

Navigating Social Inclusion in Business Improvement Districts: Insights from Sweden

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Abstract

This study investigates how Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Sweden conceptualize and operationalize social inclusion. It focuses on their community engagement strategies, the challenges they encounter, the best practices they identify for potential transfer to other BIDs, and potential avenues for improvement. The research employs a basic qualitative methodology grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, using email interviews to explore the perspectives of BID representatives operating within diverse urban contexts. The findings indicate that although social inclusion is broadly regarded as important, it's often addressed in practical terms with limited attention to structural inequalities or rights-based frameworks. Engagement strategies include safety initiatives, co-creation projects, and localized events. These approaches reflect creativity and adaptability but often prioritize short-term visibility at the expense of long-term systemic change. Internally, BIDs report constraints such as limited resources, unclear organizational roles, and low levels of internal engagement. Externally, they face challenges related to stakeholder misalignment, institutional fragmentation, and fragile trust with local communities. Tensions between economic objectives and social inclusion goals further complicate these efforts. Respondents identified best practices focused on trust building, consistent local presence, and inclusive communication. They also advocated for more stable institutional support. The study concludes that although current BID initiatives demonstrate significant potential, achieving sustained and genuinely inclusive outcomes will require more robust organizational structures, deeper engagement strategies, and broader stakeholder collaboration.

Keywords: Business Improvement Districts (BID), Social Inclusion, Community Engagement, Urban Governance, Participatory Governance, Social Capital, Urban Political Economy.

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	5
Tables.....	6
1. Introduction.....	7
1.1 Background.....	7
1.2 Aim & Research Questions.....	8
1.3 Delimitation.....	9
1.4 Research Rationale.....	9
1.5 Disposition.....	10
2. Literature Review.....	12
2.1 The BID Model and Its Development.....	12
2.1.1 <i>BIDs in the Swedish Context</i>	14
2.2 Urban Governance.....	16
2.3 Economic Development in Urban Context.....	17
2.4 Public-Private Partnerships (PPP).....	18
2.5 Social Inclusion in Urban Development.....	19
2.6 Community Engagement in Urban Development.....	21
2.7 Strategies to Promote Community Engagement.....	22
2.8 Challenges in Fostering Community Engagement.....	23
3. Theoretical Framework.....	25
3.1 Social Capital Theory.....	25
3.2 Participatory Governance.....	26
3.3 Urban Political Economy.....	27
3.4 Relevance of Theoretical Frameworks.....	28
4. Methodology.....	30
4.1 Scientific Theoretical Foundation.....	30
4.2 Research Design and Data Collection Method.....	31
4.3 Conducting Interviews.....	32
4.4 Selection of Participants.....	33
4.5 Method Reflection.....	35
4.6 Rigor in Qualitative Research.....	36
4.7 Ethics.....	37
4.8 Data Analysis & Material Processing.....	38
5. Analysis.....	40
5.1 Understanding and Practicing Social Inclusion.....	40
5.1.1 <i>Defining Social Inclusion</i>	40

5.1.2 Prioritizing Aspects of Inclusion.....	42
5.1.3 Community Engagement Initiatives.....	44
5.2 Challenges and Balancing Goals.....	46
5.2.1 Internal Engagement Challenges.....	46
5.2.2 External Engagement Challenges.....	48
5.2.3 Balancing Economic and Social Goals.....	49
5.3 Strengthening Engagement.....	51
5.3.1 Improving Practices and Strengthening Partnerships.....	51
5.3.2 Local Practices and Reflections.....	52
6. Discussion.....	55
6.1 Understanding and Practicing Social Inclusion.....	55
6.1.1 Defining Social Inclusion.....	55
6.1.2 Prioritizing Aspects of Inclusion.....	57
6.1.3 Community Engagement Initiatives.....	58
6.2 Challenges and Balancing Goals.....	60
6.2.1 Challenges (Internal and External).....	60
6.2.2 Balancing Economic and Social Goals.....	62
6.3 Strengthening Engagement.....	63
6.3.1 Improving Practices and Strengthening Partnerships.....	63
6.3.2 Local Practices and Reflections.....	64
7. Conclusion.....	67
7.1 Future studies.....	71
8. Sources.....	72
9. Appendices.....	79
9.1 Appendix 1: Interview Questions.....	79
9.2 Appendix 2: Consent Form.....	79
9.3 Appendix 3: Information Letter.....	81

Tables

Table 1. Table of Interviewed Organizations/Associations and Their Municipal Locations...34

Table 2. A Thematic Matrix of Key Findings from BID Interviews.....39

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The Business Improvement Districts (BID) model represents a collaborative public-private partnership that brings together diverse stakeholders, including property owners, municipalities, and businesses (Ruffin, 2014). The model integrates elements of a bottom-up approach (Guimarães, 2021) and is widely acknowledged for its substantial contribution to urban development. In particular, BIDs play a key role in stimulating local economies and revitalizing urban areas (Morçöl and Wolf, 2010).

Kudla (2022) highlights the considerable benefits of the BID model, particularly its significant impact on local urban development. The model enables stakeholders to manage and influence the areas where it's implemented. Typical interventions include the introduction of security measures to reduce crime, the enhancement and beautification of public spaces, and the stimulation of the local economy through targeted marketing campaigns. A comparable approach can be observed in Gamlestaden, Gothenburg, the site of Sweden's first BID, established in 2001 (Fastighetsägarna, 2023). In this context, problems are first identified and subsequently addressed through structured collaboration among stakeholders. Recent initiatives have included the creation of a seasonal summer street to alleviate traffic congestion and support local businesses, the development of joint policies for signage and outdoor areas, and the implementation of coordinated graffiti removal efforts. Collectively, these measures seek to enhance safety and improve the visual quality of the urban environment (BID Gamlestaden, 2023).

Lloyd and McCarthy (2003) further note that this economically oriented urban development model encourages increased entrepreneurial activity by identifying opportunities and fostering innovation. As improvements are made to the area, its reputation is enhanced, which subsequently attracts additional customers and investment. Moreover, the model adopts a forward-looking perspective by projecting revenues over multiple years and formulating long-term strategic plans.

The BID model has also faced criticism, particularly regarding its social implications. Valli and Hammami (2021), introducing the model from a Swedish context, argue that BIDs have emerged partly as a response to increasing socioeconomic inequalities between social groups

and urban areas, alongside the retreat of government involvement in urban governance and the growing influence of private sector actors. While they acknowledge that BIDs can enhance safety, improve attractiveness, and boost property values, they critically question whether BIDs truly serve as effective tools for social urban regeneration, particularly in light of the underlying power dynamics, whereby dominant actors maintain disproportionate influence and systematically marginalize less privileged groups from meaningful participation and decision-making processes.

Key concerns center on social justice, as Valli and Hammami (2021) highlight that the model's strong emphasis on economic outcomes often comes at the expense of social inclusion, a cornerstone of equitable urban development. They point to significant shortcomings in community participation and representation, noting that local residents typically have limited influence over decision-making. Furthermore, BIDs are criticized for addressing only visible social issues, such as public disorder and insecurity, while neglecting the deeper structural causes. As a consequence, vulnerable groups are often marginalized or displaced, rather than being supported through inclusive and sustainable solutions.

Building on this critique, it's important to note that there is limited research on how BID organizations in Sweden define and operationalize social inclusion, particularly from their own perspective. This dimension is not explored in the study by Valli and Hammami (2021), which concentrates primarily on a critical external analysis. Examining this gap in the literature in the context of Sweden may provide valuable insights into the social implications of BIDs and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of their role in urban development.

1.2 Aim & Research Questions

This study examines the perspectives of BID organizations on how they in Sweden define and operationalize social inclusion in their activities. It investigates the strategies employed to promote community engagement, the challenges encountered in fostering such engagement, potential improvements to the concept of social inclusion within BIDs, and the best practices that may be shared with other organizations.

The research addresses the following questions:

1. How do different Swedish BIDs define social inclusion, and what variations exist in their definitions?

2. What strategies do BIDs employ to promote community engagement?
3. What challenges do BIDs encounter in fostering community engagement?
4. How can community engagement be improved within BIDs, and what best practices can be identified and shared?

1.3 Delimitation

Social inclusion is a multidimensional concept that encompasses a wide range of factors, many of which go beyond the scope of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNDESA, 2016). To provide a more focused analysis, this study adopts community engagement as the primary operational dimension, while using social inclusion as the overarching conceptual framework.

The scope of this research is further confined to the Swedish context. Within this geographical framework, the study focuses on a selection of ten specific BID organizations. These organizations are described in detail in Section 4.4, *Selection of Participants*, which also outlines their geographic distribution, the criteria used for their inclusion, and other relevant aspects that guided the selection process.

Another delimitation relevant to this focus is that the studied topic is approached specifically from the perspective of the BID organizations themselves. This organizational viewpoint not only shapes the analysis but also carries specific implications, which are further elaborated in Chapter 4, *Methodology*.

In terms of terminology, there is a need to clarify that while not all BID organizations formally identify themselves as such, some use terms like association, property owner association, or other similar names. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this study, they will collectively be referred to as BID organizations, or BIDs for short. The commonality among them lies in their implementation of the BID model in their operations.

1.4 Research Rationale

BIDs can be understood as a form of neoliberal local urban governance, as highlighted by Richner & Olesen (2019), and also as collaborative frameworks in which diverse stakeholders cooperate to revitalize urban areas (Boverket, 2022). However, BIDs are neither a standardized form of local cooperation nor legally mandated in Sweden. Instead, they

remain a voluntary and evolving framework currently being adapted to the local context (SOU 2025:5, 2025).

Notably, BIDs are not the only organizational form present in the local landscape, they are one among several mechanisms for local cooperation, including neighborhood associations. Ruef and Kwon (2016) describe these associations as a form of local governance, characterized in contrast to BIDs by residents being the primary actors. In some cases, such as homeowner associations (HOAs), participation may even be mandatory. In addition to this model, other frameworks such as Idea-based Public Partnerships, known in Swedish as Idéburet Offentligt Partnerskap (IOP), differ from BIDs in that they are not driven by profit or economic interests. Instead, they are based on social and inclusive values, with initiatives typically led by civil society organizations or local governments rather than by property owners, as is common in BIDs (Mistra Urban Futures, 2019).

Despite these variations, BIDs have demonstrated practical value, seen in both their functionality and their long-term nature, and their number has grown significantly across the country, with around 20 BID initiatives currently active in Sweden (Urban Utveckling, n.d.). The decision to single out BIDs in this study stems partly from a personal interest in the topic, but also from their growing relevance in Swedish urban development. Moreover, the study aims to address the previously discussed knowledge gap regarding how BID organizations themselves define and operationalize social inclusion.

This study is not only an opportunity to explore how BIDs can be made more efficient, but also a valuable lens through which to examine broader dynamics of urban governance and social policy. Arguably, what makes BIDs a particularly suitable subject for investigation is not their status as the most efficient model for neighborhood improvement, but rather their distinctive combination of economic aims and local community involvement. This dual focus makes BIDs an ideal case for critically analyzing how social inclusion is conceptualized and operationalized within a cross-sectoral governance framework. Furthermore, it provides a rich opportunity to explore the inherent tensions between economic imperatives and social goals, and how these competing demands are negotiated within the BID model.

1.5 Disposition

This study is organized into seven main chapters, each of which addresses a key aspect of the research.

Chapter 1 presents the background of the study by introducing the concept of BIDs within the context of social inclusion. It defines the research problem, outlines its relevance, and specifies the study's aims and research questions. The scope of the study is further detailed in the delimitation section.

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature by introducing the main concepts of BIDs and social inclusion, with particular emphasis on community engagement. It also examines key areas such as strategies and challenges related to community engagement within the context of urban development, which serve as a foundation for the subsequent comparison with the study's findings.

Chapter 3 establishes the theoretical foundation of the study by drawing on specific frameworks. These encompass social capital theory, participatory governance, and urban political economy, with the growth machine theory representing a key aspect of the latter. Together, these frameworks support the analysis and interpretation of the study's findings.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach of the study. It details the scientific theoretical foundation, research design, and data collection methods. The chapter also describes the interview process, participant selection, and reflects on the chosen methods. Issues of rigor and ethics in qualitative research are addressed, followed by an explanation of the data analysis and material processing procedures.

Chapter 5 introduces, compares, and synthesizes the patterns identified in the data. It offers preliminary interpretations of the findings, which are initially connected to the theoretical framework and relevant prior research.

Chapter 6 presents an in-depth discussion of the findings, critically relating them to existing research and the study's theoretical framework. The discussion is structured to correspond with the key themes identified in the analysis.

Chapter 7 presents the study's conclusions by addressing the research questions and offers recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The BID Model and Its Development

The Business Improvement District (BID) model is commonly conceptualized as a form of public-private partnership (Ruffin, 2014) and represents an illustrative case of neoliberal urban governance (Richner & Olesen, 2019). This cooperative framework is predominantly initiated and led by property owners but also includes a range of other stakeholders, such as local businesses, civil society organizations, and municipal authorities. These actors collectively establish an association or organization within a defined geographical boundary, with the primary objective of addressing local challenges and facilitating area-based enhancements. In the Swedish context, the formation and participation in BIDs remain entirely voluntary, with financial contributions secured through non-mandatory fees. However, this voluntary nature has provoked considerable debate, a matter which has been examined in greater detail in the subsequent section of this chapter (SOU 2025:5, 2025).

The BID model originated in Canada over five decades ago and has since been adopted internationally (Kudla, 2022). The concept first emerged in Toronto during the late 1960s, as the rapid growth of new shopping malls posed a significant competitive challenge to traditional commercial areas. In particular, the Bloor-Jane-Runnymede commercial district struggled to maintain its customer base due to the convenience and accessibility of the newly developed malls, many of which were integrated with the public transportation network. In response, local business owners established a voluntary association and petitioned the Toronto Municipal Council to introduce legislation mandating that all businesses within the district contribute an annual fee to fund urban enhancement initiatives. This effort resulted in the passage of the legislation in 1969, leading to the creation of the world's first Business Improvement Area (BIA). The model was further institutionalized in 1970 through its formal inclusion in the Ontario Municipal Act (Kudla, 2022). However, such legislative frameworks remain specific to Canada and are not applicable in other national contexts. The particularities of the Swedish adaptation of this model will be explored in the following subsection.

According to Morçöl and Wolf (2010), BIDs are recognized for their multifaceted contributions to urban revitalization, including the stimulation of local economies and the enhancement of community vitality. Guimarães (2021) further explains that BIDs exhibit

characteristics of a bottom-up governance model, frequently involving grassroots initiatives led by local stakeholders. However, this partial characterization of BIDs as a bottom-up approach may, however, be attributed to the involvement of organizations and governmental institutions.

