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Exploring local activism in the neighborhoods of Cairo

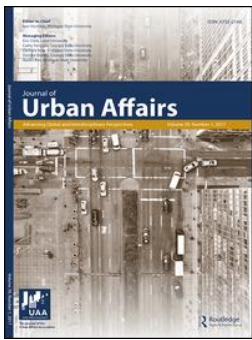Elwageeh, Aya; Kleinhans, Reinout; van Ham, Maarten

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Exploring local activism in the neighborhoods of Cairo

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ABSTRACT

Governments are focusing on building new cities to control rapid urbanization and accommodate overpopulation in Africa. Meanwhile, existing agglomerations suffer from urban deterioration, much to the dissatisfaction of their residents. Cairo is an exemplary case of active residents' response toward urban deterioration in their neighborhoods, resulting from local government deficiencies accompanied by a hostile culture toward citizen engagement. In this context, active residents use social media to share concerns, mobilize each other, and act on the ground. These active groups are likely to differ from local activism practices in contexts where a culture of citizen engagement is often state-supported. This paper aims to better understand how local activism manifests in the context of Cairo and its neighborhoods. We identified active resident groups and observed their main activities and aims. We subsequently analyzed the active resident groups' level of formality, confrontational attitude, collaboration with local officials, and motives. We found that many active groups practice local activism as a right to a certain urban quality within the neighborhoods. They were either self-provisioning groups that confront and ultimately cooperate with local officials, advocacy groups that demand accountability and action from local officials in a less confrontational manner, or user groups that settle for online criticism.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the active role of residents in improving their neighborhoods, particularly regarding the quality of the built environment and local services (Bailey & Pill, 2015). Scholars and decision-makers have argued that the active role of resident groups is essential in countries aspiring for participatory democracy and improved local governance (Teernstra & Pinkster, 2016), and where being an active citizen is an integral part of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (Murray et al., 2010). The active role of residents is a shift from residents playing the role of beneficiaries of services and infrastructure to actors participating in making and shaping these services and infrastructure (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2000). The neighborhoods are the geographical level to operationalize active citizenship in local governance (Durose & Lowndes, 2010; Kearns, 1995). Accordingly, "local activism" encompasses the right of citizens to have an active role in improving the urban environment and is spatialized at the local level of neighborhoods. Contexts with a supportive culture toward citizen engagement produce practices of local activism that thrive on a collaborative relationship between state and residents (Elwageeh et al., 2020). Even though citizens in these contexts may face obstacles to engage in local governance, these obstacles exist within regimes that mostly foster local activism beyond traditional election processes (Boonstra, 2015).

However, many Global South regimes struggle to permit active citizens to engage in local governance. This struggle results from such countries' unique political histories, cultures, and institutional

structures (Lombard, 2013). Many countries in the MENA and African region share a history of colonialism (Isin, 2017; Miraftab, 2012) and authoritarian post-dependency regimes. These regimes failed to provide a state-citizen relationship built on equal rights. Meijer and Butenschøn (2017) concluded that citizenship regimes resulting from this historical state-citizen relationship in North African countries show almost no influence of citizens on the state except through informality and patronage. Even after the revolutions in 2011, commonly known as the Arab Spring, and its momentum toward change in North African countries, the resultant regimes are intolerant to political activism (Bayat, 2013).

Cairo city represents an exemplary case of a context that discourages active citizens from engaging in urban governance. Cairo is a metropolitan city in an economically struggling and politically transitional country. Its geographical and historical position combines the urban planning and governance challenges found in North Africa. Regarding local governance, no formal channels for involving the residents in decision-making exist (Tadamun, 2015). Additionally, citizens are usually cautious when interacting with the state because civil society is contained and controlled (Abdelrahman Hassan, 2011). For instance, planned gatherings of residents' groups in public spaces without security permits are not allowed, regardless of their purpose. Even informing the residents about urban regeneration projects in their neighborhoods is unfamiliar to local authorities (Elkhateeb, 2020). Concerning urban planning and management, citizens are usually frustrated by the ineffective performance of local authorities due to corruption, centralization, and lack of resources (Néfissa, 2009). As a result, Cairo's neighborhoods, regardless of their socioeconomic level, suffer from urban deterioration in their buildings, public spaces, infrastructure, and services (Mahmoud, 2015). The aforementioned state-citizen dynamics in Egypt create what Connelly (2010) described as a hostile culture toward citizen engagement, in which public participation in urban planning and governance is unappreciated and undermined by the state and many citizens.

Despite the significantly poor support for citizens' engagement in the urban governance of Cairo's neighborhoods, active resident groups exist in many neighborhoods. These active groups reveal the different practices of local activism that may exist in a context with a problematic state-citizen relationship. Due to limited documentation, little is known about how these groups function and interact with local authorities. Accordingly, the chances of understanding the contribution of these active groups to neighborhood governance in such contexts are limited. For these reasons, better insights into the state-citizen dynamic and its impact on the active role of residents in a problematic context as Cairo contribute to understanding local activism within an African context.

This paper aims to better understand how local activism manifests itself in the context of Cairo and its neighborhoods. To achieve this, we develop a framework to analyze the activities and strategies of active resident groups in the context of a deficient local government and a lack of a culture of citizen engagement in local governance. The dimensions in the framework are deduced from the literature on local activism and contextualized to Cairo's context. The empirical section explores how active resident groups in Cairo express themselves and interact with local officials. Finally, we reflect on local activism in Cairo's neighborhoods and its possible impacts on local urban governance.

Urban deterioration and state-citizen relationships in Cairo neighborhoods

Cairo governorate is one of Greater Cairo's (GC) three governorates (Cairo, Giza, and Qalyubia), which shape the metropolitan city. Cairo is the center of the state's government, investments, mobility, and population (Sims, 2012). However, it also shares with many capital cities in Africa the problems of poverty, urban degradation, and overpopulation (UN-Habitat, 2014). Cairo's neighborhoods suffer from urban deterioration due to unplanned urban growth that pressures the amenities and built environment. Moreover, they lack adequate maintenance and urban management of infrastructure and public services.

Urban deterioration in Cairo's neighborhoods includes (1) unmaintained streets and sidewalks, (2) unsafe streets due to broken lighting poles, (3) health risks and pollution from the garbage in the

streets, (4) deteriorated local parks, and (5) infringements on public spaces by shop owners and street vendors (GOPP, 2012). Several public services are operated at a macro scale in GC, such as electrical distribution, water, sewage, telecommunication, public buses, and metro (Sims, 2012). District local government units are responsible for local road pavement, street cleaning, solid waste management, street lighting, local community support, traffic work, building permits, maintenance and improvement of local public gardens, and civil defense (Abdel-Latif, 2013). Based on this services' distribution, most of the urban deterioration and residents' complaints target the quality of services delivered on the scale of districts.

The scale of districts in Cairo represents the lowest local administration unit in Cairo. Sims (2012) mentioned the limited financial capacity as an important reason that diminishes district units' capacity in urban management. GC has the highest absolute funding in the built environment budget in Egypt. However, around 75% of this budget goes to the new urban communities (NUCs) that contain only 8% of the population in GC (Shawkat & Khalil, 2016a, 2016b). Many NUCs were built to face rapid population growth; however, they failed due to their high prices, lacking job opportunities, and the difficulty of commuting (Sims, 2014). Nevertheless, the NUCs became a consistent source of GDP in Cairo's profit-driven real estate model and a quick political gain for successive governments (Duffield, 2019). Therefore, the government directs most of the funds to the NUCs, jeopardizing the maintenance of services and amenities in the main agglomeration of Cairo and strengthening its residents' feeling of being neglected.

