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A "Promise" of Proximity in Pandemic Times: Governing Urban Marginality in the Netherlands and France

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Abstract

In early 2020, the world went into lockdown. New norms of social distancing and remote work were implemented in response to the Covid-19 crisis. These appeared to challenge a key aspect of the current governance of urban marginality: proximity. This article asks how proximity, involving physical presence in the neighborhood and direct contact with urban residents, changed and remained the same during the pandemic and what that means for the governance of urban marginality beyond pandemic times. To answer this question, I draw on ethnographic research in marginalized neighborhoods in the Netherlands and France. Studying how local actors practiced proximity and responded to the pandemic, I found that Covid-19 did not simply challenge proximate governance. While physical presence decreased, the pandemic instigated direct daily contact and community response and relief, albeit at a distance. Yet, the pandemic also exposed and aggravated existing difficulties in working "close by," particularly integrated approaches and civic engagement. The analysis, first, highlights the importance of daily contact beyond mere physical presence in the neighborhood, deepening current understanding of proximity in practice. Second, it demonstrates that local actors continuously negotiate community involvement, advancing understanding of civic engagement in proximate governance and the assumed inherent qualities and fixed nature of "the local." Third, it challenges the centrality of "the local" in urban governance, revealing the impact of a "far-away" state on local actors' ability to improve living conditions in marginalized neighborhoods, in and beyond pandemic times.

Keywords

Covid-19; marginalized neighborhoods; pandemic; proximity; urban marginality

1. Introduction

In early 2020, the world went into lockdown. At first, some described the Covid-19 crisis as a "great equalizer," as it similarly affected "rich and poor, Black and White, urban and rural" (Zakaria, 2020). Soon, however, it became clear that the pandemic intensified existing inequalities and marginalization (Florida et al., 2021; Goldin, 2021; Haase, 2020). In the Netherlands and France, mayors expressed alarm at the state of marginalized neighborhoods in their cities (Couvelaire, 2021; "Vijftien burgemeesters," 2021). They called for additional government aid to support assistance programs for these neighborhoods, which they assumed to be particularly challenged by the pandemic and associated measures of social distancing and remote working.

Local neighborhood approaches in both countries had hitherto worked from an ambition of "proximity" involving the physical presence of public service delivery in the neighborhood and direct contact with urban residents (Bacqué & Sintomer, 2001; Bredewold et al., 2018). This notion of proximity emerged in the governance of marginalized neighborhoods as a promise to bridge an understood distance between the state and urban residents (Tonkens & Kampen, 2018).

Proximate governance can be seen as a promising and key aspect of "the local" as a focus of urban governance, for which there is increasing attention in current scholarship (Blanco et al., 2014; Cochrane, 2020; Groenleer & Bertram, 2021; Hertting & Kugelberg, 2018). However, scholars also raise questions about whether the promise of proximity is in fact fulfilled in neighborhood governance (Vollebergh et al., 2021). Some argue against what they call "the local trap": "the tendency to assume that the local scale is preferable to other scales" (Purcell, 2006, p. 1921). Moreover, in the specific context of urban marginality, research points to potentially harmful effects of a state that may be, or experienced as, simultaneously proximate and far away—or proximate in different ways than promised (Dikeç, 2007; Uitermark, 2014; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013). It thus remains unclear what proximity entails in the governance of marginalized neighborhoods. Proximity may not only be a promise; it may be a pitfall as well.

In this article, I examine the promise of proximity. What does it entail? How did proximity change and remain the same during Covid-19, and what does that mean for the governance of urban marginality more generally? For this, I draw on an ethnographic study of how urban professionals and residents practiced proximity in marginalized neighborhoods in the Netherlands and France, before and during the pandemic. I found that the pandemic did not simply challenge proximate governance. While physical presence indeed decreased, the pandemic instigated more direct daily contact and community response and relief, albeit at a distance. Yet, the pandemic also exposed and aggravated existing difficulties in working "close by," particularly lack of an integrated approach to address neighborhood marginalization and variety in communities and community practices perceived, by some, as difficult or even dangerous.