As previously discussed, the model relies on close collaboration between public and private entities. Public actors include municipalities, which have a strong tradition of cooperative practices in Sweden, as well as local government organizations and law enforcement agencies. On the private side, key contributors include property owners, small business operators, and local associations, all of whom play an essential role in this collaborative framework (Ruffin, 2014). Based on my own experience gained through an internship involving the implementation of this model, and being surrounded and supervised by consultants representing multiple Swedish BIDs operating in Stockholm, it's evident that a wide range of additional actors may be engaged. Particularly the Swedish police, given that safety-related initiatives frequently necessitate law enforcement participation and evaluation. Civil society actors, such as the Church of Sweden, may also take part, which suggests a certain diversity in the composition of stakeholders engaged in BID initiatives. Ultimately, the composition of stakeholders involved varies according to the specific context, geographic setting, and objectives of the initiative.

During the internship, it was additionally observed that such improvements often focus on enhancing both the safety and aesthetic appeal of the area, aligning with Kudla's (2022) findings on the role of BID. The work of BID Märsta in Stockholm illustrates this, as it organizes safety walks where representatives from various stakeholders, including municipal officials, police officers, property owners, and others, collaboratively assess the area's safety during nighttime at specific times of the year. These assessments involve recommending improvements, identifying repairs needed to enhance the area's attractiveness, and tracking progress since the previous evaluation. At the time, the coordination of these activities was effectively facilitated by my supervisor, who held positions at both Urban Utveckling and BID Märsta.

Nevertheless, according to Morçöl and Wolf (2010), such improvements don't assume the entire municipality's responsibility, but are instead allocated to a specific segment of it. This approach also allows the municipality to communicate directly with the BID organization within a defined area. As a result, the municipality avoids the need to engage separately with

numerous stakeholders, which, as Wolf (2006) notes, reduces the administrative burden on municipal staff. Additionally, Morçöl and Wolf (2010) state that BIDs offer a clearer understanding of local conditions within their designated areas, enabling municipalities to manage and allocate resources more effectively.

2.1.1 BIDs in the Swedish Context

Given the geographical delimitation of this study, a deeper understanding of the BID model requires an exploration of how it has been contextualized and institutionalized within Sweden. As part of this exploration, Fastighetsägarna (2017) contends that the formal establishment of a Swedish model of BID is both timely and necessary, emphasizing the need for a clear and context-specific definition of BID and its intended functions. A fundamental distinction between Sweden and countries where BID is more widely implemented, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, lies in the comparatively strong influence and monopolistic role of Swedish municipalities in local governance and urban development. In contrast to international counterparts, the Swedish administrative framework is characterized by a highly structured division of responsibilities and an organized system of service provision. As a result, the function of BID in Sweden is envisioned not as a substitute for municipal services but as a complementary mechanism aimed at enhancing existing municipal efforts, a perspective similarly articulated by Morçöl and Wolf (2010).

According to the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building, and Planning (Boverket, 2022), participation in such initiatives within Sweden remains voluntary and is frequently organized through non-profit associations. These associations commonly consist of property owners, businesses, and entrepreneurs who cooperate either independently or in collaboration with public authorities. The financing model in Sweden is generally structured around membership fees, which are determined by factors such as the size of the association and the extent of property ownership within the designated area. Additionally, certain projects may benefit from partial financial contributions provided by municipal authorities to support physical improvements.

In an individual motion submitted to the Swedish Parliament, Lundström (2017), a member of the Liberal Party, argued that there was, at the time, an absence of formal legislation or regulations concerning the BID model in Sweden. She proposed that the development of a legal framework could facilitate the effective implementation of the model by establishing

clearer guidelines for collaboration among stakeholders and ensuring an equitable distribution of responsibilities. Additionally, such a framework would provide more clarity regarding the financing and operational execution of BID initiatives. Despite these recommendations, the motion was rejected by the Swedish Parliament in 2018 (Riksdagen, 2018). Subsequently, in a comprehensive assessment, Boverket concluded in its 2021 report that the introduction of BID-specific legislation was not warranted (Boverket, 2021).

An idea previously dismissed has since re-emerged. In January 2025, the Swedish government introduced a new legislative proposal, documented in the Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU 2025:5, 2025), following an inquiry initiated in 2023. This inquiry involved a multidisciplinary panel comprising experts from various governmental departments and external organizations. The proposal outlines the establishment of a mandatory fee system, comparable to similar frameworks in countries such as the United States and Canada. The proposed legislation delineates two potential mechanisms for implementation.

The first mechanism allows for an initiative to be started by a minimum of three property owners. Upon their application, all remaining property owners within the designated area would be obliged to contribute to the fee, thereby creating a model similar to BIDs, where property owners assume primary responsibility and the municipality adopts a supervisory role. The second mechanism envisions the municipality as the principal actor, designating specific areas for such collaborative initiatives. Under this model, the municipality would retain full authority over the design, organization, and execution of the scheme.

In other words, the proposed alternatives imply that the initiative would be primarily administered either by the municipality or by an association of property owners. However, the proposal also states that even in an oversight role, municipalities retain the authority to completely halt the imposition of the fee. Currently, such collaborative arrangements in Sweden are entirely voluntary. The proposed legislation marks a significant shift, introducing the possibility of making property owners' participation compulsory. Meanwhile, other stakeholders including the police, business owners, local and civil society actors are expected to be involved on a voluntary basis. The legislative proposal remains subject to appeal, and criticism has already emerged, highlighting concerns such as the potential for gentrification and market distortion (SOU 2025:5, 2025).

2.2 Urban Governance

Urban governance is a collaborative and participatory process that integrates governmental entities, such as municipal authorities, with private sector actors, including businesses, and representatives of civil society, notably local communities. This collective engagement facilitates decision-making and the management of critical issues related to financial oversight and the regulation of urban spaces, thereby promoting the efficient organization and functioning of urban environments (Abdel-Razek, 2021).

A central concept relevant to this study is that effective urban governance is distinguished by robust public participation and the promotion of social cohesion, both of which are essential for addressing urban challenges and fostering inclusive development processes. In contrast to conventional, state-centric models of governance, this paradigm signifies a transition from government to governance, marked by decentralization and enhanced collaboration among multiple stakeholders. This shift is intrinsically linked to broader socio-political developments, including neoliberalism and privatization (Abdel-Razek, 2021).

The BID model, as a market-oriented strategy, exemplifies neoliberal urban governance (Richner & Olesen, 2019). Within this framework, Sternberg (2023) critically examines neoliberal urban governance, highlighting its prioritization of economic growth, privatization, and the cultivation of business-friendly environments, as partially embodied by BIDs. Such approaches frequently marginalize inclusivity, systematically excluding certain residents from decision-making processes irrespective of their socio-economic status. This critique is supported by Kudla (2022), who notes that the pursuit of market-oriented urban spaces and the adoption of commercial management strategies have intensified tensions between BIDs and local communities, a pattern documented in earlier empirical studies.

Kudla (2022), in particular, offers a deeper examination of the role of BIDs, referencing prior studies that conceptualize them not only as instruments of neoliberal urban governance but also as mechanisms of social regulation. These studies contend that BIDs often prioritize security-oriented interventions over entrepreneurial strategies, portraying them as revanchist in their attempt to reclaim urban spaces for middle-class interests while displacing marginalized populations. In this context, BIDs act as social regulators by exerting control over public and communal spaces to mitigate crime and reinforce perceptions of safety.

Ultimately, their objective is to enhance the area's appeal to visitors and investors, thereby increasing economic returns.

2.3 Economic Development in Urban Context

Since BIDs primarily serve as tools of economic revitalization (Elmedni et al., 2018), it's essential to engage with the concept of economic development, particularly within an urban context, in a way that aligns with the study's focus on social inclusion and community engagement.

Levine and Tantardini (2023), in their analysis of how economic development is defined and measured, emphasize the absence of a universally recognized or singular definition. Instead, they present economic development as a multifaceted concept that includes both tangible outcomes such as job creation and the provision of housing, and intangible dimensions such as improvements in quality of life, social cohesion, and trust.

Furthermore, Levine and Tantardini (2023) emphasize that the primary goal of economic development is to improve individuals' material living standards. In line with this, Anwar et al. (2025) highlight economic development as both a motivating force for planning and a tool for measuring individuals' material well-being, using indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita and the Human Development Index (HDI) as proxies for quality of life.

Building on this, understanding the interrelationship between economic development and social dimensions allows for a comprehensive assessment of how BIDs, while primarily economic tools, can also yield significant social benefits. This perspective aligns with the broader conception of economic development presented by Turok et al. (2023), which includes both economic growth and improvements in social well-being. In practical terms, this dual impact is evident in the work of Morçöl and Wolf (2010), describing BIDs as playing a multidimensional role in urban revitalization. Their contributions extend beyond the stimulation of local economies to include the promotion of social cohesion and the enhancement of the urban environment. This underscores the dual function of economic development as serving both economic and social objectives through mechanisms such as BIDs, whether by design or as an unintended outcome.

2.4 Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)

As noted by Ruffin (2014), the BID model represents a form of public-private partnership, necessitating an examination of its specific implications within the context of this study. Similar to the concept of economic development, the notion of PPP is also characterized by the absence of a universally agreed-upon definition, as explained by Ke et al. (2023). Rather than offering a traditional definition, they address this gap through an illustrative approach, likening the concept to a sunflower. In this sunflower model, the core represents a set of fundamental and commonly shared features, while the petals symbolize additional, context-specific attributes. Although the six features outlined by Ke et al. (2023) are not cited here in their exact wording, they can be broadly understood to include features that every PPP should incorporate.

These include clearly defined roles and responsibilities, appropriate allocation of tasks to the most suitable actors, sustained long-term collaboration, effective communication between public and private stakeholders, active involvement from the private sector, and shared accountability across the different phases of the project. Regarding the petals, which represent attributes that are beneficial but not strictly necessary, these may include the creation of mutual value, where both parties derive tangible benefits and possess a clear understanding of their respective objectives. Additional desirable characteristics often emphasized are innovation, transparency, and competitiveness. The private sector is typically expected to play a role in improving the process, either through greater financial efficiency or by enhancing the overall quality of the project (Ke et al., 2023).

Regarding the strengths of PPPs in promoting social inclusion, Ke et al. (2023) characterize the model as a long-term collaborative arrangement. This characterization implies that, when marginalized groups are engaged from the outset, such partnerships can foster their sustained involvement. Furthermore, as PPPs are typically structured around shared objectives, the inclusion of clearly defined social inclusion goals at the initial planning stage ensures that both public and private actors are jointly accountable for addressing them. This includes active engagement with marginalized communities. Given the expectation that the private sector will support public institutions in PPPs, explicitly articulated priorities, such as social inclusion and community engagement, can be more effectively pursued within this collaborative framework.

Ke et al. (2023) emphasize that the active involvement and responsibility of private actors is a defining characteristic of PPPs. While this role is often presented as beneficial, it raises important concerns when applied to areas such as social sustainability and inclusion. This is particularly relevant in the Swedish context, where BIDs are becoming increasingly prominent (Urban Utveckling, n.d.). As Ke et al. (2023) point out in their discussion of PPP limitations, when inclusion is not explicitly prioritized by public actors from the outset, it may be entirely neglected by private ones. Additionally, when inclusion efforts are led by profit-oriented actors rather than by the public sector or civil society, there is a significant risk that economic goals will take precedence over social objectives. Oxhorn (2007) underscores this concern by noting that civil society is more closely connected to local contexts and values, whereas private actors are typically motivated by profit rather than a genuine commitment to community inclusion. Similarly, Valli and Hammami (2020) show that while BIDs may engage with inclusion, they often do so in ways that align with their own economic interests, such as promoting safety and beautification. Ke et al. (2023) further note that these partnerships tend to be institutionally rather than community driven, which can limit local resident participation and weaken efforts to address underlying structural inequalities.

2.5 Social Inclusion in Urban Development

Before examining the specific operational focus of this study, namely community engagement, it's necessary to first consider the broader conceptual framework of social inclusion within the context of urban development.

In this study, social inclusion is defined following the framework proposed by Mirzoev et al. (2022), whose article published in the *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology* presents a comprehensive, multidimensional perspective informed by contributions from researchers affiliated with multiple UK research institutions. Notably, this publication emerged as the most cited work (44 citations) in a targeted literature search on social inclusion within the context of urban sustainable development. The definition articulated by Mirzoev et al. (2022) forms the foundational reference for this research and will subsequently be compared to the definitions employed by BID organizations, in order to assess the degree of alignment or divergence.

Mirzoev et al. (2022) define the process as one that ensures universal participation and equitable involvement, with particular emphasis on addressing the needs of disadvantaged

and marginalized populations. It's characterized by accessible services and resources for all individuals. Noteworthy is that what constitutes services and resources may vary across contexts, particularly in studies involving BID organizations and similar entities. According to the authors, services are primarily understood to encompass healthcare-oriented efforts, while resources are defined as fundamental necessities such as food and nutrition. Mirzoev et al. (2022) further acknowledge that access to both services and resources is influenced by an interplay of socio-cultural, economic, infrastructural, and environmental factors

In the context of urban development, social inclusion is further defined as the pursuit of fairness and equality by ensuring that all individuals are engaged in and benefit from urban sustainability initiatives. This concept encompasses the removal of barriers across multiple dimensions. Firstly, socioeconomic barriers must be addressed to guarantee equal opportunities. Such barriers are closely linked to social exclusion and often manifest in the form of prolonged unemployment, inadequate access to education, and persistent financial hardship. Secondly, spatial barriers involve the enhancement of urban spaces to promote accessibility and connectivity. These barriers may include deficient infrastructure, poorly functioning sanitation systems, and other environmental inadequacies that disproportionately affect marginalized populations (Mirzoev et al., 2022).

Additionally, institutional barriers require the fostering of fairness and inclusivity within rules, regulations, and governance systems. Observations suggest that institutional entities are not always doing enough to achieve a more equitable society, while other actors, such as private sector organizations, may at times play a more proactive role in this context. Lastly, political barriers relate to the need for active participation and representation of all community members in decision-making processes, particularly those from underrepresented or marginalized groups, including ethnic minorities and persons with disabilities (Mirzoev et al., 2022).

Within the BID framework, social inclusion is ideally characterized by the equitable participation and benefit of all community members in urban revitalization initiatives. This encompasses individuals across the entire socioeconomic spectrum, particularly those from marginalized and overlooked groups. However, research by Valli and Hammami (2021) concerning the Swedish BID model reveals a deviation from this principle. Their investigation suggests that rather than fostering greater inclusion, these initiatives frequently undermine it. A recurring pattern indicates that influential stakeholders, such as property

owners, tend to prioritize the interests of the middle class and above, often at the expense of residents with lower socioeconomic status. Consequently, these vulnerable groups are not only excluded from the positive outcomes of revitalization but may also experience adverse effects, including displacement and gentrification. This suggests that BID-driven revitalization efforts can diminish social inclusion, contributing to the development of more exclusive urban spaces.