The local government lacks a formal channel for residents' input about urban development and neighborhood maintenance plans. At the district level, there used to be elected Local Popular Councils (LPCs) to represent the residents (ARLEM, 2013), but these were dismantled following the 2011 revolution. As a result, the government-appointed district officials are the only stakeholder on the local level who decide and execute the yearly development plan of districts (Braneya & Fouda, 2019). In the absence of LPCs, the citizens depend on informality and personal connections to influence local governance. Although this condition seems temporary until a new local governance law is issued for LPCs, residents' opinions regarding the urban governance and management of the neighborhoods do not seem important to the authorities (for example, see Sayed, 2021).

What channels are available for the residents in Cairo to play an active role in the urban development of their neighborhoods? The active resident groups in Cairo focus on improving, maintaining, and beautifying the public areas. Motivated by everyday challenges and the deterioration of the built environment, the residents spontaneously initiate and join social media platforms, where they share concerns, news, aspirations, and suggestions. They translate these concerns and ideas into physical changes such as cleanup campaigns, setting security gates for their neighborhoods, planting trees, and upgrading local gardens.

Theoretical framework

Literature usually considers local activism as the ability of residents to argue their urban needs and challenges in the forms of unrealized social, economic, or cultural rights (see Cornwall & Gaventa, 2000; Murray et al., 2010). To demand these rights, different forms of coordination, connection, and interaction between active groups of citizens and decision-makers take place (Chaskin & Garg, 1997). However, Elwageeh et al. (2020) suggested that the element of "rights-based practices" is not necessarily central to how local activism is manifested in parts of the Global South. Also, the active groups may view the element of "interaction with local authorities" as an unsatisfactory alternative while solving the neighborhood's challenges themselves. This section investigates the elements of "rights-based practices" and "interaction with local authorities" in local activism. We derive specific dimensions from literature to help investigate these two elements in Cairo.

Element one: Local activism is practiced as a right

Holston (2011) argued that residents' ability to understand their needs as rights of citizenship and to demand them is reflected in the actions adopted and arguments articulated by active resident groups. In the articulated arguments, the rights component can be detected in how active groups express their demands as a privileged, contributor, or constitutional right. The "rights" expression appears in active groups' aims and conversations. So besides investigating how movements use the term *rights* to express their demands, how should researchers examine the rights component in the actions of active resident groups in a specific context?

Based on the "exit-voice-loyalty" concept by Hirschman (1970), residents unsatisfied with the quality of life in their neighborhood have three general strategies: (1) quietly adapt to the situation (i.e., loyalty), (2) attempt to improve the neighborhood (voice) or (3) geographically leave the neighborhood (exit). Here, we focus on the residents who stay and attempt to collectively change and improve their neighborhood, performing "voice" strategies (Shinohara, 2018). The voice strategies are achieved through public hearings, public campaigns, signing petitions, and protests (Dekker & Bolt, 2015). Voice relies on residents' persistent efforts to pressure the authorities to improve the source of dissatisfaction. Voice solutions are political actions, and a rights-based component is integrated into them (Chisholm et al., 2016).

Instead of a straightforward "exit" from the neighborhood, we found the notion of "internal exit," which was introduced by Dowding and John (2008) to describe exiting the deteriorated local service in the neighborhood without exiting the neighborhood itself. In terms of services, the residents can internally exit by moving from one public service provider to another or a private one. An example of collective internal exit is using private security companies to secure the neighborhood. These internal-exit solutions are collective self-help strategies (Mitlin, 2008) through which the residents fill the gap between their collective needs and the provided quality of services and facilities (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2000). Such self-help solutions are apolitical active actions, as the residents choose to improve their neighborhoods without concerning themselves much with the broader political implications (Mitlin, 2008). In this sense, internal-exit solutions are not a loud expression of rights-based activism. They are non-state-targeting solutions (Kruks-Wisner, 2018) since the solution to the problem is not argued as an unrealized right and is not demanded from the state.

A single solution can either be voice or internal exit; however, an individual or a group can combine voice and internal-exit solutions (see van der Land & Doff, 2010). Some active resident groups combine self-help and claim-making solutions to respond to different urban challenges in their neighborhoods. The active resident groups adopt this combination to increase their chances of achievement (Mitlin, 2008). Also, this combination reflects that these groups articulate their contribution to improving the neighborhoods as a right. In conclusion, the solutions and articulations adopted by the active residents reflect how far the residents perceive local activism as a citizen right in their context. Thus, to explore the right-based component in the practice of local activism, we examine (1) where the "adopted solutions" of the active resident groups stand regarding being a voice, internal exit, or a combination of the two, and (2) the "aims" articulated by the resident groups.

Element two: The interaction between local activism and local authorities

There is an emphasis on the importance of interaction and connection between authorities and residents for efficient service provision. Such emphasis gave a prominent role to the authorities in supporting activism in neighborhood governance in the literature (Farrelly & Sullivan, 2010; Varady et al., 2015). Therefore, the authorities' role is not only about offering spaces for citizens to engage in governance but also about encouraging and incubating active residents' initiatives (Hilder, 2010).

However, if the context does not encourage an active role of citizens in local governance, local activism will be practiced either in disconnection from authorities or in a selective manner. Elwageeh et al. (2020) described three dimensions to the tendency of some active resident groups to (1) avoid official recognition through formalization, (2) evade collaboration with authorities in their activities, and (3) avoid

confrontation with authorities when demanding urban improvement. Next, we discuss these dimensions in general and their specific relevance in the context of Cairo city.

The official recognition of active resident groups

By officially recognized active resident groups, we mean the groups whose presence, practices, and involvement in the neighborhood are recognized by government entities. But why is official recognition important? The active resident groups involved in neighborhood governance are expected to practice governance mechanisms, such as decision-making and service production. Van Dam et al. (2015) showed that governmental entities grant support and permissions to officially recognized citizen initiatives rather than those lacking recognition. This official recognition facilitates the active groups' connection with authorities and helps them realize their activities. Official recognition may imply that the active resident group represents a wider group of residents to a certain extent; thus, their actions and demands could be either representative, legitimate, or both.

Fundamentally, active resident groups gain official recognition by acquiring legal status. They institutionalize themselves by registering to one of the organizational and regulatory forms created by the state to contain bottom-up groups (Cornwall et al., 2011), such as residents' associations, unions, and cooperatives. Active resident groups, especially in the Global South, do not solely depend on the organizational and regulatory forms created by the state to contain their initiatives and local activism (Williams et al., 2011) but also adopt informal tactics. They capitalize on the personal connections and ties of the group members to be officially recognized and thus facilitate achieving their goals (Berenschot & Van Klinken, 2018). Another tactic is to capitalize on the power of social media to draw public and official attention to a particular cause or goal (Azer et al., 2019).

From the above discussion, gaining official recognition can empower the active resident groups, validate their representation, and facilitate their actions toward improving the neighborhood. However, several internal and external challenges discourage the active groups from choosing official recognition options that require abiding by the government's organizational framework. Thus, the tendency to avoid formalization is reflected in the "formal status" of the active resident groups.

