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Translating the Idea of Co-Creation: An Empirical Study of an Area-Based Initiative in Norway

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Abstract

This article examines how the governance idea of co-creation is translated into practice within an area-based initiative addressing socio-economic challenges in a Norwegian municipality. Drawing on interviews, documents and field notes collected between November 2024 and March 2026, the qualitative case study combines translation theory with perspectives on institutional work and boundary work. The findings reveal a vertical translation asymmetry. At the strategic level, co-creation is translated primarily into internal coordination and resource mobilization across municipal units, while the designated arena for external participation remains inactive. At the operational level, collaboration with non-profit organization and volunteers develops through concrete activities and boundary-crossing arrangements. These practices demonstrate external participation and resource exchange, thereby reproducing selected elements of the co-creation idea, while shared problem-definition and design are less clearly documented. Relational working practices develop alongside continuing bureaucratic responsibilities. The study contributes to research on governance ideas by showing how co-creation acquires different practical meanings across organizational levels within the same initiative. Internal coordination may support operational collaboration while strategic authority remains within the municipality. The findings highlight the distinction between organizational conditions for co-creation and practices involving shared influence over problems and solutions.

Keywords: co-creation; boundary crossing; translation; civil society; municipal governance; wicked problems; vertical translation asymmetry

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1. Introduction

Socio-economic challenges in disadvantaged urban areas are often difficult to define, delimit, and solve. Problems such as poverty, social exclusion, poor housing conditions, health inequalities, and weak participation in education or work rarely belong to one sector or service alone [1]. They are interconnected, locally situated, and marked by uncertainty about both causes and solutions [2]. In this sense, they can be understood as "wicked problems" [3,4]. Such problems are not only difficult policy problems; they also pose organizational challenges because they must be handled across established mandates, sectors, and professional boundaries. They cannot be handled solely through ordinary service delivery within established sectoral boundaries but require coordination across services, professions, administrative levels, and societal actors. Area-based initiatives (ABIs)

offer one organizational response to this challenge, because they seek to address socio-economic problems through integrated, place-based, and cross-sectoral approaches that combine territorial targeting, partnership, and participation [5,6]. In municipalities, this means that complex welfare problems are translated into practical questions of organization, responsibility, prioritization, and coordination, where public actors must connect resources and measures across organizational boundaries [3].

Co-creation has become an increasingly important governance idea in response to such challenges. Associated with New Public Governance, co-creation emphasizes collaboration between public, private, and civil society actors through the sharing of knowledge, resources, and responsibility [7]. In Norwegian policy and public-sector discourse, co-creation is presented as a way to mobilize actors beyond the municipal organization to develop locally adapted and sustainable solutions [8,9]. At the same time, the Norwegian use of co-creation is marked by variation and ambiguity: the concept may signal substantive change, but it may also function opportunistically or symbolically [10,11].

However, co-creation does not enter an empty organizational space. Public administration paradigms coexist as layered "sediments," meaning that collaborative governance ideas are introduced into organizations still shaped by bureaucratic authority, service delivery, sectoral responsibility, and managerial control [12,13]. As a travelling organizational idea, co-creation is notably elastic and normatively charged, often bundling diverse expectations of innovation and public value [10,14–18]. Frontline actors consequently face severe operational dilemmas as they attempt to balance boundary-crossing ambitions with formal accountability [19,20].

Previous research recognizes that travelling governance ideas mutate during implementation [10,16] and generate institutional friction in welfare municipalities [21,22]. Torfing et al. [23] identify challenges in coordinating co-creation across strategic, tactical, and operational levels in a Norwegian city–university partnership. However, less is known about how the idea of co-creation is translated differently across organizational levels within the same initiative, particularly when collaborative ambitions meet established bureaucratic structures in ABIs [24,25].

Building on these insights, this article investigates how the idea of co-creation is translated across strategic and operational levels within an ABI through the following research question: How is the idea of co-creation translated into practice in an ABI? The remainder of the article is structured as follows: Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework, combining translation theory [14,16,17] with theoretical perspectives on institutional sedimentation and boundary work [12,25,26]. Section 3 presents the qualitative methodological design. Section 4 details results, followed by a discussion in Section 5 and concluding implications in Section 6.

2. Theoretical Framework

To analyze how the governance idea of co-creation is translated into administrative and frontline practice within an ABI, this section establishes our theoretical framework. First, we outline a conceptual delineation to define co-creation and set an empirical threshold against related governance terms. Second, we present an integrated "deep view" theoretical framework [27].

2.1. Conceptual Delineation

To ensure analytical clarity and avoid concept-stretching, we distinguish co-creation from related governance concepts. Following Torfing et al. [7], co-creation refers to an interactive process through which public and non-public actors collaborate through a constructive exchange of knowledge and resources to solve shared public challenges. It differs from co-production, which focuses on the joint delivery or execution of predefined

services in frontline encounters [28], and from broader collaborative governance. In this study, collaborative governance serves as a broader term for arrangements through which public and non-public actors work together, whereas co-creation is assessed more specifically through their involvement in defining problems or designing responses and exchanging knowledge and resources. To establish a clear analytical threshold, we apply three minimum empirical criteria for co-creation:

1. Active involvement of non-public actors (civil society, residents, or private partners);
2. Shared problem-definition or value co-design; and
3. Reciprocal exchange of knowledge and resources.

2.2. An Integrated "Deep View" Framework

To analyze how actors navigate the institutional complexity arising when collaborative ideas meet the "layered sediments" of the municipal apparatus [7,19,20], we integrate translation theory, institutional work, and boundary work into a cohesive framework.

Through the translation process, co-creation travels as an elastic governance principle rather than a rigid template, requiring local "translators" to actively edit the idea to fit the recipient organization [14,16,17]. To trace this operational modification, we draw on Røvik's [16,17] translation modes:

Reproducing mode: Actions aimed at faithfully recreating an identifiable source template or practice, reproducing core structures and institutional models to secure formal organizational legitimacy [16,17].

Modifying mode: Actions aimed at balancing fidelity to the source idea with local organizational fit [16,17].

Radical mode: Actions involving fundamental changes to the source idea's meaning or purpose, rather than adaptations of organizational roles and arrangements [16,17].

The three translation modes are applied as analytical ideal types rather than mutually exclusive empirical categories [29]. Observed practices may combine elements of different modes and are therefore interpreted according to their relative proximity to these ideal types. Importantly, the classification of translation modes concerns how the co-creation idea is translated, rather than whether the resulting practices fulfill the empirical criteria for co-creation outlined in Section 2.1.

While translation theory maps what is transformed, institutional work [26] explains why actors take purposive action to navigate institutional complexity. Actors actively manage these parallel demands by creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions, exercising agency within their embedded organizational contexts [26].