2.6 Community Engagement in Urban Development

As previously indicated, this study examines the BID model in relation to social inclusion, with particular emphasis on community engagement to narrow its focus. Srinivasan (2024), in the context of urban development, investigates the role of community engagement in urban planning processes. He contends that the active involvement of local residents is essential, as their firsthand knowledge and lived experiences offer critical insights into both the challenges and opportunities present within their communities.

Additionally, Srinivasan (2024) highlights that community engagement enhances decision-making by allowing residents to influence and shape urban development based on their lived experiences. This participation leads to better planning that genuinely reflects the needs of the people. He notes that such involvement fosters transparency and builds trust between developers and residents, ultimately reducing tension and conflict. Furthermore, incorporating diverse perspectives ensures that urban development is both fair and sustainable.

In a similar context, an article by Anthony Jr. (2024) also highlights the importance of community engagement in urban development. He describes it as a process that allows different actors to collaborate, exchange ideas, and foster innovation. This is essential for tackling urban challenges in a way that leads to solutions that align with the needs and desires of the community. He likewise connects the concept to social sustainability, explaining that it can help achieve it by ensuring everyone in the community, especially marginalized groups, can participate by having their voices heard and influencing both their surroundings and their own lives, reflecting another key similarity with the previous article by Srinivasan (2024).

What makes Anthony Jr. (2024) approach distinctive is its challenge to the traditional top-down model of governance. Instead, it advocates for a more inclusive framework that fosters active participation and gives all stakeholders a voice in shaping their urban

environments. Rather than having development dictated solely by municipal objectives, Anthony Jr. (2024) emphasizes the need for a diverse range of stakeholders to be engaged in an organic, collaborative process. This shift away from conventional centralized decision-making among urban planners is further illustrated by emerging models of inclusive governance, such as the BID model, which exemplifies collaboration between public and private actors (Ruffin, 2014).

2.7 Strategies to Promote Community Engagement

Regarding strategies to promote community engagement in urban development, Srinivasan (2024) highlights the importance of initiating discussions where all individuals can participate and share their opinions, similar to citizen dialogues or the so-called *medborgardialoger* commonly used in Swedish urban planning processes. Another crucial strategy is ensuring transparency in decision-making, allowing the broader community to understand the process. Additionally, he illustrates how the integration of local perspectives and community feedback can contribute to the enhancement of projects within the area.

Another article by Anthony Jr. (2024) discusses several digitalization-linked strategies, including the use of digital tools and platforms, such as social media and other digital discussion tools, as a forum. This is particularly beneficial for those unable to participate in person, which may help eliminate physical barriers. This approach also facilitates direct feedback and greater involvement. This represents a hybrid approach, not aimed at eliminating physical meetings, but rather providing extended access to those who may prefer meeting digitally. Another approach is the use of technology, such as apps, where residents can share ideas, vote on changes, and collaborate to create new solutions that enhance urban areas. This fosters greater involvement in decision-making and promotes collective community-driven improvements in urban areas.

He further elaborates on the need to update traditional methods to increase diversity in the voices involved, referring to methods such as public hearings, city hall meetings, and focus groups, which are commonly implemented in local communities but need to be reformed. Another approach suggests using interactive activities like games or workshops in public spaces, allowing diverse people to collaborate and foster engagement while creating a sense of belonging (Anthony Jr., 2024).

Adding to the list is Tactical Urbanism, a flexible design-thinking approach to transforming urban environments through accessible, small, and temporary projects (Lydon and Garcia, 2015). A notable example is the Park(ing) Day project in San Francisco, wherein parking spaces are temporarily converted into vibrant, artful spaces for community activities (Rebar Art and Design Studio, n.d.). This approach fosters unexpected connections between partners, engages the community, and encourages people to rethink their surroundings and explore innovative uses of urban spaces (Granicus, n.d.; Lydon and Garcia, 2015).

Building on this idea, Granicus (n.d.) underscores the value of continuous feedback, not just at the beginning but throughout the project. It emphasizes the importance of involving local residents in revitalization initiatives by raising awareness of underused spaces through temporary installations. This is exemplified by the High Line in New York City, which initially hosted temporary installations, art, and events designed to engage the community, and later evolved into the permanent public space it is today (The High Line, n.d.).

2.8 Challenges in Fostering Community Engagement

One of the primary challenges encountered in efforts to foster community engagement is the potential absence of well-defined and clear objectives within engagement initiatives. This absence of clarity can lead to confusion among participating citizens and may contribute to a broader sense of distrust within the community (Geekiyanage, Fernando, & Keraminiyage, 2020). For instance, when a local initiative is implemented without clearly articulating its purpose from the outset, it can generate frustration and skepticism among stakeholders. This, in turn, often results in diminished participation rates and a gradual decline in trust in the initiative's legitimacy and effectiveness.

Geekiyanage, Fernando, and Keraminiyage (2020) pinpoint a significant challenge, an imbalance in knowledge between local communities and professionals. Residents frequently possess less familiarity with planning processes compared to experts. They emphasize the importance of equipping community members with proper training. This allows individuals to express their views effectively and engage meaningfully with decision-makers. This kind of preparation helps foster mutual understanding. As an illustration, training can involve workshops that improve communication skills, introduce key planning terms, and enable community members to participate in discussions at a more professional level. This effort can also extend to professionals simplifying their language and documents so that everyone,

regardless of education or language ability, can understand and contribute. Without these mutual adjustments, community voices often remain underrepresented and having less influence in the planning process.

Furthermore, socio-environmental inequalities present an additional challenge, as noted by Bressane et al. (2024), highlighting how social disadvantages and environmental hardships can limit marginalized communities' access to and influence over green spaces in urban areas. These limitations often extend to restricted participation in decision-making processes and limited access to environmental information, underscoring the need for inclusive engagement and strong institutional backing to effectively address these challenges.

Xavier (2024) demonstrates this dynamic with the example of São Paulo, where environmental inequality manifests in the uneven distribution of parks across the city. Social inequality further compounds the issue, as wealthier communities enjoy easier access to well-maintained green spaces, while poorer communities encounter significant barriers. This scenario highlights the intersection of socio-environmental inequalities, reinforcing the need to include the voices of underserved communities in urban development processes to foster greater engagement and reduce these disparities (Xavier, 2024).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Social Capital Theory

Fine (2010) defines social capital as any social element that is not economic in nature, describing it as a set of assets that take multiple forms and can be exemplified by personal relationships, friendships, and participation in community activities such as social clubs or local events. These social assets provide individuals with access to resources and opportunities that support both personal and collective advancement. A practical example is Portalen Norrköping (n.d.), a municipal initiative that organizes community activities and events. These spaces enable individuals to build networks, acquire knowledge, and access tangible opportunities such as employment, demonstrating how social capital can translate into meaningful personal development.

Expanding on this foundation, Xu et al. (2023) emphasize the role of trust in building and sustaining social capital. They argue that trust fosters social cohesion, strengthens interpersonal networks, and supports the formation of both formal and informal social systems. Trust is valuable not only as a moral asset but as a mechanism that reduces friction in social interactions, facilitating cooperation and long-term relationships. This view underscores trust as a key ingredient in the production and maintenance of social capital.

Building on this idea, Matiaske (2013) presents an organizational perspective, explaining how social capital operates within institutional contexts. This can be illustrated by examples such as BIDs, where stakeholders like small shop owners use these structures to connect with decision-makers and access resources that would otherwise be out of reach. For instance, a business owner can gain institutional support to promote their ideas or expand their services. In this context, Matiaske (2013) further highlights that trust among stakeholders enhances collaboration, encouraging the exchange of strategies, shared goals, and mutual support within these networks.

Despite these positive interpretations, Fine (2010) offers a critical perspective on the theory. He argues that social capital tends to oversimplify the complexity of human interactions by reducing them to measurable assets, similar to economic resources. This reductionist view fails to account for essential factors like power, conflict, class, race, and broader systemic issues. According to Fine, the apolitical framing of social capital makes it appealing to

institutions because it avoids confronting uncomfortable social realities such as inequality and exploitation. As a result, the theory risks becoming an instrument of convenience, widely embraced but insufficiently critical, ultimately reinforcing the very structures it should be challenging.

3.2 Participatory Governance

In his discussion of participatory governance, Heinelt (2010) argues that participation is commonly viewed as a means to validate decision-making. From a democratic perspective, it's also regarded as a mechanism for achieving better outcomes, based on the straightforward principle that those affected by a decision should have the right to contribute to the decision-making process. While their input may not necessarily determine the final outcome, providing an opportunity for individuals to express their views and present their claims is considered essential.

Furthermore, Heinelt (2010) emphasizes that when participation is inclusive, diverse, transparent, and conducted in an unrestricted manner, it encourages participants to offer rational justifications for their positions. This process helps to diminish self-centered and logically flawed arguments. Allowing participation is considered a prudent approach, as it leverages the valuable knowledge and experience of participants to enhance decision quality and support the achievement of political objectives set by governments and institutions.

In this context, Heinelt (2010) describes participatory governance as a means to enhance the decision-making process and as a system that facilitates the involvement of diverse stakeholders, who primarily include citizens, along with organizations, institutions, and other relevant actors. It's characterized by its collaborative and transparent nature, providing a platform for individuals with differing perspectives to engage in rational discussions and dialogues. Ultimately, this process leads to decisions that do not solely serve the interests of a single party but instead accommodate multiple viewpoints. The opportunity to participate in such discussions fosters a sense of mutual trust, which in turn promotes cooperation. When trust is established, stakeholders are more inclined to consider the broader, long-term implications of their decisions rather than pursuing short-term solutions.

On the other hand, Hertting and Kugelberg (2018) provide a more narrowed and practical approach, illustrating how the concept can be applied in practice. They view participatory governance fundamentally as government efforts to involve citizens in the decision-making

process, allowing them to engage with local officials through deliberative and collaborative efforts such as dialogues, panels, and forums. A key problem they identify with government-led participatory efforts is their lack of stability, as such initiatives often fail to become a consistent part of political processes.

In this regard, Danielsson et al. (2018) discuss how the varied forms of participatory governance can be seen as a double-edged sword, meaning they can either support or oppose representative democracy. The supportive aspect can take the form of public consultations, where the main goal is for citizens to share their input rather than make actual decisions, leaving that role to the elected representatives of the people. In contrast, the opposing aspect involves citizens having direct influence, potentially undermining representative democracy by initiating efforts to demand change or call for a referendum. This, among other things, also demonstrates that participatory governance can occur either through citizen collaboration with governmental bodies or through citizen-led initiatives that challenge governmental decisions.

3.3 Urban Political Economy

In examining urban political economy, Newton (2013) argues that studying this topic needs no further justification, as cities represent the core of human civilization. He emphasizes that the political and economic landscapes of cities are deeply intertwined and essential to understanding their function. He contends that neither politics nor economics can be fully understood in isolation, they must be regarded as interconnected rather than independent spheres. Building on this perspective, Hansen (2013) explores the subject further, stating that politics and economics are two sides of the same coin. He highlights their inseparability, emphasizing that urban development results from the combined influence of political and economic factors rather than the action of either alone.

Additionally, Newton (2013) conceptualizes cities as segments of organized systems in which various stakeholders and locations fulfill specific functions, whether political, economic, or otherwise, within the broader hierarchy of urban environments. These functions are not driven solely by market interests or state agendas but rather emerge from a dynamic interplay of political and economic forces. This perspective is further supported by Pollio and Rossi (2022), who contend that cities exemplify urban spaces where economic activity is shaped by the intersection of governmental policies and capitalist structures. A clear manifestation of

this dynamic can be observed in the collaboration between key stakeholders, such as local businesses serving as economic anchors and municipal governments, which guides urban development through collective economic and political decision-making.

The theory of urban political economy has not escaped criticism, some of which are outlined here. Harvey (1989) critiques the approach for its overwhelmingly economic perspective on cities. While he acknowledges the central role of economic processes, he condemns the tendency to prioritize economic concerns at the expense of social factors. This overemphasis on economic growth often leads to the neglect of the social dimensions of urban life, such as the formation of communities, social networks, and human connections. Harvey argues for a more holistic understanding of cities as spaces where class, race, and other social dynamics are critically important. Similar concerns are raised by McDowell (1999) and Roy (2009), who highlight the theory's neglect of social and cultural factors, leading to significant limitations in different urban contexts.

The growth machine theory, an aspect of urban political economy, suggests that urban development is mainly driven by an alliance of key stakeholders, including politicians, real estate developers, and business leaders. These powerful actors collaborate to shape the built environment, influence governmental decision-making, and direct resources toward development that primarily serves their interests, particularly through land and real estate investment. This economically driven coalition may prioritize growth at the expense of social and environmental considerations (Logan and Molotch, 2007; Smith and Floyd, 2013), as seen in BIDs, a practical example of these economic interests, where the focus on economic growth often overshadows important aspects such as social inclusion, as shown by Valli and Hammami (2021).

3.4 Relevance of Theoretical Frameworks

An assessment of these theories demonstrates how each contributes to the study's objective by offering a distinct perspective on the BID model and its broader relevance. Social capital theory, for instance, highlights the importance of networking and trust, particularly within organizations (Fine, 2010; Matiaske, 2013). Applying this framework helps identify these patterns in practice, with BIDs serving as a clear example. As a form of public-private partnership (Ruffin, 2014), BIDs illustrate how such dynamics foster connections between

local communities and higher-level officials. These trust-based relationships, in turn, support the smoother implementation of BID initiatives.

Participatory governance, on the other hand, is particularly relevant, as the BID model reflects this approach. This theoretical lens facilitates the analysis of stakeholder involvement and collaboration within BIDs, among other relevant dimensions (Heinelt, 2010). Lastly, urban political economy, particularly growth machine theory, offers valuable insights by explaining how influential stakeholders drive urban development with a focus on economic growth. As is often the case with BIDs, this focus can come at the expense of social considerations (Logan and Molotch, 2007; Smith and Floyd, 2013; Valli and Hammami, 2021).

4. Methodology

4.1 Scientific Theoretical Foundation

This study adopts interpretivism as its scientific theoretical foundation to create an understanding of the subjective opinions, experiences, and perspectives of the interviewed representatives from BID organizations. In this study, interpretivism seeks to comprehend local and context-specific experiences and the meanings respondents attach to them, as Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) explain.