The collaboration of active resident groups with authorities

Collaboration involves two or more entities working jointly toward a common goal (Carnwell & Carson, 2009; Frey et al., 2006). Collaboration provides effectiveness, efficiency, and quality to social and public services provision and delivery (McNamara, 2012). Moreover, collaboration enables active residents to achieve their grassroot interventions and thus encourages local activism practices (Andrews & Turner, 2006). However, initiating and maintaining collaborations is challenging regarding the needed time, skills, and shift in working culture (Keast et al., 2007). Therefore, collaboration can only exist when the authorities and the active resident group value the potential benefits above the required efforts (Himmelman, 2001).

The collaboration between local authorities and active resident groups has many levels and manifestations. Many scholars defined these levels as "levels of integration" (Konrad, 1996), "collaboration continuum" (McNamara, 2012), "stages of collaboration" (Frey et al., 2006), and "3Cs" (Keast et al., 2007). Such continuums define the intensity of collaboration by breaking down the joint actions into defined classifications. We noticed common aspects in defining these classifications: the type of shared resource and actors' roles. Therefore, we propose observing these two aspects in the activities of active groups. They can define an extent of collaboration ranging from an "isolation" when the active groups neither communicate nor share resources, to a "collaboration" when an extensive (if not total) sharing of resources and co-production between the actors takes place (see McNamara, 2012).

The confrontation of active resident groups with authorities

Confrontations are the interaction patterns used by the active resident groups to express their dissatisfaction with the urban deterioration of their neighborhoods to the local authorities. Conflict is a disagreement arising between two actors due to their different goals or interests (Reinmer et al., 2015). Therefore, confrontations in activism are not *per se* a negative thing that should be avoided. They are embedded in

local activism practices as a tactic for many active groups to reach their goals and manage their conflicting interests (see Sørensen & Johansen, 2016). The residents confront local authorities to change the status quo by adopting different means and levels of escalation, such as formal complaints, media campaigns, lawsuits, protests, and civil disobedience.

Many studies have established a correlation between conflict management strategies and the stages of conflict (see Glasl, 1982; Soliku & Schraml, 2018). By shifting between the means of confrontation, one actor aims to force the other to stop ignoring the conflict and respond to it (Sørensen & Johansen, 2016). By involving external actors, using diverse and formal communication channels, and implementing direct actions, a confrontation becomes more intense, and the risk of losing control over the dispute increases. When the confrontation escalates, it involves third parties such as politicians, public attention, and litigators, until it reaches civil disobedience (see Moore, 2014).

Conflict management strategies reflect how confrontational the active group can be in a context. These strategies go from risky to riskier as they depend on whether the recipient (authorities in our case) will respond to them positively or negatively (Kempf, 2002). Kruks-Wisner (2018) mentioned that claim-making activities by the citizens could carry the risks of social and political reprisal. Therefore, confronting local authorities is not a simple matter of free shifting between the different confrontational methods until the conflict is resolved. Building on this, we investigated for the case of Cairo the strategies of escalation used to define the extent of confrontation that the active groups can endure. This was achieved by looking at the "involvement of third actors," the "usage of diverse channels of communication," and the "type of confrontational action" in their activities.

This section developed a framework to determine what dimensions to observe in active resident groups' activities to understand the nature of local activism in the context of Cairo. For local activism as a rights-based practice, we deduced the ability of the active groups to articulate their needs in the form of rights as a dimension. For local activism as a practice in interaction with authorities, we deduced the dimensions of official recognition, collaboration with authorities, and confrontation with authorities. For each dimension, we defined the determinants that facilitate its analysis. Figure 1 summarizes the four dimensions proposed by this framework and their determinants.
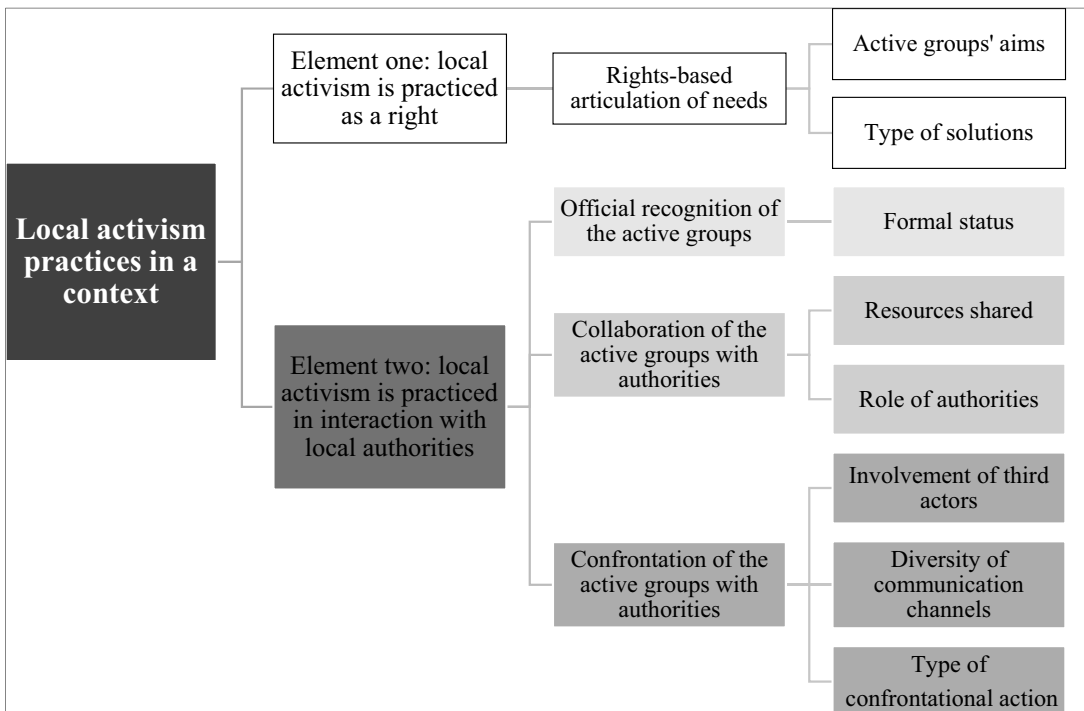

Figure 1. The framework to analyze the active resident groups. Source: Authors.

Methods, data collection, and limitations

We adopted a qualitative research approach, using observations and internet searches to explore the elements of "rights-based practices" and "interaction with local authorities" in local activism in Cairo. Between January and September 2019, we analyzed texts, images, and videos posted by active resident groups in Cairo on social media platforms where they announced their aims and activities. We adopted two stages for data collection: identifying and selecting active resident groups and collecting and analyzing data on the strategies adopted by these groups to improve their neighborhoods.

Identification and selection of the active resident groups

In this stage, we identified the active resident groups whose strategies of local activism we analyzed. We focused on active resident groups in the formal areas in Cairo governorate, while the informal areas are excluded for the following reason. The Egyptian government has special governmental entities and funds to deal with the informal areas. The focus in recent years has been on the project of "Egypt without Informal Areas," where the main approach is relocation instead of in situ development (Alfiky, 2018). Consequently, informal areas have different stakeholders from formal ones and are bound by social, legal, political, and economic restrictions. We believe the context of informal settlements produces different motives for local activism and a more complex state-citizen relationship. Therefore, it is inappropriate to neutralize the special context of informal settlements by including them in this study and draw conclusions from them on Cairo's ordinary neighborhoods. Out of 38 districts in Cairo governorate, we excluded 12 districts having informal settlements in most of their areas.