With this in mind, this article contributes to scholarship on the governance of urban marginality in three ways. First, it deepens understanding of the three "promises of proximity" identified by Vollebergh et al. (2021), building on Tonkens and Kampen (2018). In particular, it points to the importance of day-to-day contact as a mode of proximity forming a valuable complement to proximity as physical presence. Second, it demonstrates how local actors continuously negotiate community involvement, advancing understanding of civic engagement in proximate governance (Vollebergh et al., 2021) and the inherent qualities and fixed

nature attributed to "the local" (Purcell, 2006; Swyngedouw, 2004). Third, the article challenges the centrality of "the local" in urban governance, revealing the impact of a "far-away" state that challenges local actors' ability to improve living conditions in marginalized neighborhoods, in and beyond pandemic times.

2. The Promise of Proximity

2.1. Proximate Governance

"Proximity" is a key aspect of urban governance, particularly in marginalized neighborhoods. While labelled in various ways, scholars have studied "governing in community" (Vollebergh et al., 2021, p. 742) or "governing at close range" (Carter, 2018) by looking at, respectively, "proximate" governance and governance based on "proximal relationships" (p. 19). Building on existing scholarship regarding proximity in urban governance and so-called "deprived neighborhoods" (Bacqué & Sintomer, 2001; Vollebergh et al., 2021), I define proximate governance as the delivery of public services through a physical presence in the neighborhood and direct contact with urban residents.

Vollebergh et al. (2021, p. 7) identified and questioned three promises of proximity, as they critically examined attempts to "govern through community" as a "proximate form of governance" in Amsterdam, Milan, and Paris. This was built on the work of Tonkens and Kampen (2018), who listed nine such promises in discussing the changing welfare landscape in the Netherlands. The first of Vollebergh and colleagues' three promises of proximity is physical presence as a precondition for responsiveness. Thus, being knowledgeable about the neighborhood and everyday life there is considered "a precondition for efficient governance that is directly responsive to people's self-identified needs and local problems" (Vollebergh et al., 2021, p. 744). Through a physical presence, the state is seen to develop an embeddedness within the neighborhood and thereby an ability to respond to its needs.

The second promise of proximity positions the neighborhood as the appropriate scale for an integrated approach, in which professionals from different governance services and with different professions work closely together in networks. Operating in proximity to the neighborhood enables public service providers to work integrally rather than with sectored-off approaches. Such an integrated approach leads them to see and approach the different problems of the neighborhood and its residents in relation to one another, rather than in a fragmented way (Tonkens & Kampen, 2018, p. 29).

Finally, the third promise presents the local as "a natural locus of community, sociality, and civic engagement" (Vollebergh et al., 2021, p. 744). In the context of diverse and multi-ethnic marginalized neighborhoods, community and sociality are understood in a specific way, according to Vollebergh and colleagues. This entails a move away from the "self-enclosure" of various ethnic groups, towards forms of civic engagement that represent a "wholesome" and diverse community in which a variety of citizens live together (Vollebergh et al., 2021).

Proximity thus brings the promise of better service delivery. More specifically, it is a response to the classical bureaucratic Weberian state, based on values like reliability, expertise, and predictability, that has been criticized as too far away and ineffective (Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013, p. 46). Proximity encompasses a different set of values, such as trust, familiarity, and customization. The proximate state stands as an

alternative to a 'far-away' state, with local (state) actors close to and in touch with urban residents and their lived world at the neighborhood level to respond more adequately to their needs.

2.2. A Promise in Dispute

The promise of proximity cannot be seen separately from a wider revaluation of "the local" as a key scale of governance (Barnett, 2020; Blanco et al., 2014; Cochrane, 2020; Denters & Rose, 2005; Pike et al., 2007; Pill & Guarneros-Meza, 2020). The governance of marginalized urban neighborhoods, where crime, unemployment, and poverty are often concentrated, has long been highly spatialized at the local level (Swyngedouw et al., 2002; Uitermark, 2014). Currently, a shift towards a local focus in urban governance more generally is evident, marked by state restructuring from centralized, hierarchical models to decentralized, networked state-society governance relations (Hertting & Kugelberg, 2018; Vollebergh et al., 2021).

