortcomings, 'fixer' groups have no direct or official influence on the offices' actions. We discovered that these combined characteristics were shared among respondents who described this repeated form of involvement on the part active groups. Therefore, we believe that this type of involvement represents a standalone role, namely that of the 'fixer', on the part of active resident groups in the management dimension to cope with Cairo's challenging neighborhood governance arrangements.

Conclusions

The aim of this study is to understand the roles of active residents in the neighborhood governance process of Cairo, and to show how these roles unfold in Cairo's challenging context for citizen involvement in public affairs. We used a theoretical framework to identify active residents' roles and the manifestation of these roles in neighborhood governance processes through interviews with local officials and residents from nine districts. Conceptually, our results indicate the necessity to extend the framework to include a fifth role, that of the 'fixer'. This role does not appear in the literature search on which the framework was based.

Empirically, our analysis reveals (1) the absence of the 'maker' role; (2) the existence of the 'advocate', 'user' and 'self-provider' roles in limited dimensions of governance and (3) the strong emergence of a 'fixer' role in the management dimension. These results suggest that Cairo's challenging context not only partially limits specific roles but also leads to commonalities in existing roles as the active groups attempt to cope within this context. Respondents revealed that active residents mostly play the 'fixer' and 'self-provider' roles in the neighborhood governance process. These two roles are limited to helping local governments perform management and implementation activities and suggest that Cairo's challenging context motivates active residents to develop tactics that shape new roles. In this case, the active groups consistently combined characteristics from different roles and practiced them repeatedly, which we believe constitutes a standalone role, namely that of the 'fixer'. Our findings lead to questions about the trajectory of active resident groups in Cairo's local governance process. While the current roles lead to short-term service improvements, they contain the long-term risk of perpetuating

defective governance arrangements and the resultant urban deterioration by not addressing deeper governance issues.

The 'self-provider' role, as reported by respondents, relies on active residents' access to resources, legal status and capacity to sustain service provision, which limit its scope to small-scale, sporadic urban improvements. Moreover, the 'fixer' role we discovered aligns with the concept of the 'everyday fixer', a problem-solving role aimed at promptly addressing visible issues at the local level. While previous research focused on individual 'everyday fixers', our findings suggest that active groups can embody this role too. According to social exchange theory,[65] the 'fixer' role creates a mutually beneficial situation in contexts where active groups struggle to participate in governance. It allows them to resolve local management issues without confronting authorities, while providing the authorities with an opportunity to enhance their public image by attending to problems that can be resolved through simple or temporary solutions.

At the beginning of the article we pointed out some countries and cities whose political contexts discourage active citizen engagement in governance. For the case of Cairo, we conclude that broader political and security considerations lead to a prioritization of regime stability over citizen involvement. Our results indicate that the roles of active residents in Cairo are mostly restricted to that of 'fixers' or 'self-providers' within neighborhood governance. This type of activism relates to the non-civic activism observed in China,[66] which addresses local issues for individual benefit. Even within such non-civic activism, residents may have political demands. However, active groups in Cairo cannot influence policies, plans or the selection of local officials. Accordingly, much of their local activism is both non-civic and apolitical.

We argue that the choice of active groups in Cairo to avoid overt political activism mirrors the limits set by the Egyptian authorities. Groups are wary of engaging in any local activism that might disrupt regime stability or promote regime change. Therefore, we suggest that the authorities become more accepting of and consider endorsing the 'fixer' and 'self-provider' roles as a controlled form of local activism. These roles address the symptoms of urban issues without challenging the underlying policies and governance structures that contribute to these issues. This assertion aligns with Bayat's research,[67] which suggests that Middle Eastern governments may support local initiatives as long as they do not become oppositional.

In the 1980s, Singerman's study of Cairo revealed that lower-class residents relied on informal networks to improve living conditions by discreetly influencing resource allocation through personal connections with officials and politicians.[68] In 2020, our research revealed that this use of informal networks had expanded to higher-class neighborhoods. While some residents employed formal channels, such as legal entities and government portals, others, because of accessibility and safety concerns, used less visible means, such as unorganized online platforms and personal connections with district employees and influential figures, to enhance their neighborhoods.

Through this study we contribute to existing literature by providing a structured and zoomed-out view of active residents' roles in Cairo. Future research could explore individual experiences and neighborhood-specific influences on local activism. The combined knowledge from our broad cross-sectional approach and from individually focused approaches enhances our understanding of local activism in Cairo and enables us to make general conclusions based on attention to individual variations. Finally, the roles that were revealed in the various governance dimensions serve as a sample map

65 Seyed Hamid Mohammadi, Sharifah Norazizan and Nobaya Ahmad, 'Citizens' attitude towards local government and citizen's participation in local government', *Journal of American Science* 6.11 (2010), pp. 575–83.
66 Chen, 'Civic and noncivic activism under autocracy'.
67 Bayat, *Life as politics*.
68 Diane Singerman, *Avenues of participation: family, politics, and networks in urban quarters of Cairo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

of local activism in Cairo's neighborhoods and offer a starting point for scholars and decision makers seeking to enhance active residents' roles in Cairo. Such enhancements may involve interventions in governance, education and public-awareness policies to strengthen the culture of increased citizen engagement in local activism.