Focusing on the remaining districts, neither official documentation nor a public database for active resident groups existed. Therefore, we performed a citywide screening by conducting desktop research on Google using different Arabic keywords equivalent to resident unions, associations, coalitions, initiatives, and committees. The names of four groups appeared from Almaadi, Alazbakia, Misr Algadida, and Gharb districts. Capitalizing on these results, we googled the names of these four groups separately. The results were either Facebook accounts for these active groups or news pieces based on the Facebook accounts of these groups. As such, the results directed us to Facebook as a key source of information. The significant presence of Facebook results was expected due to its significant role in the 2011 revolution (AlSayyad & Guvenc, 2015). The potential of social media increases even more in politically challenging contexts where citizens suffer from security and safety constraints to organize collective activities on the ground (Azer et al., 2019). In Egypt, Facebook is one of the few channels for citizens' engagement in public affairs. It is the most used social media platform with 38 million users, which is 37% of the population and almost 70% of Egypt's internet users in 2020 (Hootsuite, 2020).

We subsequently focused on Facebook, where more active groups appeared on its search engine that shares either the same district/neighborhood name or the same type of group (union, coalition, etc.) Out of 26 districts, 21 districts have at least one Facebook page by their residents, and few areas even have four or five pages. The majority of these groups combine different activities, such as sharing local news, reporting services and infrastructure problems, reviewing products, posting memories from the area, and advertising products for sale. However, some of these groups only act as marketplaces or friendship platforms which are not the focus of this study. We noticed that some groups have been inactive for years or rarely post content. Such inactivity could be related to the frustration of many active citizens after the political turbulence in 2013 and the imposed security restrictions afterward (Shawkat et al., 2015). We adopted a purposive sampling technique to eliminate inactive groups or marketplace and friendship-focused ones. We also looked for groups mentioning content regarding the urban problems of their neighborhoods. To do this, we scanned the description of these active groups' pages and the content of their shared posts. As a result, we identified 18 active resident groups from 13 districts. We included the 18 groups to provide as many insights as possible into the practice of local activism in Cairo. Figure 2 shows the 13 districts and the main urban problems highlighted by the active resident groups.
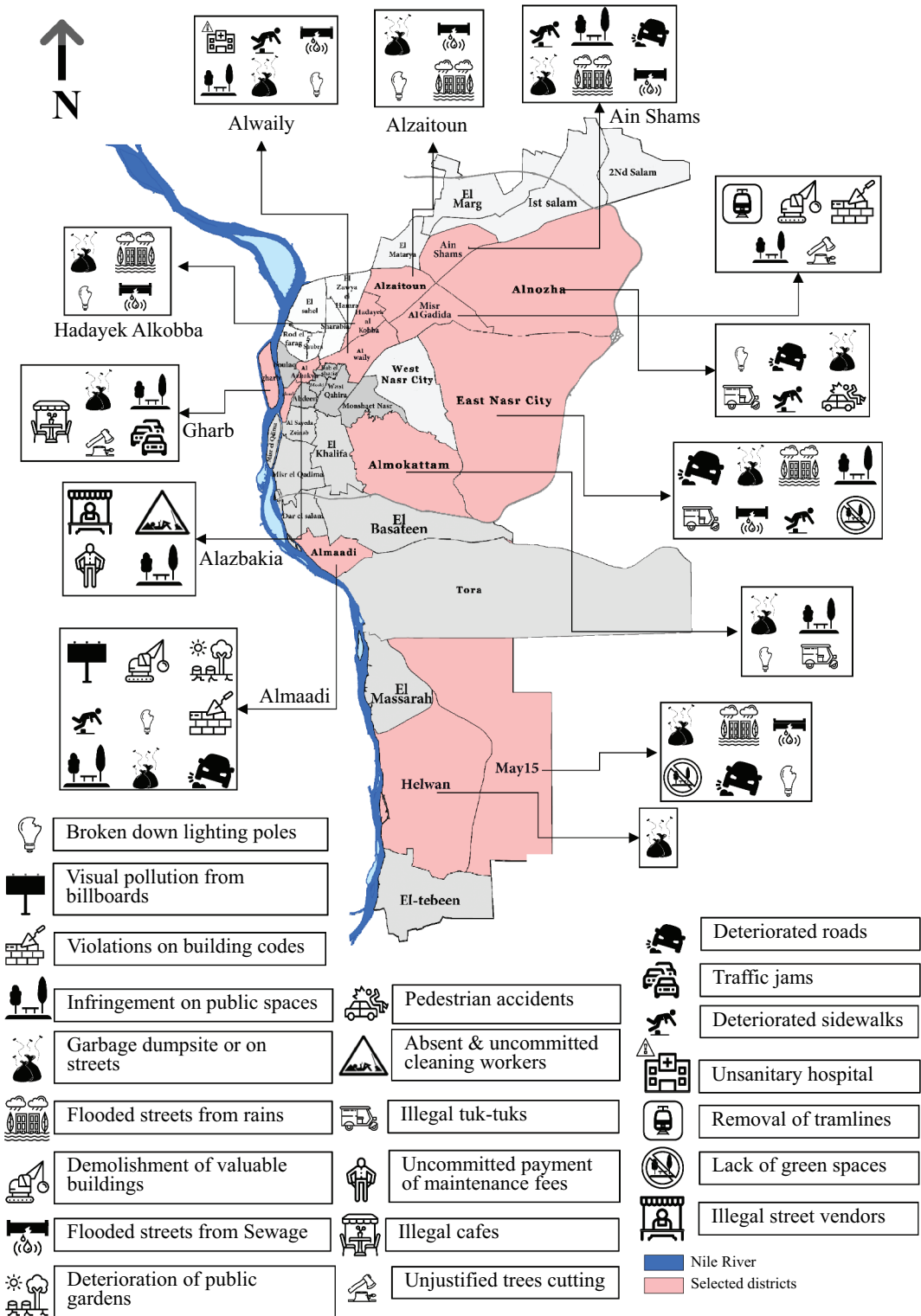
Figure 2. Map of the selected districts and the main problems in each district. Source: Authors based on a map from cairo.gov.eg (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cairo300.jpg), colors and translation, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode, and Icons from (see Appendix).

The 18 active resident groups were either organized as associations, unions, and cooperatives or unorganized. The organized groups are nonprofit groups with elected board members and predefined goals and plans. They mainly depend on collecting money from the residents through membership, monthly service costs, or bank revenues from start-up capital money. These groups' secondary resources are donations from the private sector or grants from national or international entities. Meanwhile, the unorganized groups have names such as coalitions and initiatives. When these groups gather many followers online, the founders are encouraged to lead the process of communicating residents' concerns and ideas to local authorities and taking action on the ground.

Data collection and analysis

We collected data from the photos, videos, posts, and comments published by each group on their Facebook platforms during the years 2018 and 2019. Social media is a resourceful medium for data collection in contexts without proper public databases, where citizens are limited in the available spaces on the ground to practice activism (Ashoub & Elkhateeb, 2021), and when participants are hard-to-reach (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015). We focused on observing and analyzing the active groups' strategies and aims in the data. We also referred to these groups' published descriptions to introduce themselves and their goals. We classified these data depending on the dimensions and determinants developed in the theoretical framework, as shown in Figure 3.