Rather than aiming for broad generalizations, this paradigm focuses on generating specific and detailed insights. Central to this approach is the recognition that the researcher and the research process are inherently intertwined. The way researchers design a study and frame its questions inevitably shapes the knowledge produced. In this sense, knowledge is not merely discovered but co-created through ongoing interactions and dialogue between the researcher and representatives of BID organizations. Consequently, interpretivism acknowledges that complete neutrality is unattainable, as researchers play an active role in shaping the investigated reality by deciding what to study and how to study it (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

A critical approach, informed by critical theory but not limited to the strict formulations of the Frankfurt School, complements the interpretivist focus on subjective experiences. This approach draws on insights from the literature review and theoretical frameworks to analyze the perspectives of BID organizations. It aims to balance a respectful acknowledgment of their views with a critical examination grounded in existing research and theory (Dean and Wiley, 2022). Specifically, it challenges and critiques the dominant narratives presented by the BID organizations under study.

As Dean and Wiley (2022) argue, integrating critical methods with qualitative research interrogates not only respondents' experiences and ideas but also uncovers hidden power dynamics, discrimination, and social inequalities within the studied context. These may include organizational structures and distinctions between leaders and followers. In line with Schwartz-Shea and Yanow's (2012) emphasis, this approach also fosters a shift toward conducting research with respondents rather than on them, for example by being flexible with timeframes and allowing for adjustments at any stage.

4.2 Research Design and Data Collection Method

This study adopts a basic qualitative research approach within an interpretivist paradigm, aimed at exploring the subjective perspectives and experiences of BID representatives in Sweden. While grounded in the interpretivist tradition, the study does not align with any of the five main qualitative research designs. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), such studies are often referred to as basic, interpretive, or generic qualitative studies. However, they argue that because all qualitative research is interpretive, the most accurate label is basic qualitative study. This approach seeks to understand how participants interpret their experiences, design their worlds, and attach meaning to their experiences, which aligns with the interpretivist foundation of this research (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

Data for this study were collected through asynchronous email interviews with representatives of Swedish BID organizations, a method that has gained increasing recognition within qualitative research (O'Connor and Madge, 2017). Traditionally, qualitative interviews have been conducted face-to-face, but technological advancements have expanded these methodological possibilities (Hawkins, 2018). Among these, email interviews offer a distinctive approach, involving the exchange of messages between interviewer and interviewee over time (Harris et al., 2024). Reflecting this development, email interviews were chosen as the primary data collection technique for the present study.

Hawkins (2018) highlights several benefits of this method. A key advantage is cost savings, as remote interviewing eliminates travel, accommodation, and transcription expenses. Respondents can answer at their convenience, which often results in more thoughtful and reflective responses. From an ethical standpoint, participants retain control over their level of engagement, and the absence of face-to-face interaction can increase comfort and openness. Written responses also remove the risk of transcription errors, ensuring accuracy and saving time. Additional practical benefits include the ability to conduct multiple interviews simultaneously and easily retrieve responses via email. Dahlin (2021) further notes that email interviews can enrich traditional methods by enabling in-depth discussions and generating valuable qualitative data.

Although written responses offer time-saving advantages for researchers, they place greater communicative demands on participants, thereby increasing the likelihood of brief or underdeveloped answers. While written answers provide some guidance, the absence of

nonverbal and social cues results in a notable limitation. Critical indicators such as eye contact, vocal tone, response latency, and other bodily expressions are unavailable in written formats, restricting the researcher's capacity to interpret meanings beyond the textual content. Furthermore, the potential for sample bias exists, as individuals who are more comfortable with written communication may be disproportionately represented in the participant pool (Hawkins, 2018).

4.3 Conducting Interviews

The interview process began with the identification of relevant BID organizations and their appropriate representatives. While some representatives were publicly listed, others required direct outreach to be identified. To mitigate the anticipated risk of non-response due to the time commitment involved, a larger pool of 19 potential participants was initially contacted. Of these, 10 agreed to participate and completed the interview. One declined due to being new to the role, another cited illness and family obligations, and the remaining seven did not respond despite one follow-up reminder. Further details on the selection process are provided in Section 4.4 *Selection of Participants*.

The outreach and interview process took approximately one month, though the timeline varied due to several factors. Some organizations were contacted early based on initial identification, while others were approached later as new candidates emerged. Additional delays arose when arranging interviews, often due to scheduling conflicts or slow initial responses. Once the questions were sent, response times also varied significantly. Some participants answered promptly, while others took much longer and required reminders before replying.

In this regard, no strict deadline was initially set for completing the interviews. This allowed participants to respond at their convenience. Although this flexibility likely contributed to extended response times and the need for reminders, it also led to richer and more detailed responses. Nevertheless, providing a specific response window, such as five working days, is likely to have supported more timely participation and reduced delays. On two occasions, participants requested a deadline, and the date of 31 March was informally suggested to align with the broader timeline for data analysis.

All participants received the same set of structured and open-ended questions via email, and the questions were prewritten and presented in a fixed order to ensure consistency and

comparability across responses. Most participants responded without the need for further clarification. However, two individuals sought additional guidance regarding the question on tensions between economic development and community engagement.

A consent form and information letter were also provided to all participants in line with ethical research standards. Alongside the interview questions, these documents can be found in *Appendix 9.1, Appendix 9.2 and Appendix 9.3*. A full discussion of ethical considerations is presented in Section 4.7 *Ethics*.

4.4 Selection of Participants

The identification of BID organizations operating in Sweden was conducted primarily through comprehensive web-based research. All identified organizations were subsequently contacted via email. Despite these extensive efforts, it's acknowledged that some organizations may have been unintentionally missed.

The selection criteria were intentionally broad to capture a wide range of organizational types operating under BID principles. This included organizations with varied names and structures that did not necessarily identify strictly as BID organizations or associations. Two essential requirements guided inclusion. The organization had to operate within Sweden and had to clearly apply BID principles in its activities. There were no restrictions regarding the timeframe of operations. All organizations were active at the time of the study with the exception of one. Organizations were excluded if they declined to participate, did not respond, were located outside Sweden, or were not formally recognized as BIDs.

Participants within the organizations were primarily, though not exclusively, selected based on their leadership roles, such as BID managers, and were typically the first individuals listed as the primary contact on the BID's official website. Alternatively, individuals referred directly by the organizations were interviewed. This focus on leadership can be justified by their likely greater knowledge of the BID's operations and decision-making processes.

The final sample provides broad geographical representation, including 10 organizations across 7 Swedish municipalities, half of which are located in Stockholm County.

Nevertheless, it's acknowledged that this concentration may pose sampling limitations and introduce geographical bias, potentially influencing the findings. An attempt was made to include 19 different BIDs as detailed in Section 4.3 Conducting Interviews. Despite these

efforts, various factors beyond the researcher's control led to the non-participation of the remaining organizations, as previously explained.

A special case was included to preserve valuable insights that might otherwise have been lost, with a former representative of BID Borlänge interviewed to provide insights into the organization's activities prior to its closure in 2020. In addition to this, BID Gamlestaden and BID Tillsammans för Ronneby were included based on their prior participation in a related study, even though the latter is currently represented by a different individual.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the interviewed organizations and their respective municipal locations.

Name of Association/Organization	Municipality of Operation
Bergsjön 2031	Gothenburg
BID Borlänge	Borlänge
BID Frölunda-Tynnered	Gothenburg
BID Gamlestaden	Gothenburg
BID - Tillsammans för Ronneby	Ronneby
BID Tureberg	Sollentuna
Samverkan i Huddinge (BID Flemingsberg, BID Skogås & BID Vårby)	Huddinge
Trygg i Märsta	Sigtuna
Tryggare Väsby	Upplands Väsby
Vi är Valsta	Sigtuna

Table 1. Table of Interviewed Organizations/Associations and Their Municipal Locations.

4.5 Method Reflection

Reflecting on the use of email interview as a method, it was observed that while it offered participants valuable flexibility, it also demanded considerable patience from the researcher. Although some delays had been anticipated, their extent was underestimated. In contrast to a previous project where delays were minimal, the present study experienced significantly longer response times. This experience underscored the importance of establishing clear response deadlines in future research to help mitigate similar issues.

Despite these challenges, the overall quality of the data was considered satisfactory. The responses varied in length and detail, some participants provided extensive and highly reflective answers, while others offered only brief remarks. This variation appeared to reflect differences in the scale and maturity of their operations, with more established participants often sharing richer insights, while those newer or recently in operation tended to be more concise.

Overall, the tone across responses remained factual and explanatory, with a notable openness when discussing challenges and related topics. For the most part, the respondents were honest and self-reflective about areas needing improvement and acknowledged their own limitations. While some shifting of responsibility was observed, self-reflection was more dominant, and notably, there was no persistent blaming of others without accompanying self-awareness.

It was concluded that this method remains appropriate for similar studies, provided that clearer expectations are communicated from the outset. The delays were attributed primarily to the absence of deadlines and potentially overly flexible communication. Future research would benefit from a more structured and decisive approach to participant engagement to prevent a loss of momentum.

It was also noted that the nature of email interviews provided participants with the opportunity to spend more time crafting and refining their responses over several days, a depth of reflection that would likely not have been possible within the constraints of a typical one-hour interview. While an alternative methodological approach, such as a survey, could have potentially reached a larger number of BIDs, it would likely have produced shorter and less reflective responses. Surveys are often completed in one sitting and do not allow participants to revisit or build on their answers over time. However, it is possible that less

engaged participants may have found a brief survey more accessible than an in-depth email exchange.

The experience highlighted the importance of balancing consideration and firmness in communication. While an accommodating approach was initially adopted, the need for polite but clear assertiveness in setting expectations became evident as a way to maintain focus and seriousness throughout the research process.

4.6 Rigor in Qualitative Research

The data gathered from the email interviews were analyzed in relation to existing literature to support credibility, the qualitative counterpart to internal validity. To further enhance the study's rigor, strategies such as iterative email exchanges were employed. These exchanges facilitated continuous communication with participants and allowed them to clarify, revise, or elaborate on their responses, serving as a form of member checking. Moreover, the identification of recurring themes across responses contributed to persistent observation and reinforced the relevance and consistency of the analysis. This thematic approach ensured that the findings offered a well-reflected representation of underlying patterns (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). Triangulation was also achieved by interpreting findings through multiple theoretical lenses and comparing them with previous research, as recommended by Korstjens and Moser (2018). This multidimensional approach expanded the analytical framework and avoided reliance on a singular interpretation.

Although the researcher's voice is inherently present in qualitative research, reflexivity was upheld through critical self-reflection and transparent documentation throughout the research and writing process. This documentation was thoroughly carried out and clearly described in the presentation of the methodological approach. As part of this process, personal reflections were consistently distinguished from data-driven insights. This distinction helped minimize bias and strengthened the study's credibility and confirmability, thereby enhancing overall trustworthiness (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). These combined strategies ensured that the findings authentically represented the participants' perspectives and minimized the overall bias of the study.

4.7 Ethics

In this study, all participants were well informed about the study and its objectives in a transparent and well-communicated manner, as emphasized by Farthing (2016). This was done through an information letter (*see 9.3 Appendix 3*) sent to them, which provided details about the researcher, the purpose of the study, and how the research would be conducted.

Additionally, they were given a consent form (*see 9.2 Appendix 2*), which restated the purpose of the study and outlined their rights, data protection measures, and what it means to participate. Participants were granted the option to withdraw at any time and for any reason before the study is finalized, as participation is voluntary.

The interviews were conducted via email, allowing participants to review and respond to them at their own pace. This process ensured that participants could assess the nature of the questions and determine whether any inquiries might involve the disclosure of sensitive or personal information. Moreover, the participants' names and positions were not used in this study. Their privacy and sensitive personal information, such as details about career and personal life, were also protected, as emphasized by Farthing (2016). The collected data were also securely stored on the OneDrive account provided by Linköping University and were only used for the stated purpose of the study.

Moving beyond procedural ethical considerations, an ethical reflection on specific research choices reveals that the need to delimit the study to a narrower and more manageable focus raised an ethical concern. The inclusion of only the perspectives of representatives of the BID organizations necessarily excluded other critical stakeholder groups. This exclusion may have introduced partiality or bias into the final conclusions. However, given the practical constraints and the need to maintain a feasible research scope, this limitation was considered unavoidable. As outlined in the methodology chapter, the findings were critically analyzed following the critical approach proposed by Dean and Wiley (2022) and further situated by comparing the BID organizations' narratives with prior studies and relevant theoretical frameworks.

In addition, the research questions were designed to avoid sensitive or ethically problematic issues, ensuring alignment with the overall research aim and minimizing potential ethical concerns. As detailed in Section 4.4, *Selection of Participants*, all known BID organizations were invited to participate, regardless of factors such as organizational size, stage of

development, or other similar distinguishing characteristics. While not all organizations chose to participate, this inclusive approach aimed to enhance fairness and reduce selection bias in the research process. Notably, engaging in this ethical reflection aligns with The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2023), which emphasizes the researcher's responsibility to uphold transparency, accountability and honesty in recognizing and disclosing the limitations in the research process.

4.8 Data Analysis & Material Processing

Saldaña (2024) characterizes thematic analysis as a flexible and widely adopted method of data analysis, often regarded as virtually synonymous with coding, wherein themes are identified as meaningful patterns that emerge during the interpretation of data. While Saldaña (2024) highlights the centrality of coding, Faulkner and Watson (2024) broaden the perspective by showing that coding is not the only analytical strategy. They illustrate how alternative and creative approaches, such as the use of poetry, can be employed to analyze qualitative data.

This study, however, follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, applied in a systematic, step-by-step manner, as demonstrated in the following. First, all collected data were thoroughly reviewed, and key segments relevant to the research questions were highlighted. These segments were then coded with specific labels that captured their content. The codes were examined for patterns and grouped into three distinct themes. These themes were organized into three headings, which structure the analysis chapter and guide the presentation of findings.

During theme development, the initial themes were critically reviewed, which resulted in reduced overlap and the creation of clearer, more coherent categories. Similar themes, particularly those addressing common issues such as challenges to engagement, were combined into a unified section under the three main analytical headings. Meanwhile, distinct ideas within broader themes were separated into their own subsections to maintain clarity.

In addition, Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize the importance of reflexivity in thematic analysis, highlighting that theme development is inherently subjective. Since researchers interpret and categorize data through the lens of their own perspectives, this study explicitly acknowledges such subjectivity to maintain transparency regarding the researcher's influence on the analytic process.

The thematic analysis process is presented in the thematic matrix below, outlining the three main themes, each accompanied by a brief description and example codes. The first theme focuses on definitions of social inclusion, key priorities, and community engagement initiatives. The second theme explores challenges to engagement, including the tension between economic development and social goals. Finally, the third theme highlights policy and partnership improvements, as well as recommended best practices.