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Appendix

TABLE An overview of respondents (interviewees) and active groups in this study

	Active Resident Groups				
District	**Group Code**	**Aims and Activities**	**No. of Respondents**	**Member Code**	**Official Code**
Al-Nuzha	UG 1*	• Mobilize residents to exchange memories and news, and discuss problems and solutions • Communicate residents' complaints to local authorities and follow up on authorities' response	1	1	--
	UG 2	• Provide information regarding services, businesses and events in neighborhoods • Link residents with officials by communicating residents' complaints or proposals and following up on these • Campaign for provision of safe pedestrian crossings	1	2	
Al-Waylī	UG 3	• Report problems regarding sewerage, road surfaces and garbage collection to local authorities and follow up on repairs	1	3	2
Ḥadāʾik Al-Qubba	UG 4	• Celebrate the valuable heritage of the district • Communicate residents' complaints to local authorities • Share local news	2	4 5	3
Al-Azbakiya	Union 1	• Focus on maintenance, cleanliness and safety of the area by employing private security companies and cleaners • Fund, manage and maintain the softscape (trees and shrubs) and hardscape (benches, street lights, road surfaces and sidewalk paving) in the area	2	6 7	4
Miṣr Al-Gadīda	Association 1	• Preserve and document the architectural value of the neighborhood and promote its urban heritage • Protect green areas • Provide traffic solutions based on public and environmentally friendly modes of transportation • Act as a watchdog to make sure that building and construction bylaws are upheld	1	8	5
Al-Maʿādī	Association 2	• Encourage preservation of trees and nature conservation • Protect the architectural and urban heritage against huge billboards and illegal cafés within residential areas • Advocate against issuing new building permits for high-rise buildings to avoid pressure on the area's infrastructure and traffic problems	1	9	6
	Union 2	• Upgrade deteriorated roads and main squares, including road surfaces, sidewalks, green areas, street lighting and cleaning • Advocate against issuing new building permits for high-rise buildings to avoid pressure on the area's infrastructure and traffic problems	1	10	
Al-Muqaṭṭam	UG 5	• Discuss the district's problems and propose solutions to officials who are members of the group	1	11	7

(continues)

TABLE (Continued)

	Active Resident Groups				
District	**Group Code**	**Aims and Activities**	**No. of Respondents**	**Member Code**	**Official Code**
East Nasr City (ENC)	UG 6	• Gather and discuss problems faced by residents • Communicate residents' complaints to representatives of Parliament, the media and newspapers • Organize streets cleanups and maintenance campaigns for small parks	1	12	8
	UG 7	• Organize local street improvement campaigns, including cleanups, fences painting, sidewalk repairs and tree planting • Install security gates at the neighborhood's entrances and hire a private security company • Organize garbage collection from homes • Report residents' complaints regarding street lighting, road surfaces and garbage collection to local authorities and follow up on repairs	2	13 14	
	Union 3	Focus on maintenance, cleanliness and safety of the neighborhood by: • reporting deterioration of road surfaces, sidewalks and street lighting to local authorities and following up on repairs • organizing garbage collection from homes • installing security gates at the neighborhood's entrances and hiring a private security company • securing street light cables and neighborhood electricity substations • repairing sewerage connections to buildings	2	15 16	
	Cooperative 1	• Organize regular street cleanups • Maintain street lighting in collaboration with the district office • Repair sewerage connections to buildings • Manage and maintain shared gardens and plant trees • Report residents' complaints regarding street lighting, road surfaces and infringements on public spaces to local authorities and follow up on responses	1	17	
	UG 8	• Report residents' complaints regarding garbage collection and street lighting to the district office • Fight corruption in the district office by reporting building violations, shops infringing on sidewalks and low-quality urban improvements by contractors hired by the district office to representatives of Parliament, the governor and The Administrative Control Authority	1	18	
Gharb	Association 3	• Involve residents in various social awareness campaigns, such as promoting garbage sorting at home and discouraging the usage of plastic bags • Act as a watchdog to ensure that building and construction bylaws are upheld, particularly those related to uncontrolled urban growth • Document old trees and ensure maintenance thereof • Organize regular street cleanups • Install bike racks to encourage cycling	1	19	9

* The abbreviation UG refers to unorganized group