The names of the groups were anonymized to maintain their privacy and safety, especially when connecting citizens with the topic of active citizenship may put the members of these groups at risk of reprisal reactions (Miller, 2018). A code containing the name of the group's district and the group's type of organization[1] represent each group. Table 1 shows samples of the data and their analysis.

Study limitations

It is important to note that this study's results are not representative of all possible active groups in Cairo for two main limitations. First, relying on social media to identify active groups cannot guarantee capturing the full range of active resident groups in Cairo. There may be active groups that are either undetectable due to privacy settings or based on mobile chat apps, or without a virtual presence. However, due to the widespread use of Facebook, it is considered to be the most important online channel to gather people in Egypt, and we found all active groups known to us in Cairo on Facebook. Keleg et al. (2021) also noticed that districts in Cairo have at least one Facebook group and a page for residents to discuss the district news or exchange ideas, announcements, and information. Therefore, we believe that the active groups on Facebook could uncover most practices of local activism in Cairo. Second, the data collected is limited to the active groups observed at the time of data collection. Accordingly, the results capture diverse practices of local activism in Cairo's neighborhoods; however, they do not claim the continuous presence of the same practices or active groups.

Results and discussion

In this research, we examined the solutions adopted by selected active resident groups regarding two main elements: (1) the practice of local activism as a right and (2) the practice of local activism in interaction with local authorities. Next, we explain where the active groups in Cairo stand regarding these two elements.

The practice of local activism as a right in Cairo

For the element of local activism as a right, we investigated the ability of the active groups to articulate their local interventions as a right in their stated aims and the adopted solutions. In the aims of the active groups, we found three main categories. First, active groups whose aims are rights-centered.
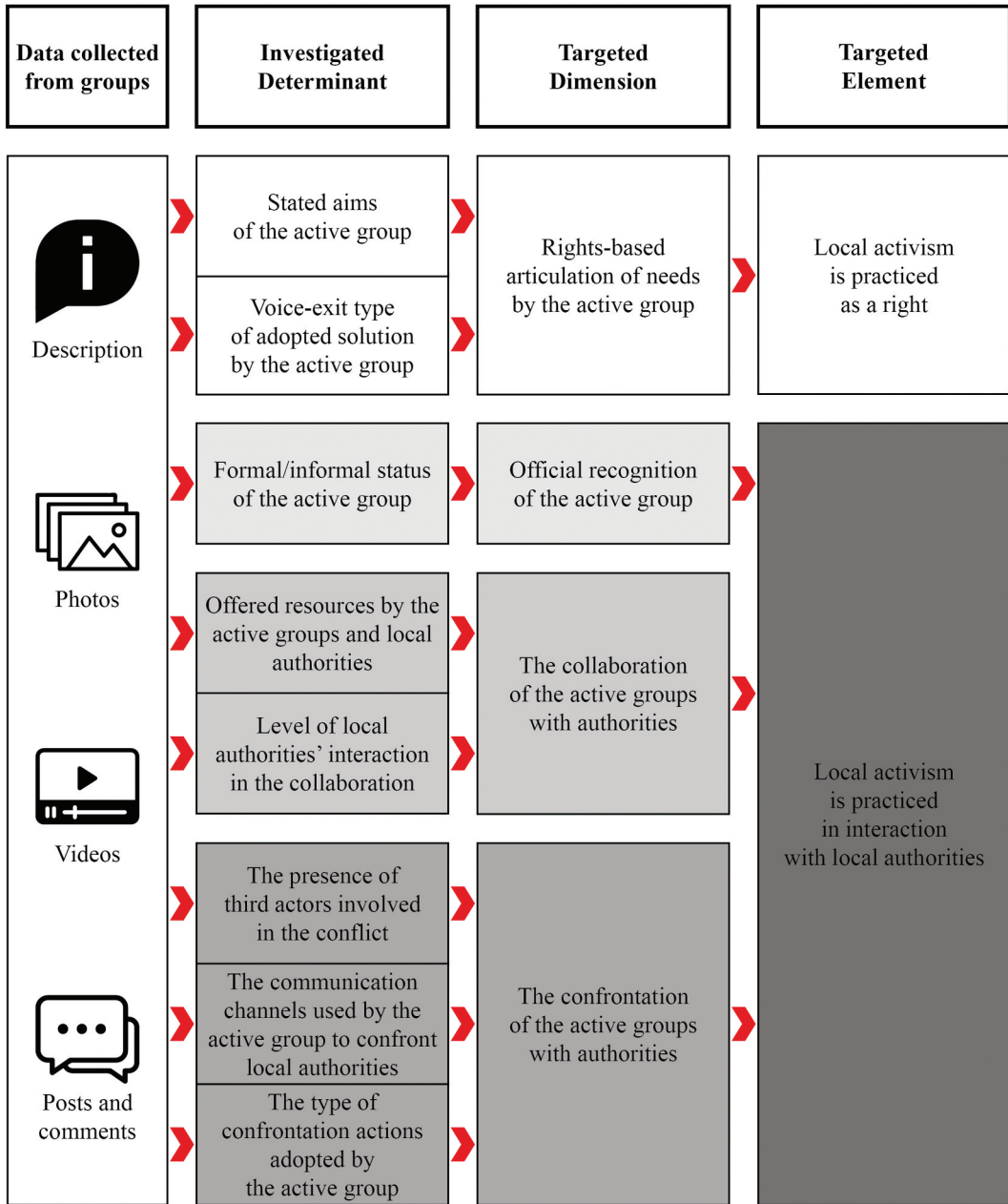
Data collected from groups	Investigated Determinant	Targeted Dimension	Targeted Element
Description	Stated aims of the active group	Rights-based articulation of needs by the active group	Local activism is practiced as a right
	Voice-exit type of adopted solution by the active group		
Photos	Formal/informal status of the active group	Official recognition of the active group	Local activism is practiced in interaction with local authorities
	Offered resources by the active groups and local authorities	The collaboration of the active groups with authorities	
Videos	Level of local authorities' interaction in the collaboration		
	The presence of third actors involved in the conflict	The confrontation of the active groups with authorities	
Posts and comments	The communication channels used by the active group to confront local authorities		
	The type of confrontation actions adopted by the active group		

Figure 3. Data collection and analysis flow based on the theoretical framework. Source: Authors.

These groups emphasize the right-based term *rights* in their description of the groups. Second, active groups whose aims were service quality-centered, revolving around improving the public spaces and the quality of the local public services. Third, active groups whose aims combine rights-centered aims and service quality ones.

We also found three categories of solutions adopted by the active groups in Cairo. First, active groups adopting voice solutions in the form of highlighting the urban deterioration in their neighborhood and demanding intervention from authorities. Second, active groups adopting internal-exit solutions by improving the urban deteriorations themselves instead of depending on the level of

Table 1. Sample content from active groups' posted activities and aims in relation to the investigated determinants.