These institutional tensions play out in physical and organizational spaces through boundary work [25]. Boundary work refers to the discursive and practical activities actors use to define, expand, or challenge the limits between different groups, departments, and sectors [25]. This involves either demarcation to protect professional jurisdictions and autonomy, or the construction of boundary arrangements and boundary spanning to facilitate cross-sectoral coordination [25]. Such boundary-crossing practices may involve expanded professional repertoires that combine professional work with coordination and resource mobilization, consistent with hybrid professionalism [20]. Frontline workers are increasingly pushed to adopt professional repertoires where organizing, resource mobilization, and balancing professional quality with managerial efficiency become an integrated part of their daily work [20].

Weaving these perspectives into a "deep view" framework allows us to avoid treating co-creation as a "black box" [27]. In applying this integrated framework, translation theory serves as our primary analytical entry point, providing explicit operational coding categories [16,17] to trace how the co-creation mandate is edited across administrative levels.

Institutional work [26] and boundary work [25] function as "sensitizing concepts" [30]. They guide our qualitative reading and interpretation of actors' practices, equipping us with analytical tools to explore how the idea of co-creation is translated into practice within established bureaucratic structures. The analytical functions of the theoretical perspectives are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Theoretical perspectives and their analytical application.

Theoretical Perspective	Analytical Focus	Application in This Study
Translation theory—Reproducing mode	Replication of recognizable features of an original idea or practice.	Identifying practices that most closely preserve central elements of the idea of co-creation.
Translation theory—Modifying mode	Adaptation of an organizational idea through additions, omissions or adjustments to local conditions.	Examining how the idea of co-creation is adapted to existing municipal structures, roles and responsibilities.
Translation theory—Radical mode	Substantial transformation of the original idea's meaning or organizational form.	Assessing whether observed practices involve fundamental reinterpretations of the idea of co-creation.
Institutional work	Creation, maintenance and disruption of institutional arrangements.	Interpreting how actors navigate established organizational arrangements, institutional expectations and bureaucratic responsibilities.
Boundary work	Demarcation, negotiation and crossing of organizational and professional boundaries.	Examining how actors maintain, negotiate or cross boundaries within the municipality and between municipal and non-public actors.

3. Methods

This case study combines descriptive and exploratory approaches [31–33]. An ABI provides the empirical entry point for studying co-creation in a relatively large Norwegian municipality. The data material was collected between November 2024 and March 2026 and consisted of interviews, field notes, policy and management documents, and information on the municipality's website regarding the ABI. The purpose of the study is to explore how the idea of co-creation is translated into practice in an ABI.

3.1. Recruitment and Participants

The selection criterion was that participants had direct or indirect experience with the ABI program in the municipality. At the start of data collection, a contact person in the program helped us by suggesting participants we could contact. This person was not made aware of who we interviewed. As we became better acquainted with the ABI, we identified participants to interview ourselves.

Table 2 summarizes the interviews conducted using each method. The study included 23 unique participants across 22 interview sessions: 19 individual interviews, two group interviews with two participants each, and one focus group interview with four participants. Including repeated interviews, this amounted to 27 participant appearances across the interview sessions. During the data collection period, the Program manager was interviewed three times (two individual interviews and one focus group interview). We also conducted two individual interviews with a Culture leader 10 months apart, and one individual interview in addition to a focus group interview with an Area Developer (see Appendix A for further details).

As the table shows, most of our data material is based on interviews with municipal participants who had direct experience with the ABI. Still, we argue that we also have sufficient material from representatives of non-profit organization and volunteers to explore how the idea of co-creation is translated into practice in an ABI.

Data were collected by all authors: four researchers and three master's students. The students participated in the project alongside the researchers but submitted their own

independent master's theses based on the material they had collected themselves in the research project. The research team had access to complete original transcripts collected by the students, and these formed a significant part of the material.

Table 2. Participants.

Participant Category	Count	Individual Interviews	Group Interviews	Focus Group Interviews
Municipal leaders and Program coordinators	15	13	1 interview with two participants	1 interview with four participants
Municipal politicians	2	2		
Non-profit leaders	3	1	1 interview with two participants	
Volunteers	3	3		
	23	19	2 (4)	1 (4)
Total interview sessions			22	

Gray indicates total participants and interview sessions.

All participants received a project information letter in advance, and we prepared a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide addressing their experiences with the ABI. Examples of topics in the interview guide for the focus group with Program Coordinators were resource mobilization, place development, service development, and co-creation. An individual interview with a representative of a non-profit organization, for example, addressed the organization's role in the ABI and the activities in which it collaborates.

Interviews were generally conducted at the participants' workplaces and lasted around 45–60 min. All interviews were audio-recorded by UiO's "nettskjema" application and the verbatim transcripts totaled 248 pages. We also participated in meetings and workshops and met several actors from the municipality, non-profit organization and volunteers; these encounters were not recorded. We wrote short field notes on these encounters that also formed part of the data material. As a supplement to the interviews and field notes, we collected political and administrative documents, most of which were available on the municipality's website. These were the cooperation agreement between the municipality and the state, strategy for area investment, description of the organization and management of the program, action plan, survey of living conditions, sub-plan for public health and living conditions, and particularly a topic page on ABI on the municipality's website. This triangulation of methods contributes to rich descriptions, offering a nuanced picture of the translation of the idea of co-creation. See Appendix A for further details.

3.2. Analysis

Authors 1, 2, and 3 conducted the analysis, in dialogue with author 4 (researcher) and authors 5, 6, and 7 (master's students). Two of the master's students had analyzed their own material and completed their master's theses. The research team reviewed their analyses, which informed the analysis of the full dataset.

We started a conventional, data-driven content analysis with a joint review of a few selected interviews before we distributed the rest of the data material between us for sorting and processing. We held regular meetings to compare coding and interpretations. When interpretations differed, we revisited the relevant excerpts and discussed their fit with the theoretical concepts before agreeing on the final categorization.

Although the analysis was initially closely linked to the data material, we gradually became more aware of how theory and previous studies influenced our understanding

of the material. The analysis shifted towards a deductive orientation, and we conducted a directed content analysis using existing theory and prior research to develop an initial coding scheme [34]. Here, organizational theory from an institutional perspective [26] and boundary work [25] were utilized as sensitizing concepts [30] during the contextual reading of interview transcripts and document data. Translation theory provided a conceptual entry point for examining how co-creation travels into a formal organization. Røvik [16,17] distinguishes between three translation modes: reproducing, modifying, and radical modes. In this article, these theoretical concepts are used analytically to examine how co-creation is translated into practice as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Extract from the analysis.