Theme	Description	Example Codes
Conceptualizations and Strategies for Social Inclusion & Community Engagement	Outlines how BIDs conceptualize inclusion, prioritize certain aspects of it, and employ strategies to foster engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social inclusion as equality in participation - Focus on participation over other aspects - Civil Society involvement
Challenges to Fostering Community Engagement	Explores the internal and external challenges BIDs face in promoting engagement, as well as the tensions between their economic and social goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resource and funding limitations - Coordination and communication challenges - Lack of long-term structures and municipal continuity
Improving Community Engagement and Best Practices	Examines potential improvements and includes suggestions for sustaining engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Value of local presence and continuity - Leveraging physical improvements to drive engagement - Creating inclusive platforms for decision-making

Table 2. A Thematic Matrix of Key Findings from BID Interviews.

5. Analysis

This chapter presents, compares, and synthesizes the patterns identified in the data, offering preliminary interpretations. At this stage, the findings are situated within the theoretical framework and relevant literature in a preliminary manner. A more in-depth and critical analysis is provided in the discussion chapter, which expands on the insights presented here without unnecessary repetition. To ensure respondent anonymity and avoid singling out specific organizations in a potentially negative context, quotes are presented without direct attribution.

5.1 Understanding and Practicing Social Inclusion

5.1.1 Defining Social Inclusion

This section explores how the studied BID organizations in Sweden understand and practice social inclusion, highlighting both similarities and variations in their approaches, as well as frequently observed patterns.

Some organizations provided formal definitions that are theoretical in nature, while others adopted more practice-oriented interpretations rooted in their local operations or, in one case, municipal policy frameworks. A recurring theme in the data, however, was that several organizations explicitly stated they have not defined the concept of social inclusion at all.

Regardless of whether a formal definition is provided, a frequent pattern, either explicitly stated or implicitly reflected in their practices, is the importance of participation and local influence. Across the board, organizations shared the ambition to create opportunities for residents to actively participate in and influence their local areas. One respondent illustrated this perspective:

By social inclusion, we mean that all residents and people active in the area should have real opportunities to participate in, influence, and benefit from society's resources – socially, economically, and culturally. It's about feeling a sense of belonging, being seen and acknowledged, and having access to safe environments, meaningful occupations, and influence over one's local area.

In a similar vein, another organization emphasized inclusion from a broader, more city-wide perspective. Here, inclusion was not only framed as a right but also as a prerequisite for urban

development: *"A city that does not include all its citizens is not a vibrant city. We need all societal groups to support the city's development and continue to be a living, thriving city."*

Consistent with these statements, some organizations linked inclusion to the creation of safe environments and the fostering of a sense of belonging. This aligns with the central objectives of the BID model, where safety is often prioritized (Kudla, 2022). The interconnection between inclusion, safety, and local influence reveals a practice-oriented understanding of what it means to build inclusive communities. This resonates with key elements of social capital theory (Fine, 2010), suggesting that for many participants, inclusion involves more than participation. It also entails building trust, forming relationships, and cultivating a sense of community.

Despite this common emphasis on participation and influence, the organizations vary significantly in how they articulate and operationalize social inclusion. Some of them provide clear explicit definitions that align with theoretical perspectives, emphasizing equal access to resources, and well-being. Others adopt a more operational approach, focusing less on abstract definitions and more on concrete local practices. As one interviewee described their approach in explicitly practical terms:

We work with social inclusion in all initiatives and activities we carry out, as these are exclusively done in collaboration with the local and civil society. We try, as much as possible, to only be supportive (with resources, contacts, finances) but allow the local and civil society to implement the activities, plan them, and decide on their content.

This exemplifies an approach to inclusion that extends beyond local participation to encompass resident ownership and management of participatory processes. It represents a semi-bottom-up model, wherein the BID assumes a predominantly supportive and facilitative role.

In contrast, several organizations noted that they have not defined social inclusion formally, a theme that surfaced across some interviews. As one stakeholder explained: *"We have not defined social inclusion in our collaboration."*

Yet, despite the absence of a clear definition, the respondents' answers revealed a clear practical commitment to work towards inclusion, often expressed through a practical and action-oriented focus in their local initiatives. As expressed in the following:

This area is a place where many different people meet. People with varying socioeconomic backgrounds – hence, it's of utmost importance to work for social inclusion to create a local community where residents care for one another and their local environment.

Overall, the data reveal a diverse range of approaches to social inclusion within the Swedish BID context. Most initiatives share a common emphasis on participation, influence, safety, and local engagement, yet their conceptual perceptions of social inclusion and their operational practices differ

Regarding noticeable differences, a key aspect concerns the distinct target groups of these efforts. In the first case, respondents described a general and broad inclusion that applies to everyone in society. One respondent illustrated this view, stating: *"All individuals, regardless of background or situation, should have the opportunity to participate in society."*

In contrast, in the second instance, inclusion is aimed at specific groups or local communities, where people themselves drive initiatives and take responsibility. This was emphasized by another who stated: *"We always try to involve local actors, residents, and associations in creating and carrying out initiatives, so that they themselves drive the process and feel responsible for their neighborhood and local environment."*

Another difference concerns the purpose of inclusion itself, with some considering it an instrument for achieving certain goals, such as safety or economic development. As one noted: *"When more people care about their neighbors and their environment, the attractiveness of the place increases, and thus the property values rise."*

In contrast, other views of inclusion indicate a separation of economic objectives from social goals, instead framing inclusion as a valuable end in itself. As one explained: *"An inclusive society is valuable in itself — where people feel that they belong, are respected, and have influence over their everyday environment."* These differences imply that despite a shared motivation for working towards inclusion, distinctions exist, notably in their audience and the rationales behind their efforts.

5.1.2 Prioritizing Aspects of Inclusion

While the BID organizations differ in how they define social inclusion, certain recurring patterns and common themes emerged in their responses. Building on the previous section,

this part examines which dimensions of social inclusion are prioritized in practice and the factors that guide these decisions.

Although participation, equality, and accessibility are broadly acknowledged as crucial dimensions of social inclusion, responses reveal differing priorities among these aspects, highlighting a clear challenge of prioritization. As one participant explained: *"All aspects are of course important, but in reality you sometimes have to choose what to focus on most — what will make the biggest difference here and now."* This illustrates that although social inclusion is broadly seen as multifaceted, it's not always approached as such in practice. Instead, priorities and decisions are often shaped by immediate circumstances.

Similarly, some stakeholders described participation and influence as prerequisites for addressing other aspects of inclusion: *"Participation is a prerequisite for both accessibility and equality—if people are not involved, it's difficult to reach them or to address the challenges they face."* Nevertheless, in practice, a more pragmatic approach often prevails, driven by limited resources and the need to address the most urgent local needs:

We try to work with everything, but with limited resources you have to focus where it makes the most difference — sometimes that means safety, sometimes it means creating activities for young people, sometimes it's simply about being present in the area.

Consequently, prioritisation frequently revolves around immediate concerns such as safety, with trust-building emerging as a key component in creating a secure environment. This was illustrated by one participant, who explained: *"It's about combining social initiatives with situational measures—such as safety inspections and safety walks—to balance community engagement with immediate safety needs."*

While other stakeholders prioritize equality and resource allocation, not necessarily treating everyone the same, but rather directing focus where needed to address disadvantages. One respondent explained: *"We do not see that equality is achieved by treating everyone the same, but by directing resources and efforts where the needs are greatest."*

Moreover, others prioritize removing barriers, whether physical, linguistic, or cultural, in recognition of the diversity of people involved. This is essentially about prioritizing and ensuring accessibility through practical adaptation. As another participant emphasized: *"We try to reach the whole community by offering activities in close connection to the target groups and through several different platforms."*

Taken together, based on respondent accounts, certain factors shape these prioritizations, not only the organizations' overarching aims but also context-specific conditions such as available resources and local challenges. While participation and influence remain central principles, the data indicate that in practice, organizations often make place-based selections and strategic adaptations to respond to local conditions.

5.1.3 Community Engagement Initiatives

As previously established, social inclusion serves as the broader framework, while community engagement represents the primary focus within the organizations' work. Having explored how social inclusion is understood and prioritized, the following section turns to the concrete initiatives and programs implemented to engage the community. This includes efforts directed at residents, businesses, and marginalized groups. While the focus now shifts to implementation, this part remains within the same analytical section.

The most prevalent types of initiatives implemented by many BID organizations focus on safety, social cohesion, and beautification. These pragmatically oriented efforts, carried out through visible and tangible actions, often include safety walks, community patrols, and environmental improvements designed to enhance the area's appearance. As one participant described: *"We conduct joint safety walks with residents and stakeholders to identify problem areas and suggest improvements."*

The benefits of these efforts lie not only in enhancing perceived safety and reducing crime but also in creating welcoming public spaces that encourage interaction and networking, crucial elements of social capital (Fine, 2010; Matiaske, 2013; Xu et al., 2023). In tandem with these safety-focused activities, beautification efforts also play a significant part of their work, with one interviewee noting: *"We've painted public infrastructure like cable boxes and decorated common areas — it builds pride and reduces vandalism."*

Moreover, many organizations pursue alternative engagement strategies by involving communities in inclusive initiatives like citizen dialogues, open planning meetings, and targeted outreach. These participatory efforts are exemplified by the following statement: *"We work a lot with citizen dialogue and always try to include as many perspectives as possible."* This is further highlighted in their description of a diverse outreach approach: *"We try to reach the whole community by offering activities in close connection to the target groups and through different platforms."*

These practices align with participatory governance theory (Heinelt, 2010), which emphasizes the crucial role of involving diverse stakeholders in decision-making. This engagement, as Danielsson et al. (2018) note, often takes the form of deliberative collaborative efforts such as dialogues and forums. By bringing firsthand knowledge and lived experience into planning, this approach, as Srinivasan (2024) suggests, enhances fairness, sustainability, and trust. Furthermore, the emphasis on co-creation and collaborative space-shaping resonates with the work of Anthony Jr. (2024).

In addition to broad engagement efforts, targeted initiatives have emerged to support specific groups. Several organizations focus on youth inclusion by offering free, open-to-all sports activities and providing diverse opportunities for young people, particularly girls at risk of not completing their education. As stated by one of the participants: *“We offer summer jobs to young girls who are at risk of not completing school.”* This youth focus was further explained in the following: *“We run regular sports sessions, free and open for all, after school hours — it's about meaningful engagement.”*

Building on insights from Mirzoev et al. (2022) these initiatives empower communities and foster the inclusion of vulnerable groups. By providing youth with networking opportunities, resource access and expanded possibilities they cultivate social capital, a sense of purpose and belonging aligning with Fines' (2010) observations. Xu et al. (2023) further underlines the key role of trust in these connections. Consequently these efforts carry dual benefits, stronger social networks and greater inclusion alongside economic advantages like job creation.

Alongside these initiatives, several responses also reveal a consistent pattern where, rather than carrying out activities themselves, BID organizations aim to empower the community to take the lead and own these initiatives. This approach aims to strengthen civil society and foster a sense of local ownership, with BIDs playing a supportive rather than directive role. As one organization described it: *“We try, as much as possible, to only be supportive — providing resources, contacts, finances — and let civil society take the lead.”*

This principle of BIDs as a tool for access and collaboration aligns with Matiaske's (2013) perspective. Additionally, this decentralized approach resonates with participatory governance theory, particularly in its emphasis on grassroots initiatives (Heinelt, 2010).

The data also indicate that BID organizations engage creatively with communities through art installations, murals, clean-up events, and festivals. These small-scale, community-led initiatives embody the principles of tactical urbanism by helping locals reimagine public spaces, fostering a shared sense of identity, and creating unexpected partnerships (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). One stakeholder illustrated this approach by sharing: *“We held a mosaic workshop with the public and a local school, resulting in a permanent artwork installed in the city center.”*

Lastly, the involvement of local business owners as stakeholders is recognized, though it receives comparatively less emphasis. Their participation is often facilitated through dialogue meetings and shared planning activities. According to one participant: *“We host breakfast meetings with local businesses to discuss safety and development.”* This example not only illustrates a form of engagement effort, but also further demonstrates how BIDs operate as platforms for mediating and balancing socioeconomic interests (Logan and Molotch, 2007).

5.2 Challenges and Balancing Goals

5.2.1 Internal Engagement Challenges

Having examined the diverse ways BID organizations engage their communities, this section now focuses on the internal barriers they face in doing so. The findings indicate that the most commonly cited internal challenge is limited organizational capacity and resources, including insufficient time, funding, and staffing, which can hinder efforts to actively support local initiatives. As one respondent shared: *“Resources are limited — it’s always difficult to secure funding, and that affects everything we try to do.”*

From a growth machine perspective (Logan and Molotch, 1987), limited resources and institutional capacity may reflect a broader tendency to prioritize economic development goals, particularly those tied to land and property value, over socially oriented engagement work. In this context, community engagement may receive less consistent support unless it aligns with growth-related objectives.

Beyond resource limitations, several organizations also expressed difficulty in mobilizing and maintaining active involvement among their own members or stakeholders. Engagement was sometimes described as uneven, with only a few actors consistently driving the work forward. As one interviewee noted: *“Not all members are equally involved. It’s hard to maintain energy*

when participation varies so much.” Expanding on this concern, respondents also pointed to a lack of shared ownership, as not all actors were equally engaged. It could also reflect an uneven distribution of responsibility, which may help explain Nina Lundström’s (2017) desire to create a legal framework to, among other things, ensure a more equitable allocation of responsibilities within BIDs.

A third category of internal challenges relates to communication and coordination. Although these challenges affect external stakeholders, their underlying causes stem from internal processes. Among other things, these challenges concern who to communicate with, what methods to use for different groups, and the issue of unintentionally reaching the same segments of the population repeatedly. As one respondent described it: *“Communication is always a challenge. How do we reach people, follow up, and make sure we’re not just engaging the same group again and again?”*

In light with this, another common issue is the lack of follow-up. While initial participation might be secured, it’s often more difficult to demonstrate how community involvement has actually influenced decisions or outcomes. This was captured in the following statement: *“It’s easy to invite people to give input, but much harder to follow up and show how their input mattered.”*

These communication shortcomings risk undermining trust, a key asset for collaboration as emphasised by Matiaske (2013). Without clear information sharing, networks weaken and opportunities for joint learning and strategy exchange are lost. These issues may arise from unclear engagement goals, leading to confusion and distrust (Geekiyanage, Fernando, and Keraminiyage, 2020).