Investigated Determinants	Classifications	Sample content from active groups' posted activities and aims
Aims of the active group	Rights-centered	Aim: the page helps the people to demand their legitimate right to a better life and development of their district
	Quality of services-centered	Aim: to upgrade the deteriorated roads and main squares
	Mixed	Aim: discuss the district's problems, solve them, and communicate our voice to the officials.
Formal/ informal status	Formal	"According to the decisions of Union <X>, private cars and taxis only are allowed to enter from Gate <Y>, and whoever violates this shall face legal consequences."
	Informal	"Everything, including security, cleanliness, speed bumps, paints, and other things, was done with the self-efforts of the residents without a union."
Authorities' interaction	Listening	"The union board is thankful to the district office for responding and sending specialists to maintain the light control panels for buildings 1–9."
	Facilitating with procedural support	"We shed light on the positive things constantly. Today we mention the support of authorities in licensing the establishment of security gates in the neighborhood."
	Participating with physical and human support	"In cooperation with the local authorities, we will deliver sturdy bags to the doorman of buildings and villas to collect tree trimmings and mowed grass. District workers will pass by every two days to empty the bags."
Confrontation	Criticism using social media	• "Mr. head of the district [. . .] this is the failing garbage collection system; we do not want it. We do not want you." • "The neighborhood, unfortunately, with this head of the district, is witnessing the worst period in its history."
	Mediating through personal connections	"We do not forget the support of our representative in the Parliament in obtaining security approvals for the security gates."
	Campaigning through social media	"The last day to sign the petition tonight to stop the demolishment of villas in the neighborhood."
	Criticism through press	"The complaint we sent to the newspaper has been published."
	Administrative decisions through authorities' complaints units	"A screenshot of the complaint to the Council of Ministers regarding the accumulated garbage in the neighborhood."

Source: Authors.

urban improvement offered by the local authorities. Finally, active groups combining voice and internal-exit solutions. We will discuss next the relevance of these observations on the practice of local activism of these groups as a right.

In Table 2, we noticed that the active groups that articulate their needs as rights tend to adopt voice solutions to reach their goals. For instance, Misr Algadida (UG) aims to protect "the right to a quality life in Misr Algadida." To achieve this, residents raise awareness against the problems occurring in the district on the group's platform. We also noticed that most groups that use the "right" tone for urban improvement are unorganized. The unorganized groups seem to capitalize on social media's ability to mobilize, motivate, and expand the outreach of residents' problems or claims. These abilities are consistent with voice solutions in which the active groups target the authorities and demand improvement from them. They also target the residents by reminding them of their rights to a certain quality of life and their responsibility toward demanding this right.

The aims of organized groups in the form of associations, cooperatives, and unions focus on improving the quality of service and the built environment. They do not use right-based expressions in their aims. Without interviewing members of these groups, this observation is not definitive evidence that these groups do not consider their active role in improving neighborhoods as a right. Instead, this observation emphasizes that these groups' aims focus on satisfying the need for urban improvement more than stressing residents' right to better urban quality. Moving to their adopted strategies, the union-based active groups adopt internal-exit solutions such as setting up gates at the entrances of

Table 2. Local activism practiced as a right in Cairo.

Code	Rights-based articulation of needs	
	Aims articulation	Type of solutions
East Nasr City (UG1) Alwaily (UG2)	Mixed	Combined
Hadayek Alkobba (UG)		Voice
Almokattam (UG) May 15 (UG) Alnozha (UG) Ain Shams (UG) Alwaily (UG1)		
Misr Algadida (UG) Alzaitoun (UG)	Rights-centered	
East Nasr City (UG2) Helwan (UG)	Quality of services centered	
Gharb (assoc.)		Combined
Misr Algadida (assoc.) East Nasr City (coop.)		
Alazbakia union		Internal exit
Almaadi union East Nasr City union		

Source: Authors.

their areas and funding the pavement, plantation, and tiling of multiple streets in their neighborhoods. These solutions focus on satisfying the need for urban improvement more than stressing the authorities' responsibility toward maintaining the residents' right to better urban quality. Meanwhile, active groups in the form of associations and cooperatives combine voice and internal-exit solutions. For instance, East Nasr City (coop.) employed workers to clean the streets and maintain the sewage system of the buildings (internal exit); simultaneously, it demanded the state's intervention in preventing the buildings and shops' infringements over public spaces (voice).

In our case, active resident groups often use rights-related expressions in the context of the right to a certain urban quality, including maintained roads, walkable sidewalks, safe streets, organized market spaces, and a clean environment. This expression of rights indicates that the voice actions by the active resident groups are reactions to the right to a certain urban quality that is not adhered to by the government. Meanwhile, the use of the rights argumentation as the right of residents in decision-making was only noticed in the voice actions of Misr Algadida (assoc.) that call for residents' participation in the urban improvement plans of their neighborhood. Our analysis reveals that many active groups include right-based argumentations in their aims and adopt voice actions to demand their rights. These results suggest that many active groups practice local activism as a right, but it is a right to a certain urban quality within the neighborhoods. This right rarely extends to the right of residents to be involved in the processes that produce the neighborhoods' urban conditions in the first place.

The practice of local activism in interaction with local authorities in Cairo

We deduced the dimensions of official recognition, collaboration with authorities, and confrontation with authorities for the element of practicing local activism in interaction with authorities. For the official recognition dimension, we searched for the legal status of the active groups in terms of formality. For the collaboration dimension, we explored the resources offered by both the active groups and district offices in their joint activities to improve the neighborhoods. Additionally, we

observed the level of authorities' interaction with the groups to determine their role in collaborative activities. Finally, for the confrontation dimension, we investigated the involvement of a third actor in the conflict between the active groups and local authorities. We also investigated the diversity of the communication channels used and the type of confrontation actions.

The official recognition of the active resident groups in Cairo

Some groups had a high level of official recognition due to their legal status as associations, cooperatives, or unions. The posts of these formal groups show that formalization widened their influence since the laws recognized them. Also, becoming formal enables them to practice different governance mechanisms. For instance, the district office contracted Masr Algadida (assoc.) to implement urban improvement projects in their area after becoming formal. In addition, the district office occasionally contacted Gharb (assoc.) to publish local news. These interactions indicate that local authorities recognize these formal groups and are inclined to involve them in the governance process.

Meanwhile, most unorganized groups depend on informal tactics to be officially recognized. They capitalize on the number of online followers or the members' personal connections. With these connections, some unorganized groups approach the local authorities and present themselves. However, it is up to the local authorities whether to consider hearing and responding to that group of residents. These informal tactics may allow the group to participate with local authorities in joint work on the ground, as in the case of Alwaily (UG2) and Alnozha (UG). However, as noticed in the rest of the unorganized groups, their participation in governance is merely to communicate the neighborhood problems.

Regarding the reasons behind the significant presence of informal active groups, Fahmy (2012) described the state system in Egypt as "Bureaucratic Authoritarian." This system puts legal and procedural challenges on civil society to establish a formal group. Additionally, the active resident groups face internal challenges related to the lack of resources needed for an organization, such as funds, time, and capacity. Such challenges may drive many active resident groups in Cairo to choose informal ways to become officially recognized. This choice is especially the case for the groups focusing on being a voice platform rather than a self-help group that wants to secure financial and physical resources for their activities.

The collaboration of active resident groups with authorities in Cairo

As shown in Table 3, many unorganized groups seem to work in isolation from local authorities. They offer a platform for the residents to post about the urban deterioration in their neighborhoods and question the authorities' performance. However, these groups do not seem interested in establishing joint work with the authorities. El-Azzazy and Zaazaa (2017) referred to this work approach as the "shadow approach," in which active citizens work without cooperating or interacting with the authorities since they fear being disrupted. This fear increased after the laws forbidding fieldwork without permits (El-Azzazy & Zaazaa, 2017) and criminalizing unsanctioned protests (Shawkat et al., 2015).