While proximity can be seen as a key aim and fundamental principle of this "local turn," its "promise" is not undisputed. Some scholars contest warm appraisals of "the local," or what they call "the local trap" (Barnett, 2020): "the tendency to assume that the local scale is preferable to other scales" (Purcell, 2006, p. 1921). In their criticism, they dispute the attribution of specific, inherent benefits to the local as a governance scale, arguing "there is nothing inherent about any scale" (Purcell, 2006, p. 1927). Rather, they view scale as the result of social and political arrangements, which are outcomes of actors' political struggles. As such, scale is a social construction: dynamic, fluid and constantly made and remade, rather than fixed and given (Swyngedouw, 2004). Governance arrangements at the local scale (or any scale), therefore, cannot be inherently more likely to have certain effects than those at other scales (Brown & Purcell, 2005, p. 608). This necessitates the rejection of the analytical assumption that any scale has certain inherent characteristics and the ensuing idea that the local scale holds certain promises for urban democracy and the welfare state (Brown & Purcell, 2005; Purcell, 2006).

Moreover, previous research on the specific context of urban marginality suggests that governments have not simply moved closer to citizens. Rather, what can be viewed as a "local turn" is also theorized as a "move away": a retreat of the neoliberal state, which cuts budgets and closes public services in marginalized neighborhoods while increasingly relying on citizens and civil society in a decentralized, local governance of "active citizenship" (Hoekstra, 2018; Uitermark, 2014; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013). In this context, the presence of the state does not manifest itself in proximate relations of trust. Rather, the state enacts a punitive and penalizing presence, being "close by" through surveillance of marginalized neighborhoods (Dikeç, 2007; Uitermark, 2014). Thus, within proximate neighborhood governance, the state may be, or experienced as, simultaneously far away and proximate in different ways than promised.

3. Studying Proximity in Pandemic Times

3.1. The Pandemic as a "Forced Experiment" on Proximate Governance in the Netherlands and France

The Netherlands and France have different welfare systems, historical paths, and national cultures (Musterd, 2005), but in both countries a shift from a "distant" to a more "proximate" state unfolded starting in the early 1990s, extending well into the new millennium. In the Netherlands, a "move of the welfare state" has been one of the most profound institutional changes in this regard. In 2015, the social domain was decentralized and

many tasks and responsibilities of the welfare state that had been carried out at the national level were placed within the purview of local governments (Bredewold et al., 2018; Groenleer & Hendriks, 2020). In France, the national state continues to play a central role; but here, too, processes of decentralization and localization have impacted urban governance (Bertrand & Moquay, 2004).

Particularly, urban governance programs aimed at "deprived" or "priority" neighborhoods have had and still retain a local and territorial focus. This applies to both the previous *Vogelaarwijken* and current "focus areas" in the Netherlands (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2022; Musterd, 2009) and the *quartiers prioritaires de la politique de la ville* and their predecessors in France (Cupers, 2014; Tissot, 2007). In France, this has translated into an increased focus on participatory democracy (Bacqué & Sintomer, 2001), local governance (Bacqué & Mechmache, 2013; Bertrand & Moquay, 2004), citizen empowerment (Bacqué & Biewener, 2013), and "outreach" to marginalized populations (Baillergeau & Grymonprez, 2020). In the Netherlands, proximity is found in neighborhood governance approaches involving "working with a presence" (*present werken*; see Baart, 2003), active citizenship and participation (Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013), domesticity (Bredewold et al., 2018), and working close to "the lived world" of citizens (Veldboer et al., 2022). As such, the Netherlands and France provide particularly interesting settings to study how, in different institutional and national contexts, a similar ambition took shape and was possibly challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic as an "intervention" or "forced experiment" (Aarts et al., 2021; Florida et al., 2021) provides an intriguing research context to study proximity in practice, as it impacted life in *and* proximate governance of marginalized neighborhoods (Haase, 2020). While a pandemic may be seen as a "great equalizer," it actually "operates selectively," with consequences unevenly distributed (Aarts et al., 2021, p. 6; Goldin, 2021). As such, the Covid-19 crisis exposed and aggravated existing inequalities (Aguirre, 2020; Goldin, 2021; Haase, 2020; Zhenga & Walshamb, 2021), specifically in the Netherlands (De Jonge et al., 2020) and France (Bouchet & Duvoux, 2022).