Moreover, unclear roles and shifting responsibilities frequently lead to communication and coordination challenges, resulting in confusion and interruptions to continuity. Respondents highlighted the importance of stable, consistent processes, noting that varying work paces among stakeholders add further complexity to collaboration. One respondent captured the issue clearly: *“When roles shift every year, so much energy is lost. There’s no consistency in how things are done.”* Another participant expanded on this concern: *“We need partnerships that don’t collapse when people change jobs. Too much depends on individuals rather than systems.”*

Lastly, some respondents highlighted the absence of long-term structures and routines necessary to institutionalize community engagement. They emphasized that engagement should not rely on individuals or short-term projects, but instead become an enduring part of the organization's operations. As one participant stated: *"No one is against long-term thinking in theory, but in practice it becomes difficult."* Another participant, commenting on current partnerships, added: *"We need partnerships that don't collapse when individuals change jobs or when organizations reorganize. It requires clear agreements, shared priorities, and long-term responsibility — regardless of who is sitting in the chair."*

5.2.2 External Engagement Challenges

Shifting focus to external challenges, it's important to first recognize the overlap with internal issues, particularly in areas like communication and coordination. These challenges are not only organizational but also shaped by conditions beyond the BIDs direct control, making them both internal and external in nature. From an external perspective, as previously noted, these challenges manifest in forms such as limited stakeholder reach, insufficient feedback loops, and loss of stakeholder trust.

An additional external challenge closely linked to coordination and communication, yet previously unaddressed, is that even when the issue of low engagement is overcome, stakeholders may still pursue differing priorities and interests. As one respondent explained: *"Externally, a challenge is getting both residents and other actors to work together toward a common goal, especially when there are different priorities and interests."* Another respondent reinforced this sentiment, noting: *"Some property owners prefer efforts with direct returns, like safety walks, rather than softer projects like art or participation."*

This misalignment of priorities echoes growth machine theory, which argues that powerful actors often shape urban development to serve their own interests, potentially at the expense of social or environmental goals (Logan and Molotch, 2007; Smith and Floyd, 2013). Similar dynamics have been observed in BIDs (Valli and Hammami, 2021).

Moreover, while internal disengagement has already been addressed, a few responses also explicitly point toward external disengagement and mistrust among certain community groups particularly those who may feel excluded. This may reflect a trust issue or legitimacy gap, which can hinder participation even when outreach efforts are made.

Another external challenge mentioned is engagement itself, getting different stakeholders on board is difficult, especially considering how much time it requires. As one respondent pointed out: *“It takes time to build engagement. The biggest external challenge is getting the local community, the municipality, and civil society on board with the initiatives we run.”*

The opt-out culture presents another external challenge, rooted in the voluntary nature of collaboration within Swedish BIDs (Boverket, 2022). Stakeholders face no obligation to participate and can easily disengage. As one person put it bluntly: *“Some actors can just choose not to engage with their neighbors — hang up the phone — and nothing happens.”* This underscores the value of legal frameworks to regulate BID initiatives, frameworks that were previously requested but failed to materialize, yet have resurfaced in current discussions (SOU 2025:5, 2025; Lundström, 2017).

Adding to these challenges is municipal instability and structural fragmentation, which frequently disrupt partnerships and hinder long-term collaboration. As one stakeholder observed: *“When roles shift every year due to reorganization, a lot of energy is lost.”* Another example highlights the issue: *“The municipality used to have a place development officer, but the position was removed due to budget cuts. That affected our ability to maintain dialogue.”*

In some cases, organizations, particularly those that are newer and less established compared to their older counterparts, struggle with issues related to gaining recognition and visibility within the community. As one respondent noted: *“An external challenge is getting the BID recognized where it should be recognized.”* This highlights, among other factors, the role that organizational maturity plays in determining the necessary efforts to achieve recognition.

Concerns were also raised regarding funding structures, which were described as unstable or voluntary. As one participant stated: *“We’re built on voluntary contributions and partnerships... ensuring long-term financing is a major challenge.”* This echoes, though from a different angle, the reasoning behind the recent legislative proposal SOU 2025:5 (2025), which advocates for mandatory fees.

5.2.3 Balancing Economic and Social Goals

Exploring the tension between economic development and community engagement is central to this study, which examines how the BID model may prioritize economic outcomes over

social inclusion (Valli and Hammami, 2021). In doing so, three main themes emerge, as explored in the following.

Among the findings, a perceived tension or trade-off emerges between economic development and community engagement. This stems from the preference of some property owners for fast, tangible outcomes over longer-term or relationship-based efforts. These preferences are often linked to the measurability and immediate visibility of results, which make certain types of initiatives easier to justify and prioritize. As one respondent explained: *“Some property owners prefer efforts with direct returns, like safety walks, rather than softer projects like art or participation.”* Another echoed this view: *“Some stakeholders focus more on what increases safety or visibility in the short term — it’s not always easy to motivate work that takes longer or isn’t measurable.”* This pattern reflects a broader dynamic, where influential stakeholders channel resources toward initiatives that primarily serve their own interests, a core premise of growth machine theory (Logan and Molotch, 2007; Smith and Floyd, 2013).

Others did not report experiencing direct conflict. Instead, they emphasised that the true barrier to community engagement was economic instability or lack of funding. In this sense, the goals are not opposed but are both vulnerable to external pressures. One participant reflected: *“I can’t recall any example where economic development and community engagement conflicted. What I’ve seen is that lack of economic development causes tension.”* Another respondent shared a similar perspective, noting: *“We’ve had to reduce engagement activities not because we don’t value them, but because economic conditions don’t support that kind of work right now.”*

Another recurring theme is the strategic blending of social and economic objectives through hybrid activities. These initiatives include trust-building safety efforts or events that simultaneously improve both visibility and inclusion. One respondent highlighted this approach, stating: *“The key is to combine social and situational interventions.”* This idea is echoed in another reflection: *“Activities like safety walks serve both purposes — they make the area safer, but also create contact between residents and stakeholders.”* In this context, Anthony Jr. (2024) emphasizes that integrated efforts are essential for addressing urban challenges in ways that reflect community needs. When participatory, such initiatives can also, as Srinivasan (2024) observes, build trust, promote transparency, and help reduce tension and conflict.

5.3 Strengthening Engagement

5.3.1 Improving Practices and Strengthening Partnerships

As participants reflected on ways to enhance community engagement within their BID, several recurring themes emerged, many directly addressing the challenges previously identified. The following section delineates these proposed improvements, with particular emphasis on clarifying their connection to the underlying issues revealed in the data.

For instance, some respondents emphasized the need for greater stability and long-term structures, reflecting the previously identified challenges related to a lack of continuity. They observed that project-based approaches alone are insufficient. Rather, effective engagement necessitates formal support mechanisms including dedicated budgets, clearly defined roles and consistent routines. This perspective was illustrated by a respondent who remarked: *“Everyone agrees on long-term thinking in theory, but in practice it becomes difficult.”* Another respondent underscored this point by stating: *“We need structures, not just enthusiasm.”* Within this context, the absence of lasting structures and continuity reflected in these two statements relates to the challenge identified by Hertting and Kugelberg (2018), whereby participatory initiatives, particularly those led by governments, risk becoming one-time occurrences.

Another emergent theme underscores the necessity for improved coordination, particularly through a clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities between BIDs and municipalities. Such an approach is seen as essential for addressing the previously identified coordination gaps. Good intentions alone are insufficient. What is required are aligned objectives and formal agreements. As one interviewee observed: *“We need shared priorities and clear agreements — not just goodwill.”* Furthermore, this collaboration demands stable and sustained coordination, as emphasized by another participant: *“We need partnerships that don’t fall apart when individuals change jobs.”* This need aligns with the argument advanced by Nina Lundström (2017), who contends that a legal framework and formalized rules are critical for ensuring the proper distribution of responsibilities, including financial arrangements.

In response to the previously identified issue of stakeholder imbalance, a recurring theme emerged aspiring to empower local actors. Several participants articulated a preference for local communities to assume a more prominent role in the design and implementation of

initiatives, with the BID positioned primarily as a supporter or facilitator rather than as the central coordinating body. As one participant noted: *“We try, as much as possible, to only be supportive — providing resources, contacts, finances — and let civil society take the lead.”* This approach of enabling rather than directing resonates with Matiaske’s (2013) conceptualization of trust as a fundamental prerequisite for effective collaboration, thereby enhancing the potential for active local engagement and participation.

Another common pattern identified was the perceived need to diversify the engagement process to make it broader and more inclusive, thereby ensuring that a wider range of voices are heard, particularly those who are harder to reach or typically excluded. As one respondent explained: *“We always want to reach more people, but it’s a challenge — and we need to adapt better to different groups.”* This perspective aligns with Srinivasan’s (2024) assertion that diverse viewpoints contribute to more equitable and sustainable urban development. Similarly, Anthony Jr. (2024) and Mirzoev et al. (2022) emphasize inclusion as a dynamic process that enables marginalized groups to participate meaningfully and influence their environments.

Lastly, some respondents emphasized the need for stronger institutional support, requiring more steady, organized, and trustworthy commitment and participation from municipalities. This was particularly reflected in calls for policy or legal frameworks designed to enhance participation and secure funding, as outlined in SOU 2025:5 (2025). One respondent captured this by stating: *“A mandatory model could make the work more sustainable and secure.”* This suggests that formalizing the BID model through mandatory frameworks may be viewed as a potential solution to reach sustained structural stability.

5.3.2 Local Practices and Reflections

While the previous section explored areas for improvement, this section highlights successful practices that respondents believe are effective and would recommend to others. When invited to share their experiences and advice for other BIDs aiming to enhance community engagement, several common themes emerged.

One of the most frequently mentioned practices was the importance of being visibly present and committed to building long-term relationships. Respondents linked this to the need for consistency and reliability. As one participant advised: *“Build relationships over the long-term, be present where people already are, communicate openly, give real influence —*

and stay over time.” The importance of relationship-building was echoed in another response: *“I believe it’s crucial to have a coordinator who gets the time and resources to be in the area, meet people, and build connections.”* As seen in both comments, the value of sustained presence and local networking was highlighted, with the additional acknowledgment that building meaningful relationships is a gradual process that takes time and effort to develop.

Another recurring piece of advice was to begin with modest, realistic initiatives to avoid overpromising and instead focus on small, visible efforts that gradually build momentum. As one participant noted: *“Small steps lead to big changes — start with concrete initiatives that make an impact and build from there.”* This approach aligns with the concept of Tactical Urbanism (Lydon & Garcia, 2015), which demonstrates how small and often temporary projects can help transform urban environments, sometimes temporarily and sometimes permanently. A notable example is New York City’s High Line, which began as a temporary intervention and has since evolved into the permanent public space we know today (The High Line, n.d.). Even modest projects can lead to unexpected networking opportunities, foster community engagement, and encourage residents to rethink and explore innovative uses of their urban spaces (Granicus, n.d.; Lydon & Garcia, 2015).

Several respondents also emphasized the importance of involving residents in tangible, hands-on activities where the results are immediately visible. This focus on fast, double-benefit outcomes emerged repeatedly throughout the findings and was described as a key factor in engaging communities and delivering noticeable results. As one respondent shared: *“The best advice is to include the community in activities that lead to something physical — that you can actually see.”* This emphasis on visible, dual-outcome initiatives was further illustrated by another example: *“The cable box painting project improved the urban environment visually and also contributed to a sense of safety.”* This recurring emphasis on tangibility, visibility, and quickness in community engagement efforts reflects a pattern in the operational practices of Swedish BIDs observed across the data.

Another best practice highlighted was the importance of flexibility and adaptability, particularly in selecting communication methods tailored to the specific needs of different community groups rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach. One participant even underscored the critical importance of addressing this at the outset: *“Identifying the right communication channels for each group early in the BID process is essential.”* This emphasis

was noted among some participants, although it was not a consistently recurring theme across the initiatives presented in this chapter.

As a final point, respondents called for honesty, openness, and inclusivity in communication and dialogue. They also stressed the benefits of co-creation and collaborative problem-solving. As one respondent concisely expressed: *“Keep an open and honest dialogue, listen to different perspectives, and work toward shared solutions.”* Although not explicitly termed as such, these trust-building characteristics correspond closely with Xu et al.’s (2023) concept of trust-sustaining social capital. According to them, trust enhances social cohesion, reinforces interpersonal networks, and facilitates the development of both formal and informal social structures.

6. Discussion

This chapter provides a deeper discussion of the findings in relation to previous research and theoretical frameworks, following a structure that broadly mirrors the order of the analysis chapter.

6.1 Understanding and Practicing Social Inclusion

6.1.1 Defining Social Inclusion

The findings demonstrate that both similarities and differences emerged regarding how the organizations define social inclusion. Some organizations provided formal, theory-oriented definitions, while others adopted a more practical, operational understanding, emphasizing how they work with social inclusion in practice rather than offering explicit definitions. Only a few organizations articulated highly structured or rights-based conceptualizations.

These variations may reflect differences in the organizations' locations, contexts, aims, stakeholder compositions, and priorities. The fact that the BIDs operate across a diverse range of Swedish municipalities suggests that local conditions significantly shape how social inclusion is understood and enacted. For instance, BIDs operating in larger geographical urban settings, like those in Stockholm or Gothenburg, often engage with not only larger populations but also more diverse ones culturally, ethnically, and linguistically. This necessitates broader approaches to social inclusion compared to BIDs operating in geographically smaller municipalities. These BIDs in smaller areas might work with smaller, perhaps more cohesive populations, potentially allowing for narrower, more targeted approaches to fostering inclusion.

Across these varying definitions, recurring key concepts included participation, influence, and safety. These concepts also appeared in respondents' descriptions of practical engagement, explored in subsequent sections.

Comparing these findings with the definition adopted for this study (Mirzoev et al., 2022) reveals both alignment and gaps. Participation and opportunities for influence, central elements of Mirzoev's definition, were consistently emphasized. Even when not framed in theoretical language, many organizations described operational practices aligned with fostering inclusion, empowering marginalized groups, and providing opportunities for

influence. However, attention to access to resources was more inconsistently addressed, and references to legal rights, structural injustice, or systemic power imbalances were notably rare.

This raises a concern that while participation is consistently highlighted it risks remaining superficial if not accompanied by deeper engagement with rights, systemic barriers, and questions of power. This superficiality arises when residents are involved in activities like citizen dialogues without critically addressing underlying inequalities, ultimately creating the appearance of influence without actual decision-making power.

Thus, the organizations' approaches to social inclusion appear predominantly pragmatic and action-oriented rather than rights-driven or structural. Their practices often center on physical presence, fostering trust and safety, and organizing community activities, outcomes that are visible and relatively attainable, rather than challenging systemic inequities.

The strong focus on trust-building and safety reflects key ideas from social capital theory. As Matiaske (2013) explains, trust acts as a crucial social asset that supports collaboration, networks, and knowledge sharing. In the same way, safety remains a central concern in BID operations, as noted by Kudla (2022). These priorities often blend social and economic goals, especially when safety initiatives are designed to build trust and strengthen relationships. This approach echoes Srinivasan's (2024) view that such efforts can foster cohesion and help ease tensions between different local actors.