Topics	Categories	Translation Mode [16,17]
The message and "messengers"	Socioeconomic challenges over years	
	Employment of experts (role of translators)	Reproducing (the "shift")
Translation into practice	Establishment of the ABI program	Modifying
	"All in the same boat"	Strategic level: modifying; operational level: reproducing-oriented
	Silos–potential between	Modifying
	The idea of co-creation and "The empty box"	Modifying
	Facilitating leadership (trust) creates room for maneuver	Modifying
	Boundary crossing work	Modifying

These examples illustrate modifying translations of the co-creation idea within established organizational arrangements. Classification by translation mode does not establish that all three empirical criteria for co-creation were met. Table 4 illustrates the authors coding process using sensitizing concepts.

Table 4. Illustration of the coding process through sensitizing concepts.

Empirical Material	Coding and Analytical Classification	Sensitizing Concepts: Institutional Work/Boundary Work Interpretation
Example 1—Operational level. "…we have a position that we administer and recruit for, but who is then employed by the municipality…" (Non-Profit Organization Leader)	Code: Cross-sectoral staffing arrangement. Category: Boundary crossing work. Translation mode: Modifying. Justification: The arrangement combines external participation and resource exchange with existing municipal employment and formal responsibilities.	Boundary work: Organizational boundaries are negotiated through an arrangement combining non-profit recruitment with municipal employment and responsibilities
Example 2—Strategic level. The organizational chart included a strategic reference group for external stakeholders, but this arena remained inactive during the study period. (Documentation, Politician 1, other informants)	Code: "The empty box" Category: The idea of co-creation and "the empty box" Translation mode: Modifying. Justification: The co-creation idea is adapted primarily into internal municipal coordination, while the designated arena for external strategic participation remained inactive during data collection.	Institutional work: The arrangement is consistent with the maintenance of established decision-making authority, although sequential implementation is another possible interpretation. Intentional exclusion is not demonstrated.

3.3. Ethics and Consent

NSD Data Protection Services approved the study, reference number 115292. The participants received both verbal and written information about the study. They were also informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, they received information about anonymization and secure storage of the data.

A data management plan (DMP) was prepared to ensure safe handling of data throughout the project. The plan supported sharing data as openly as possible and restricting access where necessary after the end of the project. The plan includes a description of roles and responsibilities in the research group regarding data management. It also specified which datasets would be used, storage solutions, data security, and strategies for preserving the data.

4. Results

Our point of departure in understanding the idea of co-creation is collaboration between public, private, and civil society actors through the sharing of knowledge, resources, and responsibility, relying on the definition of Torfing, Sørensen & Røiseland [7] and Røiseland & Vabo [35]. In the following, we analyse how the idea of co-creation is translated into municipal organizational practice and acquires different meanings at strategic and operational levels.

4.1. The Message and "Messengers"

4.1.1. Setting the Stage

The municipality has mapped living conditions in smaller geographical areas (living conditions zones) every other year since the mid-2010s. The assessment of living conditions in the early 2020s showed an accumulation of challenges in some areas of the municipality. Over the years, there has been a large increase in child poverty, with nearly 20 percent of inhabitants living in households with persistent low income. This was significantly higher than the national average. Almost a quarter of adult inhabitants had primary and lower secondary education as their highest completed education, with significant differences between zones. There is a clear correlation between areas with a high proportion of children in low-income households and the share of rented dwellings. The living conditions zones also differ considerably in the proportion of immigrants.

Several participants mentioned a project from the second half of the 2010s that aimed to strengthen local living and upbringing conditions through resource mobilization and collaboration with non-profit actors, volunteers, and private enterprises in one city zone. However, this project was eventually discontinued due to a lack of resources, alongside insufficient political and organizational anchoring (Municipal website, May 2025).

More generally, The Norwegian association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) has played a key role in introducing co-creation concepts and tools to the municipal sector. At a KS conference, the former municipal director presented the municipality's strategies for sustainable welfare and child poverty, highlighting a shift toward innovation and "Municipality 3.0" (KS conference presentation, 2020). Drawing inspiration from a citizen-centered welfare model, the municipal director functioned as an early advocate for implementing new collaborative methods in partnership with civil society and the private sector.

4.1.2. Employment of "Translators"

> […] we must raise [the living conditions in] the areas that need it the most. We have made many political moves for and are working on this in many ways (Politician 2)

The municipality made a strategic appointment that facilitated the adoption of co-creation through an ABI program. In the early 2020s, a manager with extensive experience in ABIs was hired to lead the program. Shortly after, the current Program manager (who had similar experience) was employed. Describing the strategic effort to govern and secure the necessary room for maneuver, the Program manager states:

> "Organizing [the services] so that it is possible to co-create, that is, create this space for co-creation, govern so that there is room for co-creation, I think."

There is reason to believe that through these appointments of "messengers," the municipality made an explicit decision to adopt the co-creation approach by establishing a program for the ABI.

4.2. Translating into Practice

A structured program was identified as the necessary organizational vehicle to handle these multifaceted issues:

> "Then I just really got a mandate when I came here that "you must make this work". And the answer for me then was "create a program". A program structure is suitable when it comes to solving or trying to handle complex problems". (City development leader)

Municipal governance documents became critical instruments for clarifying organizational goals and roles. This formal anchoring was particularly important because the cross-sectoral program introduced shared responsibilities and coordination arrangements alongside established departmental structures.

Drawing on the previous municipal experience of the two newly hired core employees ("the messengers"), the municipality formally resolved to introduce a state-supported ABI. Following authorization to negotiate a letter of intent with the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (KDD), the program was established in the first half of the 2020s. Rather than operating as an isolated project, the initiative was designed as a distinct strategy anchored directly in the Municipal Sub-Plan for Public Health and Living Conditions over a ten-year period. The strategy defines its primary mandate as addressing socio-economic disparities in three designated living areas facing severe structural challenges:

> "The ABI will contribute to improving living conditions where the need is greatest, by facilitating strengthening public services, local communities, social networks, trust and culture […]. Civil society will play an important role, and the participation of residents, local people and volunteers is central". (Strategy for Area Investment in the Municipality)

The ABI targets children, young people, and their parents. The municipality had identified three areas with significant and growing living-conditions challenges requiring particular attention.

Funding for the ABI consists of an annual grant over five years from the KDD, alongside an expectation of municipal co-funding. While political guidelines shape the program's overall organization, day-to-day operations are delegated to the program administration. The current Program manager highlights the advantages of this political anchoring, stating:

> "So yes, it's the case that you must go in and inform [politicians], but it's not like you must defend everything all the time politically". (Program manager)

Administrative authority is delegated from the municipal director to the responsible director and the Program Board, which is led by the program owner. Under this framework, the program owner holds responsibility for budgeting, accounts, and tasks within the designated area. This formal program structure is intended to ensure that dedicated resources are set aside to facilitate active participation and collaboration across the multiple municipal sections involved (See Figure 1).