We also noticed that the groups in our study that provide various resources to improve their neighborhood receive more supporting resources from the local authorities. This correlation may become challenging for many informal groups that cannot legally collect financial and material resources. Therefore, they can only offer information about the problems in the neighborhood and ideas to solve them. The information sharing from the unorganized groups is met by listening and possible responses from local authorities. Meanwhile, the formal active groups show an ability to raise funds and acquire material resources for their urban improvement activities. This ability is met by more support and resources from the district office. For example, Gharb (assoc.) offered their human resources and cleaning tools to implement cleanup initiatives in the district. In return, the district office offered cleaning workers and heavy equipment. A limited sharing of resources by the local authorities in Cairo is expected due to the centralized governance system in Egypt. Almost 90% of the governorates' budget is centralized and directed by appointed officials (Tadamun, 2013), which leads to a top-down decision-making process in allocating this budget. As such, the resources left to local authorities that could be shared with active resident groups remain questionable.

Table 3. The practice of local activism in interaction with local authorities in Cairo.

Code	Official recognition (formal/informal)	Collaboration with authorities to improve the urban quality of the neighborhood			Confrontation with local authorities to improve the urban quality of the neighborhood		
		Offered resources		Level of authorities' interaction	Involvement of the third actor	Diversity of communication channels	Type of confrontation actions
		Active Group	District Office				
Alzaitoun (UG)	Informal	No collaboration activities were found			Yes	• Social media • Personal connections	• Criticism • Mediating
Hadayek Alkobba (UG)						• Social media	• Criticism
Almokattam (UG)					No	• Press • Social media	
Helwan (UG)							
Ain Shams (UG)							
Misr Algadida (UG)							
Alwaily (UG1)		• Information • Human	Complaints receiving	Listening	Yes	• Social media • Press • Personal connections • Authorities	• Criticism • Mediating • Administrative decision
East Nasr City (UG2)		• Information & ideas				• Social media • Press & media	• Criticism • Campaigning
Alnozha (UG)					No	• Social media	
May 15 (UG)							
Alwaily (UG2)		• Information • Human	• Complaints receiving • Procedural support • Physical support	• Listening • Facilitating • Participating			
East Nasr City (UG1)		• Information & ideas • Physical • Human	• Complaints receiving • Procedural support • Physical support • Human support		Yes	• Social media • Personal connections	• Criticism • Mediating

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Code	Official recognition (formal/informal)	Collaboration with authorities to improve the urban quality of the neighborhood			Confrontation with local authorities to improve the urban quality of the neighborhood		
		Offered resources		Level of authorities' interaction	Involvement of the third actor	Diversity of communication channels	Type of confrontation actions
		Active Group	District Office				
Gharb (assoc.)	Formal	• Information & ideas • Physical • Human	• Complaints receiving • Procedural support • Physical support • Human support	• Listening • Facilitating • Participating	Yes	• Social media • Press • Personal connections • Authorities • Court system	• Campaigning • Lobbying • Administrative decision • Litigation
Almaadi union			• Complaints receiving			• Social media • Press • Authorities	• Campaigning • Administrative decision
East Nasr City (coop.)			• Complaints receiving			• Press • Personal connections • Authorities	• Campaigning • Mediating • Administrative decision
Alazbakia union			• Technical support • Complaints receiving • Procedural support		No confrontational activities were found		
Misr Algadida (assoc.)			• Complaints receiving • Procedural support • Physical support		Yes	• Social media • Press & media • Personal connections • Authorities	• Criticism • Campaigning • Lobbying • Administrative decision
East Nasr City union			• Complaints receiving • Procedural support		No	• Social media	• Criticism

Source: Authors.

Regarding the level of interaction by local authorities, they seem to be "passive responders." In posts shared by the active groups on joint activities with district offices, we found these activities initiated by the groups. Meanwhile, the local authorities seemed to only react to residents' initiatives but did not initiate joint activities themselves. This passive responding role of the local authorities corresponds with the unfamiliar culture toward citizen engagement in local governance. The local authorities in Cairo are far from involving the residents in their activities or seeing them as partners in the urban governance of districts. Additionally, they do not appear to practice any "level of participation" (Teernstra & Pinkster, 2016). This passive responding attitude suggests that local authorities are neither expecting an active role from the residents nor mobilizing the residents for such a role.

The confrontation of the active resident groups with authorities in Cairo

Many unorganized groups in our study adopt online criticism, which is a low level of confrontation, focussing on pinpointing the local authorities' deficiencies and demanding their neighborhoods' improvement. They post pictures and videos of many problems in the neighborhoods, accompanied by captions like "where is the district office amidst all this negligence." These captions imply the presence of a conflict with local authorities, and the residents publicly express that conflict. However, it is an uncommunicated conflict because no posts mentioned a direct communication of these conflicts with the local authorities. We could not find content from these groups regarding involving third parties with administrative, legal, or legislative power. We found no mention of escalating activities such as submitting official complaints or resorting to the court system or the Parliament in their adopted strategies.

The form of escalation adopted by some unorganized groups depended on initiating media and press campaigns to gain public support. Additionally, few groups involve a third party as a mediator between them and the district office. This mediation strategy depends on the group's connections with natural leaders, political party members, or local members in parliament who could communicate with the district office. While these third actors may influence the local authorities, they do not have the power to enforce decisions. For instance, East Nasr City (UG2) could not force the local authorities to stop the infringements of cafés on public spaces despite running a wide media campaign and reaching out to parliament members. The reliance of residents on personal connections to deal with local authorities was also highlighted by Berenschot and Van Klinken (2018) in Indonesia. These personal connections help active groups to achieve results amicably and informally without putting the groups in face-to-face interactions with the local authorities. However, the influence of these personal connections is non-binding.

It might seem unexpected that unorganized groups adopt this less confrontational manner since they majorly depend on voice actions and state-targeting strategies. This less confrontational manner is not a sign of responsiveness from local authorities, as many groups express that their strategies did not solve the conflict. Instead, the opting out of many active groups from higher confrontational strategies could result from the political history in Egypt. Although weak in legitimacy and effective administration, the single-party regimes in Egypt used repression to maintain themselves. This repression created what Fahmy (2012) described as "passive resistance," in which the citizens do not confront the government but rather evade and ignore unpleasant policies. Our results suggest that active resident groups are cautious when choosing their confrontation strategies since they do not have equal power in front of the local government. So, even if the residents might be aware of the different levels of confrontation, they are also aware of the possible legal consequences of being accused of "publishing fake news" or "instigating revolt" (see Demerdash, 2021; Sweet, 2019).

On the contrary, many organized active groups in our study resort to legal and administrative measures to escalate and pressure the local authorities. For instance, Gharb (assoc.) helped the residents in suing the National Authority for Tunnels in Egypt against the new metro project passing under old buildings. Almaadi union managed to stop local authorities from allowing the demolition of villas to construct apartment buildings after complaining to the governor and council of ministers. By adopting these escalations, these groups confront the lack of responsiveness from the local authorities face-to-face. As previously mentioned, these organized groups cooperate with district offices to maximize the efficiency of their urban improvement activities. So, some groups still choose highly confrontational strategies even

though they might face a future lack of cooperation from local authorities due to displacing local officials' power with decisions from upper administrative levels (Néfissa, 2009).