At the same time, this pattern points to a deeper issue. While these initiatives support inclusion to some extent, they tend to focus on what is immediately achievable. This raises a critical question: why do BIDs prioritise practical participation over more formal, rights-based approaches? Based on the findings, a likely explanation is the emphasis on fast, concrete, and measurable outcomes. Several respondents explicitly noted a preference for initiatives that deliver visible results and outcomes that are easier to justify. This pragmatic orientation reflects broader patterns observed across the study, where tangible, place-based improvements are favored over systemic, structural interventions.

Overall, while the BID organizations demonstrate a clear commitment to fostering social inclusion, their framing tends to be more operational than transformative. Their focus is not on altering systemic structures, power relations, or institutional barriers, but rather on enhancing immediate conditions within their communities. This may reflect a conscious

strategic choice, aligning with the market-driven nature of their work, and could help explain what Valli and Hammami (2021) meant when they argued that the BID model's emphasis on economic outcomes often overshadows its commitment to social inclusion.

This orientation resonates with growth machine theory, which posits that powerful actors, including property owners and local governments, collaborate to shape urban development primarily in service of economic interests (Logan and Molotch, 2007; Smith and Floyd, 2013). In essence, while participation is central to both theory and BID practice, the findings show that most approaches remain pragmatic and localised rather than structural or transformative.

6.1.2 Prioritizing Aspects of Inclusion

Despite variation in how social inclusion is defined, the findings reveal a striking convergence in the aspects that BID organizations emphasize. Across responses, participation and influence consistently emerged as foundational priorities, as reflected in their stated goals, daily practices, and even how inclusion itself was defined. Meanwhile, dimensions such as equality and accessibility were acknowledged but received comparatively less systematic attention, reflecting the nuanced and context-dependent ways in which social inclusion is understood and operationalized.

This pattern partially aligns with the model proposed by Mirzoev et al. (2022), who conceptualize social inclusion through interconnected dimensions such as participation, equality, access, empowerment, and structural justice. While the strong emphasis on participation supports their framework, the findings suggest that other dimensions are addressed more unevenly, and often only indirectly.

The selective emphasis on certain aspects appears shaped by practical constraints and contextual realities. Limited time, for example, is often tied to the project-based nature of many BID initiatives, which prioritize short-term outcomes. Funding pressures further reinforce this dynamic, as stakeholders and funders tend to expect visible, measurable results. Additionally, organizational maturity plays a role: newer BIDs, still seeking legitimacy, may focus on initiatives that signal quick success such as safety interventions or youth engagement rather than more complex equity-building efforts.

Several respondents emphasized that participation and influence are important entry points for broader social inclusion efforts. However, a key concern is that when participation is viewed mainly as a tool to generate engagement, reduce crime, and improve safety, it risks falling short of addressing deeper structural inequalities. This pattern echoes concerns raised in previous research that participatory governance models, such as those seen in BIDs, often struggle to achieve continuity and stability, with efforts serving economic goals directly and indirectly rather than prioritizing deeper social inclusion (Hertting and Kugelberg, 2018; Valli and Hammami, 2021).

This pattern may indicate a deliberate avoidance of structural change, with inclusion serving more as a depoliticised concept or symbolic gesture than a transformative practice. From this critical perspective, BID initiatives risk reinforcing the very inequalities they aim to address. Alternatively, these limitations may simply reflect the economic orientation of BID organizations, which are often led by property owners whose primary goal is profit generation. In this view, even modest efforts at community engagement may stem from a degree of goodwill and can be seen as constructive steps within a market-driven framework.

Overall, while BID organizations show strong commitment to inclusion through participation, their focus is guided by feasibility, visibility, and measurable impact not necessarily by equity or justice. There is clear potential for more inclusive practices, but this is often constrained by institutional structures, market-driven priorities, and the pursuit of legitimacy.

6.1.3 Community Engagement Initiatives

The findings reveal that BID organizations engage in a range of practical, context-specific community initiatives, including safety walks, beautification projects, youth programs, and dialogue forums. Among the most frequently mentioned themes was safety, which, alongside other priorities, reflects efforts to address immediate community concerns. These initiatives often serve as starting points for building relationships and trust with local residents.

Trust-building, in particular, emerged as a central mechanism across initiatives, playing a strategic role in fostering both safe and inclusive environments.

The emphasis on safety is consistent with existing literature. Kudla (2022) describes how BIDs often prioritize security to reduce crime and revitalize public spaces, with the broader aim of stimulating economic development. This dual function, with safety acting as both a goal and a means, was evident not only in how BIDs define social inclusion but also in how

they operationalize engagement. This raises the question of whether safety is pursued primarily as a means of improving residents' quality of life or as a strategy to attract investment and promote economic growth. While research such as Morçöl and Wolf (2010) supports the idea of BIDs playing a dual socioeconomic role by revitalizing urban areas and driving economic improvement, it remains unclear whether the social benefits are intentional or incidental outcomes of economic priorities.

Beyond safety, BID initiatives frequently reflect inclusive and participatory values. Many are designed to create opportunities for residents to influence their local environment, aligning with the principles of participatory governance (Heinelt, 2010). For instance, initiatives involving dialogue, co-creation, and community involvement are echoed in the work of Srinivasan (2024), who argues that such practices enhance fairness, embed lived experiences into decision-making, and strengthen trust. Similarly, Anthony Jr. (2024) highlights how inclusive engagement fosters collaboration and innovation through shared dialogue.

The localized, small-scale nature of many initiatives, such as murals, art installations, and clean-up events, also resonates with the concept of tactical urbanism (Lydon and Garcia, 2015). These flexible and low-cost interventions often invite unexpected partnerships and encourage community ownership, demonstrating a pragmatic approach to urban engagement (Granicus, n.d.).

The findings also highlight a notable diversity in approach. Some initiatives are top-down, while others are bottom-up. Some target the general public, whereas others focus on specific groups. Similarly, initiatives may emphasize socio-cultural, economic, or environmental goals. Despite this variation, most initiatives attempt to position community members as active participants. Yet, upon closer examination, many efforts, for instance graffiti removal, appear functionalist and reactive, designed to address immediate issues rather than to prevent or transform systemic problems. This raises concerns about the depth of participation. While residents are invited to engage, the terms of engagement are often predefined by the organizations. Rather than enabling meaningful co-creation, participation risks becoming instrumental, serving to legitimize predetermined decisions rather than shaping them.

Moreover, while several initiatives showcase creativity and adaptability, they also expose structural limitations. As many respondents noted, engagement tends to be project-based and reliant on specific individuals rather than being embedded within durable institutional frameworks. This unstructured approach and sporadic engagement limits continuity and

weakens the potential for long-term impact. In the absence of durable structures and institutional commitment, such efforts risk remaining fragmented and unsustainable, limiting their long-term effectiveness. This echoes the findings of Fine (2010) and Matiaske (2013), who emphasize the importance of trust-building and institutional support in sustaining community networks.

6.2 Challenges and Balancing Goals

6.2.1 Challenges (Internal and External)

BID organizations face a diverse range of challenges, divided into closely intertwined internal and external factors, that shape their operational community engagement work and its scale. The findings reveal two major internal challenges: limited resources and funding, and low internal engagement among members or partner associations. Additional but less frequently mentioned issues include internal communication problems, unclear organizational structures, and tensions between short-term project logic and long-term strategic focus.

These internal barriers help explain why many BIDs tend to operationalize social inclusion through short-term, visible initiatives, reinforcing the ideas previously discussed in Section 6.1.1. With limited financial and human resources, organizations may feel compelled to focus on projects that yield tangible and measurable outcomes, particularly when seeking continued support or funding from municipalities or external stakeholders. In this context, fast and visible results become a practical necessity, even if they fall short of addressing deeper structural challenges such as inequality, power imbalances, or long-term exclusion.

Furthermore, the widespread issue of low internal engagement, affecting nearly half the organizations, places significant strain on active individuals and groups and could severely weaken morale. When combined with internal communication breakdowns and unclear roles, this points to deeper organizational problems that may hinder sustained collaboration or long-term planning. These structural weaknesses underscore the need for more institutionalized frameworks, including clear mandates, defined responsibilities, and secure funding mechanisms, echoing earlier reflections on the potential value of formal legal structures in creating stability and accountability (SOU 2025:5, 2025).

In addition to internal barriers, BID organizations face several significant external challenges that shape and often limit their community engagement efforts. One of the most persistent

issues is the misalignment of priorities and interests among external stakeholders. Property owners, municipalities, civil society actors, and residents often hold divergent goals, expectations, and levels of commitment. Even when engagement is achieved, these differences can hinder the formation of a unified direction, making coordination difficult and slowing collective action.

It's important to distinguish between the misaligned interests of powerful stakeholders such as property owners and local governments, and those of less powerful groups like residents and small business owners. The difference lies not only in influence but in the ability to shape outcomes. Growth machine theory (Logan and Molotch, 2007; Smith and Floyd, 2013) helps explain this pattern, framing urban development as dominated by powerful stakeholders who prioritise economic returns over inclusive outcomes. In the context of BIDs, this theory is reflected in the findings of Valli and Hammami (2021), who argue that economic concerns such as safety improvements linked to property values frequently override longer-term, community-focused investments. While less powerful stakeholders may contribute in ways they find meaningful, their overall influence remains limited, as dominant actors continue to shape urban environments with or without broader community input.

In addition to conflicting priorities, many respondents identified the practical difficulty of engaging external stakeholders, particularly residents, municipal representatives, and civil society organizations. Engagement was described as time consuming, complex, and requiring sustained effort to reach diverse groups. This challenge is compounded by structural issues such as coordination problems, inconsistent mandates, and limited funding. While legal reforms such as mandatory collaboration or participation fees have been proposed to address these barriers, their effectiveness remains uncertain. The recent legal proposal SOU 2025:5 (2025), for example, outlines two potential roles for municipalities: one as an observer, and the other as a lead actor with full planning and implementation responsibilities. The latter approach may better address the voluntary nature of participation in Swedish BIDs (Boverket, 2022), which contributes to a broader "opt-out" culture. This culture weakens continuity and accountability, as stakeholders may disengage without consequence, leaving partnerships fragmented.

BID organizations frequently rely on short-term or voluntary funding, which limits scalability and encourages a focus on visible, low-risk projects. This financial instability undermines

long-term planning and reflects a broader structural barrier to sustained, inclusive engagement, a concern central to proposed reforms in SOU 2025:5 (2025).

Yet municipalities themselves are not always a reliable solution. Several organizations pointed to municipal instability and structural fragmentation as additional external barriers. Frequent staff turnover, vague mandates, and inconsistent levels of involvement can disrupt partnerships and undermine long-term trust building. Even when external actors are formally engaged, this does not guarantee meaningful community participation. Respondents noted persistent issues of mistrust and perceived illegitimacy, where residents and local communities may view BID-led initiatives with skepticism or feel excluded from the process altogether. This reflects findings from Srinivasan (2024), who emphasizes that trust and transparency are foundational to inclusive urban engagement.

6.2.2 Balancing Economic and Social Goals

The tension between economic and social goals is central to this study's problem statement. As Valli and Hammami (2021) argue, social inclusion is often overshadowed by economic goals in BID structures. This dynamic was reflected in several interviews, where respondents described trade-offs between social and economic outcomes, suggesting that achieving one often meant deprioritising the other. For example, short-term, visible solutions such as beautification or safety measures were frequently favoured because they produced measurable results and were easier to justify to funders and stakeholders. This reflects growth machine theory, which holds that urban development is often driven by economically powerful actors, frequently sidelining deeper social transformation (Logan and Molotch, 2007; Smith and Floyd, 2013).

The considerable influence wielded by property owners and funding partners in BIDs can result in resource allocation that disproportionately benefits their interests. Consequently, the question arises: could enhanced representation of community voices within BID structures be a key mechanism for rebalancing priorities and achieving fairer outcomes in the face of existing economic power dynamics? Nonetheless, many economically motivated activities mentioned by respondents, such as crime prevention, environmental improvements, or increasing foot traffic, still carry social value. They often benefit local residents and business owners, even if they do not directly address deeper structural issues such as inequality or marginalisation.

Interestingly, not all respondents viewed economic and social goals as conflicting. Some suggested that both are constrained by resource scarcity, arguing that economic instability or limited funding impedes the achievement of both types of outcomes. This offers a more nuanced perspective: rather than being inherently opposed, economic and social goals may be jointly limited by structural factors such as unstable financing and inconsistent institutional support.

In response, some organizations appear to adopt what could be described as strategic blending, integrating social and economic objectives through hybrid initiatives.

Safety-focused projects, for example, aim not only to reduce crime but also to build trust, foster relationships, and encourage community participation. Although these initiatives may not directly confront structural inequality, they represent a pragmatic model of inclusive development by linking safety, trust-building, and active community involvement.

These types of integrated approaches align with the work of Anthony Jr. (2024), who highlights the value of participatory, multi-dimensional interventions in addressing urban challenges. As Srinivasan (2024) also notes, when such efforts are inclusive in nature, they can build trust, enhance transparency, and reduce tension between different actors and interests.

6.3 Strengthening Engagement

6.3.1 Improving Practices and Strengthening Partnerships

The improvement proposals put forward by respondents reflect a broader shift in thinking, from short-term, project-based engagement to longer-term, structural approaches. Many suggestions directly address previously identified challenges, such as the need for greater stability, clearer responsibilities, and more inclusive outreach.

At a deeper level, the call for defined roles, consistent routines, and long-term funding highlights a lack of institutional maturity in the Swedish BID model compared to more established ones. Originating in Canada in the late 1960s (Kudla, 2022), the BID concept has evolved in other contexts, often supported by legal frameworks that clarify responsibilities and secure funding. In contrast, Sweden's model is still in an early stage, relying on voluntary participation and informal coordination. Frequent appeals for structural solutions suggest a natural step in adapting the model, underlining the difficulties of transferring governance

frameworks across contexts. As a multi-actor form of urban governance (Ruffin, 2014; Richner and Olesen, 2019), the BID model inherently faces complexity, and calls for reform can be seen as a response to this. The current proposal, SOU 2025:5, is seen not only as a practical fix but also as a necessary institutional step toward addressing the fragility of loosely defined, voluntary collaborations.

Proposals to shift more power and leadership toward civil society actors reflect a growing recognition of the importance of local ownership and democratic inclusion. However, they also raise concerns about the capacity and support available. If municipalities take a more supportive role by offering resources, funding, and connections, it remains unclear whether civil society can realistically lead engagement efforts without stronger institutional backing. Without the necessary tools and authority, this shift could risk becoming a transfer of responsibility rather than empowerment. In a system already constrained by limited resources, questions remain about what meaningful local leadership can look like.

The push for broader, more inclusive outreach highlights limitations in current engagement practices. Several organizations acknowledged the need to go beyond the usual participants and tailor communication to reach marginalized or underrepresented groups. That these insights come from within the BIDs themselves shows a valuable level of self-awareness. Rather than reacting to outside critique, many of the proposed improvements appear internally driven.