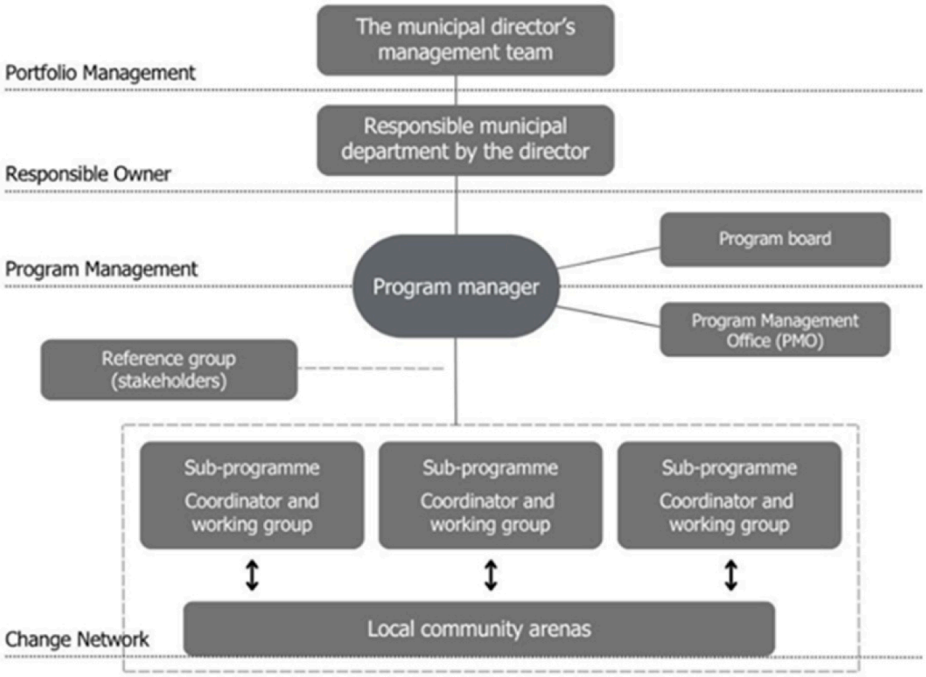


Figure 1. The organization of the program.

The governance structure of the ABI is closely aligned with the municipal director. The Program Board is established by the municipal director's management team and comprises sector managers representing environment and urban development, culture, building and property, kindergartens, child and family services, schools, and the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). Due to a municipal reorganization during the data collection period, this administrative overview is not exhaustive. A key feature of this model is that each manager on the Program Board must navigate a dual governance structure led by the municipal director. They remain individually responsible for their departmental portfolios while simultaneously sharing overall responsibility for the ABI.

At the operational level, the Program Management Office (PMO)—referred to by several participants as the "core team"—consists of the Program manager, Coordinators, and Area Developers. This team is responsible for following up on measures and holds delegated authority to allocate a limited portion of the project funds. Informants describe these operational activities as heavily involving collaboration with voluntary and non-profit organization. To run, support, and anchor the program across the municipality, the organization relies on a "change network," which functions as a cross-cutting network of employees, managers, and key resource people. In contrast to these operational units, the broader stakeholder reference group was inactive during the period of data collection.

4.3. Potential Between the Silos

Initially, the Program manager found it "very demanding" to extract "the potential between the silos". However, organizing the initiative as a formal program has actively challenged these traditional administrative boundaries. Rather than dismantling existing

departments, the program's "umbrella" structure was experienced as "compensating for the silos," releasing latent potential by preventing departments from "sitting on their own little mound" and pulling in different directions. Within this framework, the introduction of the idea of co-creation serves as a strategy for identifying and mobilizing resources across silos.

> "I don't think you get anything done unless you create it together. And I believe that the people we are going to meet and interact with out there—the fact that we stand together and help them together, and have one face outward—that is one of the most important parts of what we do ..." (Coordinator)

In addition, most participants view co-creation as a primary strategy for challenging silo-created barriers and dominant governance ideas through collaboration and resource mobilization, by "pick[ing] tools from several toolboxes" to solve challenges (City development leader). However, a bureaucratic bind arises as collaboration requires demonstrating effectiveness and measuring efficiency. One participant wishes "we had the money in a joint collaboration pot [to] collaborate better".

The barriers created by organizational silos tend to categorize citizens. Opting to define citizens as "our recipient of service" rather than "yours" or "mine" is intended to allocate resources more efficiently (NAV leader).

4.4. All in the Same Boat

In the data material, the idea of co-creation is translated into an emphasis on shared goals, common timeframes and joint effort. The "we are all in the same boat" narrative is used to mobilize and align actors. However, this is less about formal tools and more about creating: "...a common goal and that everyone is pulling in the same direction" (NAV leader)

At the operational level, the activity house Area Developer insists that "you don't get anything done" unless we "stand together" in supporting residents. An Area Developer emphasizes that participants "play each other good" so that "everyone pulls each other". In these examples, at the operational level, the idea of co-creation is expressed through a collective project identity in which services, professionals, and residents are portrayed as sharing one boat, one direction, and shared responsibility.

Several participants shared experiences of "closedness" in some departments that are difficult to touch. At the same time, the participants gained knowledge about waste management, water and sewage systems, and fire services. An ABI coordinator said that employees in these departments were enthusiastic about contributing to housing-related work alongside social workers: "It is something that gives a completely different dynamic when we are developing a plan for housing because they are so important". They all work with the same target groups in completely different ways. A NAV leader expresses:

> "Here we must work together. You have to lift yourself out of your silo and pull in the same direction to prevent the exclusion we see then. And the areas where poverty and living conditions are vulnerable".

The leader expressed impatience with the pace of progress, noting that separate budgets and limited staff time constrained joint action. Our interpretation of such statements fits with the understanding of co-creation as a broad, normatively charged idea that must be made meaningful in relation to concrete questions of participation, sharing of knowledge and responsibility.

The "all in the same boat" narrative acquires different meanings across organizational levels. At the strategic level, it reflects a modifying translation, emphasizing internal municipal coordination and resource mobilization. At the operational level, practices more closely resemble the reproducing ideal type, as external participation and resource exchange

preserve central elements of the co-creation idea. However, this relative classification does not imply that co-creation is fully realized, since shared problem-definition and co-design remain less clearly documented.