The impact of the pandemic, both the health crisis itself and the policy measures taken in response to it, was foreseen to be most severe for deprived populations and in marginalized neighborhoods (Berkowitz et al., 2021; Florida et al., 2021; Haase, 2020). The intersection of low socioeconomic status and territorially unequal distribution of public services made the residents of marginalized neighborhoods more vulnerable, as poverty, poor housing, and living conditions, as well as low access to health services, all increased the risk of becoming infected (Haase, 2020). Moreover, the capacity to obey government-imposed measures of social distancing was unevenly distributed (Dodds et al., 2020), as many residents of marginalized neighborhoods lived in small homes, had limited access to green spaces, and had jobs in sectors where working from home was not possible. It soon became evident that government-initiated social distancing measures, working from home, quarantines, and lockdowns profoundly changed urban residents' lives and the governance of their neighborhoods (Aarts et al., 2021; Dymanus et al., 2021).

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

I studied how this change came about through ethnographic research concerning local and participatory governance approaches in marginalized neighborhoods in the Netherlands and France from 2019 until 2021. In the Netherlands, I followed an approach initiated by a Dutch municipality and implemented in three

neighborhoods. My study included over a year of participant observation of neighborhood and municipal meetings and events and 19 in-depth interviews with citizens and urban professionals involved in the approach. In France, I studied the *politique de la ville*: the national government's urban policy program for "priority neighborhoods." That study included 16 explorative conversations, several participant and non-participant observations, and 19 in-depth interviews with citizens, professionals, and civil servants involved in priority neighborhoods in the Île-de-France region. In both the Netherlands and France, interviews focused on urban professionals' and residents' experiences with participatory governance approaches, their strategies to make urban change, and—for the interviews done during the pandemic—the impact of Covid-19 on these approaches.

My ethnographic research in these two locales provided a multi-sited and comparative exploration of how a global phenomenon, participatory governance in marginalized neighborhoods, manifested locally in different national settings. The aim of this multi-sited, comparative ethnography was not to generalize across cases, but to contrast and mirror insights from different contexts, to better understand the phenomenon as it manifested in different settings (Falzon, 2009; Simmons & Smith, 2019).

While my research started pre-pandemic, most of the fieldwork took place during the Covid-19 crisis. This limited opportunities for participant observation and "being there." At the same time, it provided a perfect opportunity to study proximity and how it was, presumably, challenged by the distance mandated by governments worldwide in response to the pandemic. In the Netherlands, my data collection started prior to the pandemic and in a "traditional" way of ethnographic research: with my participation in weekly meetings and events, visiting city hall, strolling through the neighborhood, having informal conversations and unplanned interactions. Starting in March 2020, meetings were suspended and later resumed online and in hybrid formats.

In France, the fieldwork was built on prior research in 2014–2015, but the present work started during the pandemic, during a lockdown. Here, my focus was more on planned interviews than on unplanned informal interactions. Rather than being "immersed in the field" for an extensive period (Schatz, 2009), the fieldwork in France consisted of an explorative field visit in January 2021 and two additional field visits, including two rounds of interviewing in the spring and fall of that same year. The practices as discussed in interviews were followed with (participant) observations of these practices, like visiting a neighborhood council meeting after interviewing the municipal employee responsible for organizing these. In both the Netherlands and France, some meetings were online, but most conversations and interviews were in person, often one-on-one, wearing face masks, in offices separated by plastic screens provisionally attached to desks and at times outside.

The collected data, documents, fieldnotes, and interview transcripts, were analyzed using several coding rounds (Emerson et al., 2011). First, I inductively identified thematic patterns in the data. This resulted in a focus on proximity. Second, I used focused coding to develop an understanding of the ways respondents made sense of proximity in neighborhood governance, for instance, by explaining municipal strategies, like *aller vers* (literally "going towards" or "reaching out"), and in relation to the pandemic, for instance, by explaining how professionals maintained contact with urban residents. Finally, I analyzed the data in line with the three promises of proximity. Going back and forth between data and theory, using an abductive approach, I reexamined existing theoretical ideas about proximity and potentially challenged them with the empirical material (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The analytical process of moving between the Netherlands

and France enabled me to develop comparative insights based on rich and varied contexts—about how proximity was part of neighborhood governance and how it was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

4. Proximity in Practice

4.1. The Netherlands

4.1.1. Proximity in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, urban professionals and residents stressed the need to bridge a distance and build trust between residents and institutions. Working close to residents was viewed as a way to do that. By working in the neighborhood, urban professionals sought to restore and strengthen the trust of urban residents, in a casual and informal way (Fieldnotes NL, May and August 2020).