6.3.2 Local Practices and Reflections

Alongside the challenges discussed earlier, several respondents shared reflections on successful practices and methods they believe are effective in strengthening community engagement. These insights do more than offer general advice, they illustrate how core concepts such as trust building, inclusion, and participation are translated into concrete actions on the ground.

A key theme was the importance of maintaining a consistent presence in the local area, suggesting that trust and legitimacy often stem from personal interactions, particularly in communities where institutions may be viewed with skepticism. However, without long-term structural stability, such as consistent staffing or embedded routines, engagement efforts that rely heavily on individuals can quickly lose momentum, and crucially, erode the hard-won

trust accumulated over time, especially when key people change roles or leave the organization.

Another common recommendation was to start with small, tangible actions. These modest efforts, such as beautification projects or safety walks, signal commitment and help build trust. They reflect principles of tactical urbanism (Lydon and Garcia, 2015), where low-cost interventions are used to spark broader change. Especially in low-trust settings, such visible efforts can serve as initial groundwork, offering something concrete that demonstrates presence and reliability, and paving the way for more sustained and inclusive engagement. However, without a long-term plan, they risk remaining fragmented or symbolic.

A related idea is engaging residents in hands-on, co-created projects. Activities like murals or painting public spaces not only enhance the environment but also build a sense of shared ownership. This supports Anthony Jr.'s (2024) view that participatory urban design empowers communities when they have real influence over their surroundings. However, these efforts are most effective when they go beyond symbolic gestures and lead to lasting inclusion embedded in policies, routines, or governance. Without that, participation may remain superficial and short-lived.

Several respondents highlighted the importance of adaptive communication, noting that one-size-fits-all outreach is often ineffective. This underscores the need to view participation not as a fixed attribute, but as something adaptive and reflective. In ethnically and culturally diverse areas where many BIDs operate, relying solely on communication strategies such as distributing materials only in Swedish or using digital platforms can unintentionally exclude certain segments of the community, such as recently arrived immigrants, international workers, students, and elderly people. Truly inclusive engagement must account for structural barriers like language proficiency and digital access to ensure that all voices are heard and to prevent the reinforcement of existing inequalities. This reflects the argument made by Mirzoev et al. (2022), advocating for dismantling multifaceted barriers as a pathway toward truly inclusive participation across society. Extending this perspective, certain forms of communication such as digital participation should be used thoughtfully as complementary tools to broaden access for those who prefer to engage online, rather than as replacements for physical meetings, as explained by Anthony Jr. (2024).

Finally, there was an emphasis on honesty, openness, and transparency in communication, suggesting that successful engagement requires more than formal dialogue. It's not merely

about participation, but about the quality of the work and the relationships that lay the foundation for developing shared solutions.

Taken together, these reflections illustrate a model of community engagement that is relational, flexible, and locally grounded. Many of the strategies highlighted are scalable and adaptable, making them especially relevant for new or emerging BIDs still working to establish visibility and legitimacy. However, while promising, these practices often remain informal and dependent on individual efforts rather than embedded institutional support. As such, they may be best viewed as starting points, offering practical and meaningful foundations for broader and more sustained social inclusion efforts.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how Swedish BID organizations understand and apply social inclusion, focusing on their strategies for community engagement, the challenges they encounter, and ways to improve their practices. Based on qualitative interviews conducted with BID representatives via email, this chapter summarizes the key findings and outlines suggestions for future research.

How do different Swedish BIDs define social inclusion, and what variations exist in their definitions?

While some offered formal, theory-based definitions, most took a practical approach, emphasizing what they do rather than how they define the concept. Rights-based perspectives were rare. However, participation, influence, and safety consistently emerged as key priorities, often taking precedence over other dimensions like equality or accessibility. These priorities were shaped by practical constraints, with organizations focusing on what they perceived would make the most immediate local impact.

Some organizations framed inclusion broadly, while others focused on specific groups like youth, reflecting differences in local context and organizational aims. Compared to the definition by Mirzoev et al. (2022), the findings show partial alignment. Participation and influence were emphasized, but less attention was given to structural equity and access to resources. Safety was particularly central to how inclusion was practiced, consistent with traditional BID goals (Kudla, 2022).

However, similar to what Valli and Hammami (2021) explain, these efforts tend to concentrate on visible, short-term improvements rather than addressing systemic change. Without genuine decision-making power, participation risks becoming superficial. The emphasis on presence and trust-building reflects social capital theory, which highlights the role of networks and collaboration in local engagement.

Overall, while BID organizations value inclusion, their approaches remain pragmatic and localized, shaped more by economic priorities than by transformative social goals, as noted by Valli and Hammami (2021) and growth machine theory.

What strategies do BIDs employ to promote community engagement?

The findings revealed a range of context-specific initiatives, including safety walks, beautification projects, youth programs, and dialogue forums. Safety was the most frequently mentioned theme, appearing both in engagement strategies and in definitions of inclusion. This reflects its central role in BID work (Kudla, 2022) and supports a broader approach to building trust and relationships in the community. Trust-building itself emerged as a key mechanism for advancing both safety and inclusivity. However, it also raised questions about whether safety is pursued for social benefit or economic gain, revealing a tension between these goals.

Many strategies emphasized participation, influence, and inclusivity, aligning with principles of participatory governance (Heinelt, 2010). These often involved co-creation and citizen dialogue, echoing insights from Srinivasan (2024) and Anthony Jr. (2024), who stress the importance of lived experience, fairness, and collaboration. Local, small-scale initiatives such as murals, public art, and clean-up events also featured prominently. These reflect tactical urbanism (Lydon and Garcia, 2015), encouraging community ownership and flexible partnerships.

While strategies varied in focus and form, the commitment to community engagement was consistent. Still, concerns remain about the depth and sustainability of this participation. As with definitions of inclusion, many strategies appeared functional and short-term, responding to immediate needs rather than structural challenges. Participation sometimes risked legitimizing pre-defined decisions instead of enabling meaningful co-creation. Furthermore, though often creative and adaptive, many initiatives lacked integration into stable institutional frameworks. Their project-based, individual-dependent nature made them vulnerable to discontinuity. This echoes Fine (2010), Matiaske (2013) and Xu et al. (2023), who argue that lasting social capital relies on trust and institutional support.

Taken together, BID organizations demonstrate a clear commitment to engaging communities through diverse and innovative strategies. To achieve more lasting and meaningful outcomes, they must strengthen institutional continuity and deepen participatory practices.

What challenges do BIDs encounter in fostering community engagement?

Internally, organizations most often cited limited funding, low engagement among members, and resource constraints. Additional concerns included unclear roles, weak internal communication, and the tension between short-term project demands and long-term strategic

goals. These conditions likely contribute to the focus on quick, visible results, which, while practical, may limit the ability to address deeper issues like inequality or exclusion. The findings suggest a need for stronger internal structures, including defined responsibilities and more stable funding, aligning with ongoing discussions about legal frameworks to improve continuity and accountability (SOU 2025:5, 2025).

Externally, one of the most persistent challenges is the misalignment of priorities among stakeholders. Even when engagement is achieved, differing interests often prevent unified action, complicating coordination. Growth machine theory (Logan and Molotch, 2007; Smith and Floyd, 2013) highlights how dominant actors tend to steer urban development toward economic outcomes, a dynamic also noted by Valli and Hammami (2021). In practice, this can limit the influence of local communities, even when they participate.

Efforts to engage external actors were frequently described as time-consuming, complex, and requiring sustained outreach. These challenges are intensified by structural issues such as inconsistent mandates, coordination gaps, and limited funding. The legal proposal SOU 2025:5 (2025) may offer partial solutions by strengthening the role of municipalities, potentially addressing issues like the opt-out culture that weakens continuity. However, municipalities themselves were also seen as unstable partners due to staff turnover and vague responsibilities.

Even when stakeholders are involved, trust remains fragile. Several respondents noted a sense of skepticism or exclusion among residents, who may not view BID-led efforts as legitimate. This reflects findings by Srinivasan (2024), who emphasizes that trust and transparency are essential for inclusive engagement.

A key theme in this study is the tension between economic and social goals. Several respondents described trade-offs, where short-term, visible efforts like beautification or safety were prioritized to meet funder expectations. This aligns with growth machine theory, which argues that powerful actors often shape urban development toward economic outcomes (Logan and Molotch 2007; Smith and Floyd 2013). As Valli and Hammami (2021) note, this can overshadow social inclusion.

While some economically driven initiatives still offer social value, such as crime prevention or improved public spaces, deeper structural issues often remain unaddressed. Some

respondents offered a more nuanced view, suggesting both goals are constrained by limited funding and institutional instability, rather than being inherently in conflict.

To navigate this, some BIDs pursued blended strategies that integrate social and economic aims. Safety projects, for example, were also used to build trust and community participation. These efforts reflect Anthony Jr. (2024) and Srinivasan (2024), who emphasize inclusive, participatory practices as essential for reducing tensions and fostering broader engagement.

How can community engagement be improved within BIDs, and what best practices can be identified and shared?

Respondents emphasized the need to shift from short-term, project-based efforts to more stable and structured approaches to community engagement. Many proposals focused on improving internal frameworks through clearer roles, consistent routines, and long-term funding. These suggestions reflect the relatively early stage of Sweden's BID model, which lacks the legal foundations found in more established contexts (Kudla 2022; SOU 2025:5 2025).

There was also a call for stronger municipal support or formalized structures to reduce overreliance on individual efforts. While some respondents proposed greater leadership from civil society actors, concerns were raised about their capacity to lead without institutional backing. Without adequate tools or support, this shift risks being a transfer of responsibility rather than genuine empowerment.

Many BIDs acknowledged the need to expand outreach efforts and engage groups that are often left out. This includes adapting communication methods to account for language barriers and limited digital access. These reflections indicate a growing self-awareness and commitment to inclusivity.

Best practices mentioned included maintaining a consistent presence in the community, initiating small-scale projects like safety walks and beautification efforts, and involving residents in hands-on, co-created activities. These actions build trust and ownership, especially in low-trust settings, and align with tactical urbanism principles (Lydon and Garcia 2015). However, their long-term impact depends on being supported by stable routines and institutional continuity.

Participatory efforts were seen as most effective when they move beyond symbolic gestures and become part of regular governance and planning. This supports insights from Anthony Jr. (2024), who argues for inclusive urban design shaped by community influence.

Finally, honest and transparent communication was frequently mentioned as essential for trust and legitimacy. Meaningful engagement is not only about participation, but also about the quality of relationships that support shared solutions.

Together, these reflections point toward a model of engagement that is locally grounded, flexible, and relational. For these efforts to have lasting impact, they must be embedded in stable structures that support inclusion beyond individual projects.

7.1 Future studies

While this study provides valuable insights, it primarily reflects the perspectives of BID organizations. Future research could benefit from incorporating a broader range of stakeholders, such as property owners, municipalities, local residents, shop owners, and civil society groups. Since BIDs operate both as independent entities and as platforms for collaboration, capturing the views of all involved actors could help shed light on key issues like low engagement or a lack of trust among residents. Exploring these dynamics from multiple perspectives would offer a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of how BIDs function in practice.

In addition, future studies might benefit from a more focused scope. For instance, concentrating solely on internal challenges could allow for deeper exploration of their root causes and how they might be addressed. Building on this idea, a focused qualitative study of a single BID, examined through the lens of multiple stakeholders, could provide both depth and clarity. This approach could lead to more practical and actionable insights.

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9. Appendices

9.1 Appendix 1: Interview Questions

- How does your association/organization define social inclusion, and why is it important for your work?
- Among aspects like equity, participation, and accessibility, which are most important in your approach to social inclusion?
- What initiatives or programs have you implemented to engage the community (e.g., residents, businesses, and marginalized groups)?
- What are the biggest internal and external challenges your BID faces in fostering community engagement?
- Can you share a specific instance where you encountered tensions between economic development and community engagement? How did you navigate or resolve the situation?
- What changes, policies, or partnerships would help improve community engagement within your BID?
- Based on your experience, what best practices would you share with other BIDs looking to strengthen community engagement, such as building relationships or communicating clearly?

9.2 Appendix 2: Consent Form

I hereby consent that Linköping University processes my personal data in the form of any written responses provided within the framework of this study. No information that can be linked to my personal interests or private life will be collected or processed.

For the following purposes: to analyze how BID organizations in Sweden define and implement social inclusion, the strategies they use to promote community engagement, and to identify challenges and opportunities for enhancing social inclusion within the BID model.

The participants will remain anonymous, meaning no personal data, such as names or professional roles, will be included in the research report.

Information:

Your personal data will be processed in the following way: it will be securely stored on the OneDrive account provided to me by Linköping University. Only the responsible researcher, Kerlos Marouki, and the supervisor, Jelmer Brüggemann at Linköping University, will have access to the data. The personal data will not be disclosed to external recipients or third parties and will be removed after finishing this study.

The data will be used for the purposes mentioned above and in accordance with this consent. The legal basis for processing your personal data is your voluntary consent. We do not share your personal data with unauthorized parties, and your data is protected in accordance with the Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act.

Linköping University, 581 83 Linköping, with organization number 202100-3096, is the data controller. You can find Linköping University's privacy policy at www.liu.se.

The consent is valid until further notice. You have the right to withdraw your consent at any time by contacting registrator@liu.se or kerma343@student.liu.se. In such a case, we will cease processing the personal data collected based on this consent. However, data included in results that have already been produced will not be affected by the withdrawal of your consent. Some data may also be archived in accordance with Swedish law.

You have the right to access the personal data we process about you. You also have the right to have incorrect personal data about you corrected. If you have any complaints about our processing of your personal data, you can contact our Data Protection Officer at dataskyddsbud@liu.se. You also have the right to lodge a complaint with the supervisory authority if you believe that we are processing your personal data incorrectly.

I hereby consent that Linköping University processes my personal data according to the information above:

Place	Signature

Date	Name

9.3 Appendix 3: Information Letter

I am Kerlos Marouki, a Master's student in Strategic Urban and Regional Planning at Linköping University. I am conducting research on social inclusion within Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Sweden as part of my master's thesis.

This study explores how Swedish BIDs understand and implement social inclusion. It aims to investigate the strategies used to engage communities, the challenges faced, and how community engagement within BIDs can be improved, along with best practices that exist. The research is conducted through email interviews with representatives from selected Swedish BIDs.

The interviews will be conducted via email, where you will receive a set of predefined open-ended structured questions. You will be able to answer at your convenience. The estimated time required is 20-30 minutes, depending on your responses. If needed, follow-up questions may be asked.

If you have any questions regarding participation or your rights, please refer to the consent form, which will be sent along with the questions, or contact me directly.