4.5. The Idea of Co-Creation and "The Empty Box"

At the strategic level, the idea of co-creation is translated into internal coordination, role clarification and resource mobilization across units and services. The Program manager explicitly links co-creation to internal governance:

> "Co-governance and co-creation? It's co-management…To organize it so that it is possible to co-create, in other words create this space for co-creation, govern so that there is room for co-creation […]".

Another informant underscores the balance between structure and relationships:

> "There is something about the connection between relationships and structure that in a way also makes it possible. Some have that task [and] some have some expectations. That's the combo for co-creation, I think". (Focus group interview—Coordinators)

The idea of co-creation is modified to emphasize internal roles and expectations so that employees in different units can work together. A leader explicitly distinguishes between mobilizing resources inside the municipality and reaching outwards:

> […] There is resource mobilization internally in the municipality. But then we have one that works towards…volunteering, teams and associations…(Public Health Leader)

Internal resource mobilization is described as co-creation across municipal units, encouraging services to share ownership of problems rather than treating them as isolated sectoral tasks. This is mirrored in leadership practices. One NAV leader praises a colleague for not trying to steer everything centrally, but instead allowing units to define what they need, while offering support.

Assessed against our analytical criteria, these accounts primarily describe internal coordination rather than co-creation. They demonstrate exchanges of knowledge and resources across municipal units, but do not in themselves establish the active involvement of non-public actors or shared problem-definition across the municipal boundary. The analytical finding is therefore that actors translate the idea of co-creation into internal organizational work, which they present as a foundation for subsequent external collaboration.

Several participants described internal coordination and delegated authority as conditions that could facilitate collaboration with external actors. The material documents these organizational arrangements alongside operational collaboration, but does not establish a causal relationship between them. Trust and experimentation were also emphasized as important for operational flexibility. In practice, the idea of co-creation is thus translated into coordination aimed at developing and adjusting services across internal boundaries, which does not fulfill our definition of co-creation. Another informant sums it up as "we do not develop very much that is completely new, but we connect what is already there… it is organizational change, organizational development" (NAV leader).

The central task of mobilizing resources makes coordination crucial:

> "(…) we have been working out there, with our coordination functions in their services, together with their service managers and other key functions, means that they probably receive some input from below, from their own organization, which helps". (Program manager)

The program organization disrupts the established organization and challenges existing structures. For this to succeed, it is important that the program is not placed under a specific service or department but can operate outside and can work across different parts of the organization. Our informants emphasize that coordination responsibility should not be delegated to a single unit:

> "Don't let it become a NAV thing, because then we end up sitting alone every time we try to achieve something.". (NAV leader)

At the strategic level, the translation of the idea of co-creation breaks with a central component of the co-creation concept and does not correspond to the expectations of the non-profit actors in the region. In the organizational chart, the non-profit actors are given a place, but, within the study period, the box becomes "the empty box". A politician suggests this may reflect exaggerated expectations of the voluntary sector (Politician 1). On the other hand, several informants stress that "building something internally" must come first, and that the program structure opens external possibilities once a shared internal foundation is in place. A leader of a non-profit organization interprets the lack of co-creation at the strategic level as follows:

> "I see a great willingness, but little coordination. And I'm not sure we need that many more coordinators either. We need, in a way, people who do things... And in those spaces, I miss more of those kinds of structures". (Group interview, Non-profit organization)

The non-profit participants in this study question why external actors are not involved in strategic decision-making. One possibility is that the strategic level is taking precedence over operational co-creation. Alternatively, this may be due to experiences in which non-profit actors seek to "create private copies of established welfare services," as one of the Coordinators expressed it. Resistance to co-creation may also reflect concerns about non-profit organizational identity. As a leader of a non-profit organization said: "We would like... to, of course, retain our own identity, as a service" (Group interview, Non-profit organization).

4.6. Facilitating Leadership for Room for Maneuver

The ABI is designed as an organizational response to socio-economic challenges that cut across sectors, services, and professional boundaries. In the empirical material, this broader ambition appears in practical concerns: how to carve out room to act —financially, organizationally, and procedurally— inside a large municipal system. The activity house is an example of this. Its leader portrays the building as both a key resource and an experiment: "Help us make [urban area] cool". "The house is a kind of test of cross-sectoral cooperation" (Area Developer).

In one of the three sub-areas, a private company provides a building rent-free. The rent-free arrangement makes the house a low-cost laboratory: funds can be redirected from fixed expenses to content, activities and trial-and-error activities. The house also functions as a concrete example of cross-sectoral collaboration, where services can explore new constellations without having to redesign the entire bureaucracy. Another participant highlights how this arrangement shortens the distance between ideas and formal decisions (Culture leader). In this sense, room for maneuver is material, temporal and organizational.

Taken together, these interpretations show that room for maneuver is not an abstract quality but is tied to specific structures and arenas that enable actors to raise issues, connect initiatives and move proposals forward faster than the ordinary line organization would permit. In terms of the translation perspective, co-creation is made workable partly by being woven into such concrete organizational devices at the operational level.

To facilitate collaboration across silos, municipal leadership is crucial and must navigate the tension between bureaucratic control and trust—"using carrots and sticks"—as a politician says (Politician 2). Unlocking resources between silos depends partly on conditions outside a manager's control, so leadership becomes riskier work:

> "[…] I no longer have a chance to keep track of the details. I just have to be like, okay, these are adults, they're good people. Now they just have to go for it. […] Then you just have to let go of the control. You just have to keep control of the financial regulations. Yes, procurement and things like that". (Program manager)

Collaboration across silos can be "exciting…[and] fun", for instance when a NAV leader describes her collaboration with technical departments on housing training (NAV leader). At the same time, professional jealousy and territoriality persist; some departments want to "own the projects" and feel threatened by others who operate flexibly: "Oh, are you going there again, and do you get to do so many things, really". Leadership thus involves uncertainty about personnel and finances, and project goals must emerge dynamically from ongoing dialogue.