A view on the local activism practices of active groups in Cairo

At this point, we looked at how different active groups in Cairo practiced local activism as a right and their interactions with local authorities. As a final step, we merged the two dimensions across these groups to show the general distribution of the main characteristics of local activism and identify clusters of active groups that share the same characteristics. As shown in Table 4, we developed three main clusters of active groups that connect the 18 active groups in this study with existing types of

Table 4. A holistic view on the 18 active resident groups.

Code	Type of solutions	Level of official recognition (formal/informal)	The higher level of collaboration adopted	The higher level of confrontation adopted	Type of active group
Hadayek Alkobba (UG)	Voice	Informal	Isolation	Criticism	User
Helwan (UG)					
Almokattam (UG)					
Ain Shams (UG)					
Misr Algadida (UG)					
Alzaitoun (UG)					
May 15 (UG)			Communication		
East Nasr City (UG2)	Voice	Informal	Communication	Campaigning	Advocacy
Alnozha (UG)					
Alwaily (UG1)			Cooperation	Administrative decision	
Alwaily (UG2)	Combined			Criticism	
East Nasr City (UG1)				Mediation	
East Nasr City (coop.)	Combined	Formal	Communication	Administrative decision	Self-provisioning
Misr Algadida (assoc.)			Cooperation		
Gharb (assoc.)				Litigation	
Alazbakia union	Internal exit			Avoidance	
Almaadi union				Administrative decision	
East Nasr City union			Coordination	Criticism	
Total	• Voice = 10 • Combined = 5 • Internal exit = 3	• Informal = 12 • Formal = 6	• Isolation = 6 • Communication = 4 • Coordination = 1 • Cooperation = 7	• Avoidance = 1 • Criticism = 9 • Campaigning = 2 • Mediation = 1 • Administrative decision = 4 • Litigation = 1	• User = 7 • Advocacy = 5 • Self-provisioning = 6

Source: Authors.

active groups in the literature. By doing this, we attempt to provide a holistic view on the local activism practices of these groups.

First, we found a cluster of unorganized active groups that express the need for a certain level of urban quality by posting online critiques and comments. They adopt a shadow approach in their work, avoiding direct interaction with local authorities. Although they are voice groups, they avoid confrontation with authorities and isolate themselves from collaborating with them. They depend on the public interaction they have on their pages and the connections of their members for possible official recognition. They resemble the "user" type of citizen participation described by Cornwall and Gaventa (2000), which reviews service quality.

Second is the cluster of advocacy groups that have a significant belief in their right to a certain urban quality and in the responsibility of the local government for providing and maintaining this quality (see Cornwall & Gaventa, 2000). They communicate with local authorities to report the problem and follow up on the officials' response. Meantime, other groups confront the local authorities through campaigns and mediators from their connections. They are unorganized groups that collect complaints on social media and work on communicating these complaints to decision-makers. In a way, these unorganized groups take the "user" type one step further by advocating their right to a certain urban quality and demanding it from the state.

Finally is the cluster of organized groups that exit the deteriorated public services and infrastructure as much as possible and rely on providing services and improving infrastructure on their own. Authorities officially recognize them through their legal formalization. In some cases, they form coalitions with local authorities and, in other cases, clash with them through litigation and administrative decision. The formality of these groups helps them raise funds, acquire permits, and share resources with local authorities. They resemble the "self-provisioning" type of citizen participation described by Cornwall and Gaventa (2000).

Conclusion

This paper focuses on exploring how local activism by resident groups manifests itself in the problematic context of Cairo. For this research, we reviewed the characteristics that shape local activism in the neighborhood governance literature. Rights-based practices and state-citizen interaction were key elements in the literature on local activism practices. These two elements were the base of a theoretical framework that enables us to better understand the practices of the 18 active resident groups in Cairo city that we identified on Facebook.

Our findings suggest that active groups in Cairo are practicing local activism in the form of a right. However, this right mostly results from the need for a certain urban quality of services. It rarely extends to the residents' right to decide on the urban improvement and policies in the neighborhoods. The active residents' interaction with the local authorities is selective, ambivalent, and unstable due to the problematic state-citizen relationship in the Egyptian context. On the one hand, unorganized active groups tend to work under the radar by being informal and disconnected from local authorities and avoiding clashes with them. On the other hand, other groups want to benefit from and cooperate with the district offices' resources and therefore choose to become formal and recognized by the local authorities.

Furthermore, we observed three main clusters of active groups. First, unorganized user groups that depend on social media to react to the quality of services without actual interaction with local authorities. Second, some unorganized groups take the user behavior one step further by advocating their rights in a certain urban quality and demanding it from the state, adopting low levels of collaboration and confrontation. Finally, we found self-provisioning groups that are formally recognized by authorities. These organized groups interact more with local authorities than unorganized ones in the collaboration and confrontation interactions.

The topic of local activism in Global South contexts has been tackled in recent studies, focusing on "insurgent citizenship" (Watson, 2016) that takes place in the form of resistant practices by

marginalized citizens in poor and informal settings. In these forms of activism, the residents confront the authorities face-to-face to claim their right to the city. Our study contributes to the literature by showing that local activism in Cairo is practiced in less confrontational and collaborative manners. These forms of local activism are distinct from the state-supported local activism, and the resistive practices of activism found in other contexts. These findings, therefore, improve our understanding of residents' challenges and experiences when practicing activism in a problematic state-citizen relationship. This problematic relationship is found in many contexts in Africa and beyond. Being informed about these challenges and experiences in such contexts is the starting point for policymakers to understand and support local activism.

Obviously, this research has limitations. Due to its exploratory nature, our findings should be considered indicative of how local activism is practiced in a politically challenging and largely unexplored context, but they are not fully representative of all active groups in Cairo. Also, to understand the characteristics of local activism in Cairo, and particularly their visibility in the public domain, we are limited by what the active groups publish on their platform. As we could not conduct interviews with the founders of these active groups, it is possible that what active groups announce generally differs from what they would say in one-to-one interviews. Future research should consider interviewing members of active resident groups to strengthen or adjust these findings.

Moving forward, any improvement to the active role of residents in local governance in a problematic state-citizen relationship necessitates legal and procedural changes. These legal and procedural changes should be geared toward fostering "willing, able and equipped" (Andrews et al., 2008, p. 492) citizens to practice local activism. They should encourage active resident groups, establish their effective involvement in the yearly development plans, and facilitate the procedures for residents' gatherings in public spaces. Furthermore, these changes should promote residents' unions, cooperatives, and associations and facilitate their establishment. Most importantly, these changes need to provide a necessary shift in how local authorities value local activism in these contexts. We observe that local authorities in Cairo seem to lack the motivation and incentives to proactively reach out to active groups. If the value of local activism is (re)defined in such contexts, the role of the local authorities may shift to that of initiators, mobilizers, and educators. Further research should therefore investigate the perspectives of active residents and local authorities regarding the legal and procedural changes that underpin a more positive and pro-active local government perspective on the value of local activism.

Note

1. UG represents unorganized group.
   Coop. represents neighborhood cooperative.
   Assoc. represents non-profit association.
   Union represents coordinating occupants' union.

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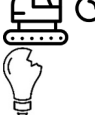
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