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How to maximize the chances of sustainable renovation in housing cooperatives

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Abstract

Obtaining sustainable renovation in large housing cooperatives is often a challenge. Two thirds majority vote at the general meeting is required. A lack of engagement may delay the process, and the residents often remain passive until they realize there is a risk of increased fees if the plans are carried out. Even if the investments are well grounded economically, the residents' fear of economic consequences is often an obstacle during the process. The residents may get involved, but will oppose the renovation. The decision process is then often called off, and needs to start over. As postponing necessary renovations substantially increases the risk of building degradation, it is of importance to map factors that increase the chances of housing cooperatives coming to an agreement on sustainable and energy efficient renovations. Through action research, three pilot studies, looking at decision processes for sustainable upgrading are followed over a period of two years. Preliminary results show that openness in the initial stages of the process is crucial. Also, visualizing the results and consequences may be effective means to obtain a dialogue with the residents, who are often more interested in the aesthetic factors than the technical solutions. Visualization of AMS (Advanced Monitoring Systems) and other household specific measurements can make residents more aware of their energy use, and explain/illustrate the need for upgrading. If communicated (visualized feedback) to the residents in a comprehensive and user friendly way, the introduction of AMS may make people more aware of their energy use, hence facilitate the decision making process regarding sustainable renovation. After renovation, the indoor climate may be more easily influenced by the building use than previously. AMS can help maintain an environmental friendly life style.

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1. Background

In Europe today, 35-40% of the energy is used in buildings. International studies show that energy efficiency improvement is the cheapest and simplest climate action [1]. A necessary consequence for the building sector is extensive renovation of existing buildings, altering them to structures with little energy use [2].

Necessary and sustainable renovation of buildings is often problematic when the owners are lay people without experience of building/renovation processes, particularly when a building is owned collectively by many residents. Most people in Norway are owner-occupiers. Nearly 80% of the households are freeholders. 14 % of the freeholders own their dwelling unit through a housing cooperative (most housing cooperatives are blocks of flats in the cities) (www.ssb.no). «Borettslag» is the legal entity for housing cooperatives in Norway. This company is owned by those who live in the cooperative; the shareholders. Each share gives the resident the right to live in the cooperative, in a particular apartment (or house), and the shareholder is free to sell her/his part. When a part is for sale, the cooperative statute can give internal first preference (to other shareholders). The highest authority in the cooperative is the annual meeting of shareholders, at which the board responsible for daily operations is elected. Most housing cooperatives are members of a cooperative housing association (cooperative building society) that functions as general manager of the housing cooperative. Most cooperative housing associations in Norway are members of the Norwegian Federation of Cooperative Housing Associations (www.nbbl.no).

Obtaining sustainable renovation in large housing cooperatives is often a challenge. Two thirds majority vote at the general meeting is required. A lack of enthusiasm may delay the process, and the residents will often remain passive until they realize there is a risk of increased rents if the plans are carried out. Even if the investments are well grounded economically, the residents' fear of economic consequences is an obstacle in the process. The residents may get involved, but will oppose the renovation. The decision process is then often called off, and will need to be started over. As postponing necessary renovations substantially increases the risk of building degradation, it is of importance to map factors that increase the chances that housing cooperatives may come to an agreement on carrying out sustainable and energy efficient renovations.

This research builds on a former project on barriers and drivers for ambitious renovation in housing cooperatives [3], a study by Hauge et al. [3] shows which factors may increase the chance that the residents/ owners in housing cooperatives agree on a sustainable energy efficient renovation. The results are based on 30 qualitative interviews of professional advisors in cooperative housing associations, and chairman/ board and residents in three chosen case studies. The findings show that success criteria and barriers are found within the societal level and the organizational/ individual level. Barriers and success criteria within the societal level are: knowledge level regarding energy efficient renovation among relevant actors, owner structure of housing, and existing regulations and incentives. For the organizational and individual level, the following categories influencing renovation processes were identified: time frame of the process, organization of the process, understanding residents' needs, economy, flow, and available exemplary projects and role models. In order to influence residents in housing cooperatives to agree to sustainable energy efficient renovation, the following aspects were found to be crucial for the housing cooperative board [4]:

- To be open about the plans, and at an early stage inform about necessary renovation and prepare for a good dialogue with the owners and residents.
- To invest plenty of time to let the project and let decisions mature.
- To seek advice. Involve the cooperative housing associations or equivalent advisors early in the process.
- To agree within the board on a joint proposal for renovation.
- To involve people who can create enthusiasm when the project is put to the owners and residents.
- To let the owners/ residents take the floor. Remember that the need for information among owners and residents is crucial. They must be able to ask questions, voice objections, and introduce new ideas.
- To take the owners' and residents' suggestions seriously. This is important in order to create confidence and anchor the project.
- To provide information in small portions, both orally and written. Use examples, pictures and a simple language.
- To set up the calculations showing the financial consequences for the individual owner. Show how the costs and energy savings affect monthly costs over time.
- To wait with the voting on the renovation until the shareholders are adequately informed. Then the project

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