The introduction of co-creation influences how professional roles are perceived. Tasks related to resource mobilization and realizing context-specific goals emphasize collaborative relationships rather than fixed positions and rigid roles. Formal structures are necessary, but several participants stress that co-creation is "meetings between people". This is described as an interplay between formal expectations and individual agency; "something in the present and something that each individual brings with them" together with "structural" elements. Trust is highlighted as central:

> "It's really just that you think the person you're supposed to collaborate with is a reasonably decent guy, and that you trust each other. And that the goal is clear. If the goal is there, and you don't think he's a good guy, and you don't have trust, then there won't be any collaboration. And then there's … something that can really make a difference.". (City development leader)

4.7. Boundary-Crossing Work

In the material, co-creation translates into concrete boundary-crossing work—arrangements and roles that intentionally span organizational and sectoral borders. One cluster of examples comes from collaboration between the municipality and a non-profit organization. The leader describes a position that effectively belongs to both organizations, for example:

> "[…] we have a position that we administer and recruit for, but who is then employed by the municipality in area investment and does some work for area investment. There is something called transitional work […]". (Non-Profit Organization Leader)

The non-profit organization manages and recruits the position, while the person is formally employed by the municipality and works in the ABI. This "transition work" is a concrete boundary arrangement between a municipal service and a non-profit organization. This arrangement meets two of our criteria for co-creation: it involves a non-public actor and combines resources and responsibilities across organizational boundaries. However, the account provides less detail about whether the participating organizations jointly defined the problem and designed the arrangement. It therefore offers clear evidence of boundary-crossing collaboration, while its classification as co-creation depends on the extent of shared influence over its purpose and content.

The same leader explains that a member of the organization runs the ABI's social media and communication: "So, we have managed the social media account and communication

work of ABI. It is a member with us who does. And then we have crossed paths...” (Non-Profit Organization Leader).

Here, role and task boundaries between the municipality and civil society are deliberately softened. Boundary crossings are equally central in work with young people. A NAV leader describes [name of a specific measure] as a joint effort “[where] the voluntary sector and the municipality and we at NAV then join forces and get young people into work or education...”

She later highlights [name of a specific measure], owned by a non-profit organization, as “a very nice example”. The municipality and NAV share responsibility for the same group of young people. Another NAV/aftercare actor values the project because it “creates things that go across the lines in the organization and the silos” and explains how the “citizen-centered welfare model” is used to work simultaneously across NAV and child welfare aftercare around a specific youth group.

Boundary crossing extends further through the linkage with the university-driven mentor scheme. Field notes from an observed meeting describe student placements in child welfare pedagogy within the ABI, illustrating connections between education, research and local practice.

Two of the participants we interviewed initially came to the activity house as service recipients. They now work as volunteers in the activity house and are involved in several activities. In the afternoons, one of them welcomes young people and supports activities including homework, job applications, CV writing, and table tennis. He talks about an inclusive culture and greatly appreciates the trust he has been given. He brings considerable life experience but continues to learn:

> “Because there are many who come here who are in a hard shell and don’t say much. They are uncomfortable. At the end of the day, they are already completely different people. And the next time they come, they are even more open. They open increasingly and become new people. They are flourishing, simply”. (Volunteer)

The shift from a service recipient to a volunteer can be seen as a reconfiguration of boundaries. These shifts do not represent ready-made roles but the continuing transformation of roles and borders.

The results show how the municipality sought to address living-conditions challenges through the establishment of an ABI. Within this organizational arrangement, the idea of co-creation was adapted through encounters with established administrative structures and local practices, acquiring different practical meanings at strategic and operational levels.

At the strategic level, co-creation was primarily interpreted as internal coordination and resource mobilization across municipal services. At the operational level, collaboration involved non-profit organization and volunteers through concrete activities and boundary-crossing arrangements. These practices demonstrate external participation and resource exchange, while shared problem-definition and co-design are less clearly documented. Internal organizational work appears to have supported these collaborative arrangements, while external actors’ influence over strategic priorities was not evident in the material.

5. Discussion

The analysis shows how the governance idea of co-creation is translated into practice within an ABI addressing complex socio-economic challenges. The idea of co-creation is introduced in a large municipal organization, where traditional bureaucracy, managerialism, and collaborative logics coexist as “layered sediments.”

Røvik [16] argues that ideas are actively translated and reshaped by human actors to fit local contexts. The ABI's program structure opens two lines of control: one bureaucratic line within the silos and one within the program. The program structure can be understood as a local adaptation that facilitates resource mobilization across departments while retaining established lines of departmental responsibility [16,17]. Holand et al. [22] identify structural flexibility as an important condition for cross-sectoral co-creation. Our findings illustrate an attempt to create such flexibility through a cross-cutting program within the existing bureaucracy.

5.1. Translating Co-Creation

The idea of co-creation arrived in the municipality as an elastic and normatively charged concept, bundling diverse expectations of innovation and public value [10,18,36]. In this context, the former municipal director functioned as an early advocate for implementing new collaborative methods, drawing inspiration from the citizen-centered welfare model promoting a shift toward "Municipality 3.0" (KS conference presentation, 2020). The municipality subsequently made an explicit adoption choice by establishing a program for the ABI and hiring key experts with extensive experience in the field. Through the lens of Røvik's [16,17] translation theory, these newly hired experts can be understood as key translators whose experience and interpretations helped shape how co-creation was organized and put into practice locally.

The municipality seems to have drawn lessons from a precursor project from the second half of the 2010s and shaped the subsequent design of the ABI to secure stronger political and structural anchoring. Thus, the co-creation idea was actively edited to fit the local public administration [16,17]. At the strategic level, the translation emphasized internal coordination, while external participation in problem-definition and priority-setting was not realized during the study period. This can be interpreted as a modification in which internal organizational alignment became more prominent than the external collaborative dimension of co-creation [7,16,17]. This modification is empirically manifested as "the empty box" on the strategic organizational chart. Although non-profit leaders were formally allocated a space in a strategic reference group, this arena remained inactive during the study period, and the material shows no documented link between it and municipal decision-making. This fell short of the expectations of external non-profit stakeholders.

A similar distinction between formal collaborative arrangements and substantive stakeholder involvement is identified by Valentina et al. [37] in a study of waste governance in Indonesia. Despite differences in institutional and policy contexts, their findings highlight how collaborative structures may exist without effective stakeholder initiation and deliberation.

In practice, this involved reconfiguring municipal roles to bridge administrative silos while the external strategic reference group remained inactive [21]. Local actors justified this shift by emphasizing that establishing a solid internal foundation was a prerequisite before extending collaborative efforts outward. From the perspective of institutional work, this rationale and its corresponding organizational modification invite competing interpretations. On the one hand, actors' emphasis on internal preparation supports a pragmatic logic of sequential implementation, prioritizing cross-departmental alignment prior to external engagement. On the other hand, the inactive strategic reference group may also be interpreted in terms of institutional maintenance, as established decision-making arrangements persisted [21,26]. This interpretation does not establish that actors intended to exclude external stakeholders. Internal consolidation may have facilitated operational collaboration, but the material does not demonstrate this relationship.

The strategic translation thus centered on internal coordination, with decision-making authority remaining within the municipality. This outcome is compatible with institutional

maintenance but does not by itself establish an intention to exclude external actors [26]. Internal consolidation may have facilitated operational collaboration while also maintaining the boundary around strategic authority.

We use the term vertical translation asymmetry to describe differences in how the idea of co-creation is translated across organizational levels within a single initiative, with different elements of the idea retained or modified at each level. At the strategic level, the idea was primarily associated with internal municipal coordination, whereas operational arrangements retained central elements of external participation and resource exchange. Interpreted through Røvik's translation modes [16,17], this suggests that different elements of a governance idea may be retained or modified across organizational levels. While Torfing et al. [23] highlight challenges in connecting organizational levels, our findings draw attention to differences in how the idea itself is understood and enacted at these levels. The material does not establish why these differences emerged or whether operational collaboration influenced strategic priorities.

Figure 2 summarizes the vertical translation asymmetry. Strategic translation emphasized internal coordination, whereas operational practices involved external actors through boundary-crossing arrangements. External participation and resource exchange were evident, but shared problem-definition and design were less clearly documented. These reproducing-oriented elements do not establish the full realization of co-creation. The dashed relations are possible rather than demonstrated: internal coordination may have supported operational collaboration, while operational influence on strategic priorities was not evident in the material. This does not establish that such influence never occurred. Institutional maintenance remains a possible interpretation, not a demonstrated intention; both levels retained bureaucratic accountability.

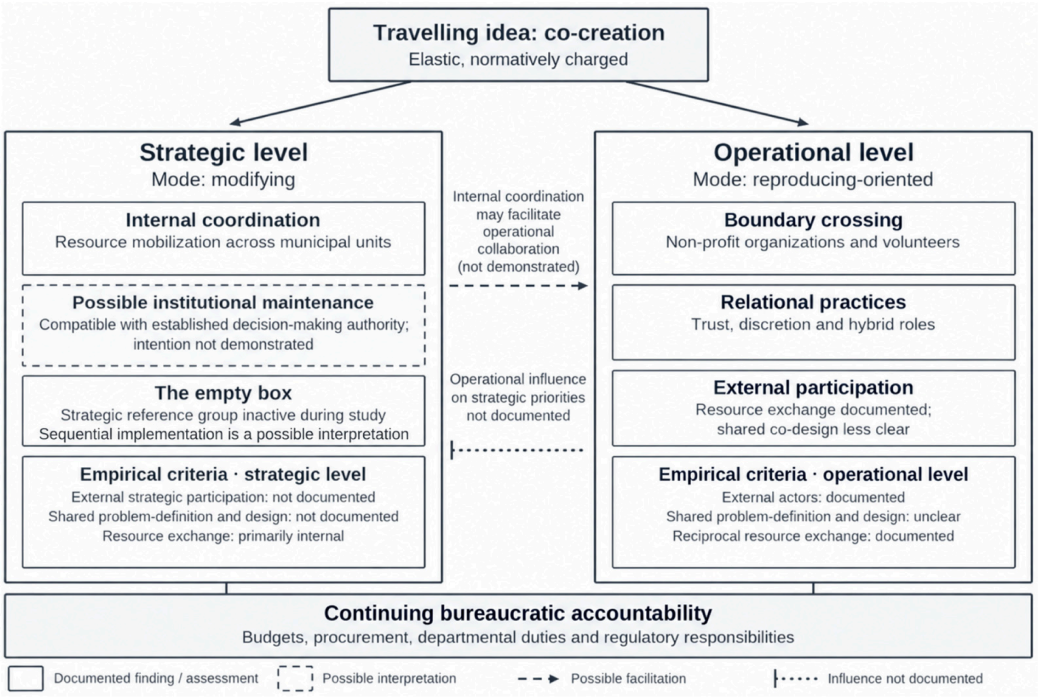


Figure 2. Vertical translation asymmetry in the idea of co-creation within the ABI. Solid boxes represent empirical findings and assessments against the three criteria in Section 2.1. The dashed box indicates possible institutional maintenance as a theoretical interpretation rather than a demonstrated intention. Dashed arrows distinguish a possible facilitating relationship from operational-to-strategic influence that was not documented in the material.

5.2. The Role of the ABI in Perforating Silos

"Wicked" socio-economic challenges are inherently difficult to handle through ordinary service delivery within established sectoral boundaries [3,4]. The ABI program was established as a formal boundary arrangement—an organizational "umbrella" structure positioned outside standard departments to work across different parts of the organization. This structure did not dismantle municipal silos but was experienced as "compensating for the silos" by creating a space of opportunity to work across departmental boundaries.

The "all in the same boat" narrative expressed a shared collaborative ambition, although separate budgets and departmental obligations constrained joint action. This resembles Holand et al.'s [22] finding that resource scarcity can redirect actors toward core responsibilities, limiting collaboration despite shared intentions. This illustrates attempts to negotiate organizational boundaries while established responsibilities remained in place [25].

This collaborative process was facilitated by the use of the "activity house" as a setting for boundary-spanning collaboration [25]. Made possible through private-sector collaboration that provided a building with "zero rent," the activity house functioned as a low-cost laboratory. This zero-rent arrangement allowed Coordinators to redirect funds from fixed expenses toward trial-and-error activities and social content.

The activity house appears to have provided practical room for experimentation by bringing actors and resources together. Participants described opportunities to connect initiatives and move proposals forward, although this flexibility remained subject to municipal financial and procurement requirements. The house can thus be understood as a setting for boundary-spanning practices within continuing institutional constraints [22,25,26].

The distinction between internal municipal coordination and external collaboration also resonates with Saputra et al. [38], who treat organizational performance and multi-stakeholder collaboration as analytically distinct mechanisms. Although their quantitative study of disaster governance differs in context and design, it reinforces the importance of distinguishing internal organizational processes from collaboration across institutional boundaries.

5.3. Relational Professionals and Boundary Crossing

At the operational level, actors negotiated organizational boundaries through concrete collaborative arrangements involving municipal and non-public organizations [25]. This is illustrated by the transitional work arrangement: the non-profit organization administered the arrangement and handled recruitment, while the person was formally employed by the municipality and worked within the ABI. Additionally, role boundaries were crossed when a member of a non-profit organization took charge of managing the ABI's social media accounts and communication. These joint operational measures, including youth-focused initiatives combining NAV, child welfare aftercare services, and voluntary actors, were highly valued because they created things that went across organizational silos.

The accounts also suggest a reconfiguration of boundaries as former service recipients became volunteers within the activity house. Their involvement in welcoming young people, supporting homework and assisting with job applications illustrates an expansion of their roles. One volunteer emphasized the importance of the trust he had been given and described the activity house as an inclusive environment.

The practices suggest expanded professional repertoires involving relationships, coordination and resource mobilization, consistent with hybrid professionalism [20]. Evidence of lasting identity change is more limited. The importance of trust also resonates with Holand et al.'s [22] emphasis on relational flexibility.

These practices illustrate changes in operational roles and collaborative arrangements, but do not establish whether external actors gained influence over strategic priorities.

Operational discretion remained bounded by financial rules, procurement requirements and departmental responsibilities. This resonates with Aastvedt and Vike's [21] findings on institutional tensions in municipal co-creation and illustrates how boundary-crossing practices may develop within continuing administrative structures [25,26].

5.4. Limitations and Methodological Reflections

This single-case study provides a contextualized account of how co-creation is translated within a Norwegian ABI. Its contribution lies in identifying patterns and tensions that may inform research in other settings, rather than establishing their prevalence across municipalities [33,39].

The sample primarily represents municipal actors. Non-profit representatives and volunteers provide additional perspectives, but residents and service users were not directly included, apart from volunteers with previous experience as service users. The study therefore offers stronger evidence about organizational arrangements and actors' interpretations than about residents' influence or experiences of co-creation. Given the participatory ambitions of co-creation [7] and its potential for exclusion and unequal influence [40], resident perspectives are needed to assess whose knowledge and priorities shape collaborative activities.

Data were collected by several researchers and master's students, whose differing interests and follow-up questions may have shaped the emphasis and depth of the accounts. Joint analytical discussions allowed interpretations to be compared but could not eliminate differences arising during data collection.

Recruitment through a program contact may have privileged particular networks and perspectives. Interviews also contain retrospective accounts of the initiative's establishment. The triangulation of documents, field notes and repeated interviews provided opportunities to compare accounts, but could not eliminate these limitations. Although data collection extended over approximately seventeen months, the study provides a clearer comparison across organizational levels than a complete account of how translation developed over time.

6. Conclusions

This study examined how the idea of co-creation was translated into practice within a municipal ABI. Its main contribution is to identify a vertical translation asymmetry within the same initiative: at the strategic level, the idea was primarily modified into internal municipal coordination, whereas operational practices more closely resembled the reproducing ideal type by retaining external participation and resource exchange. However, shared problem-definition and co-design were less clearly documented, and full co-creation cannot be established.

Combining translation theory, institutional work and boundary work highlights how different elements of a governance idea may be retained or modified across organizational levels within continuing bureaucratic responsibilities [16,17,25,26]. The persistence of established strategic decision-making arrangements is compatible with institutional maintenance, but does not demonstrate an intention to exclude external actors. Participants presented internal coordination as a possible foundation for external collaboration; its facilitating effect was not established.

For municipal practice, the findings highlight the importance of distinguishing internal coordination from co-creation with external actors and clarifying where participation entails influence. Operational collaboration should be assessed in terms of shared problem-definition and design, beyond participation and resource contributions alone.

Future research should examine whether and how external actors involved in operational collaboration gain influence over strategic priorities over time, and incorporate residents' perspectives on participation and influence.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Chronological overview of participants, data-collection methods, and data sources November 2024–March 2026. Conducted by the seven members of the research team. Authors 1–4 were researchers; authors 5–7 were master's students under the supervision of author 3. Note that the marked area is not included in the overview of the number of participants.

Participant Role	Method/Date	Data Source	Conducted by
City development leader	Semi-structured individual interview Nov. 2024	Recorded/transcribed	Author 3 & 5
Program manager	Semi-structured individual interview Nov. 2024	Recorded/transcribed & field notes	Author 5
NAV leader	Semi-structured individual interview Dec. 2024	Recorded/transcribed	Author 5
Culture leader	Semi-structured individual interview Dec. 2024	Recorded/transcribed	Author 5
Former Technical Services Leader	Semi-structured Group interview Dec. 2024	Recorded/transcribed	Author 5
Technical Services Leader			
Public Health Leader	Semi-structured individual interview December, 2024	Recorded/transcribed	Author 5
Program Coordinator	A meeting regarding mutual information February, 2025	Minutes of the meeting	Author 2 & 4
Politician 1	Semi-structured individual interview March 2025	Recorded/transcribed & field notes	Author 1 & 4
Several ABI representatives in different roles.	A meeting regarding mutual information March 2025	Minutes of the meeting	Author 1, 2 & 4
Area Developer	Semi-structured focus group interview April 2025	Recorded/transcribed	Author 1 & 2
Work Coordinator			
Program manager			
Coordinator 1			
Politician 2	Semi-structured individual interview April 2025	Recorded/transcribed	Author 1

Table A1. *Cont.*

Participant Role	Method/Date	Data Source	Conducted by
A number of stakeholders representing non-profit and voluntary organizations. Public services were represented by, e.g., police, health, schools and welfare organizations	Participated in a workshop at the Activity House regarding meeting places for youth April 2025	Field notes	Author 3 & 4
NAV Department Leader	Semi-structured individual interview June 2025	Recorded/transcribed	Author 6
Non-Profit Organization Leader 1	Semi-structured Group interview June 2025	Recorded/transcribed	Author 1 & 3
Non-Profit Organization leader 2			
Department Non-Profit Organization Leader 2	Semi-structured individual interview July 2025	Recorded/transcribed	Author 3 & 6
Health and Coping Leader	Semi-structured individual interview September 2025	Recorded/transcribed	Author 6
Public Health and Volunteering Leader	Semi-structured individual interview October 2025	Recorded/transcribed	Author 6
Prevention and Leisure Leader	Semi-structured individual interview October 2025	Recorded/transcribed	Author 6
Culture leader	Semi-structured individual interview October 2025	Recorded/transcribed	Author 6
Coordinator 2	Semi-structured individual interview Nov. 2025	Recorded/transcribed	Author 2 & 7
Volunteer 1	Semi-structured individual interview Febr. 2026	Recorded/transcribed	Author 7
Volunteer 2	Semi-structured individual interview Febr. 2026	Recorded/transcribed	Author 7
Area Developer	Semi-structured individual interview Febr. 2026	Recorded/transcribed	Author 7
Volunteer 3	Semi-structured individual interview March 2026	Recorded/transcribed	Author 7
Program manager	Semi-structured individual interview March 2026	Recorded/transcribed	Author 1 & 2

Grey background indicates data is only from field notes/notes from meetings.

Anonymized Political and Administrative Documents

- Strategy for area investment including description of the organization and management of the ABI program
- Sub-plan for public health and living conditions
- The cooperation agreement between the municipality and the state regarding the ABI.
- Strategic plan for area investment in [name municipality] for the year of [period].
- Action plan for the year of [period].
- A topic page on ABI on the municipality's website.
- KS conference presentation, 2020. Identifying details withheld to preserve case anonymity (The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities)

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