Urban professionals in the Netherlands often spoke about the importance of working with a presence (*present werken*). This meant being physically available in the neighborhood. According to one urban professional:

> [It means] being present in the neighborhood as much as possible. So, not too much working at your computer, but mainly walking around, and also, for instance, when someone says, "well, my neighbor this and that," you also ring the door of that neighbor's house. (Interview NL, November 2020)

Often, this "presence" materialized in a physical location, like a "neighborhood home": a place in the neighborhood where residents could come together and activities were organized by residents and urban professionals. In fact, as part of the participatory approach, such a place was developed in all three neighborhoods that were part of the program (Fieldnotes NL, May 2020). According to one urban professional, "that is the most important thing: having something physical" (Fieldnotes NL, May 2020).

Being present was also about developing personal relationships. As one urban professional explained:

> People asked: "What are you doing here?" And I answered: "Well, I am making coffee." I never said I was the director. That's also why on my LinkedIn page it says "neighbor." [When I open the door] I say: "Hello neighbor, come on in." (Interview NL, October 2020)

According to this professional, it was about getting to know these "neighbors," developing longstanding relationships with them, and connecting them to other urban professionals when needed (Interview NL, November 2020).

In that sense, being present, and working in proximity, was about "people acting in community together," which was the name of the participatory neighborhood approach. "Community" referred to professionals working together with residents and with one another, acting from within the neighborhood and in response to it. As one professional explained: "No matter how complicated, we have to do this together" (Fieldnotes NL, December 2019).

4.1.2. How Proximity Changed and Remained the Same in the Netherlands

How, then, did the pandemic impact this way of working? During the pandemic, physical presence as the first "promise of proximity" was challenged. Real-life encounters were suspended to a significant extent. Urban professionals working in the neighborhoods agreed that this was very problematic. Illustrative of this view was the difficult start of a "neighborhood home" that was about to open in a Dutch neighborhood when the pandemic hit. The goal of the Home was to provide a physical space for activities organized by and in service to neighborhood residents. The pandemic complicated getting this off the ground. In the words of one urban professional involved: "What is missing is sincere contact with people. Developing that, nourishing that….You have to meet people to do something together" (Interview NL, May 2021). With neighborhood residents who were already isolated from and distrusted state institutions, "sincere contact" was, according to this and other professionals, crucial to build trust and respond to real needs. They therefore found ways to remain in contact with residents, drawing on existing personal relationships, for example, organizing neighborhood breakfasts and creating a community pantry for diapers and clothing (Interview NL, May 2021).

Second, the pandemic challenged the "integral" or integrated approach promised as a result of proximity among urban professionals and between professionals and residents. Different programs and projects of various services and associations were paused: "Because of corona, there were cancellations [in the program]. When we started an effort [to come together], we had to stop again because of the pandemic" (Interview NL, December 2020). Moreover, the pandemic increased the urgency and prioritization of specific "vulnerable groups," thereby challenging a comprehensive approach, as attention and resources were directed to those most in need (Fieldnotes NL, April 2020). Urban professionals warned against focusing only on the most urgent issues, advocating all-encompassing solutions rather than quick fixes: "We see the urgency…but we have to avoid the reflex of just quick investments of money…to prevent 'Covid bandages'" (Interview NL, May 2021).

Third, "acting in community together" remained a key and crucial aspect of neighborhood governance, including during the pandemic. This was demonstrated by the above-mentioned neighborhood breakfast and community pantry as forms of first response and relief. Moreover, both urban professionals and residents stressed that the local community had to care for one another—a principle as true during the Covid-19 crisis as it had been before. One neighborhood resident said: "When I wasn't doing well, at least I knew somebody in the neighborhood I could go to" (Interview NL, December 2020).

4.2. France

4.2.1. Proximity in France

In France, almost all professionals described their way of working in terms of proximity and underscored its importance. One professional, employed by the municipality, explained that this was a new way of working for the municipality. Proximity, he said, was key to bridging the rupture in marginalized neighborhoods, and in France more generally, between state institutions and citizens: "The state is very far away. These services are here for proximity" (Fieldnotes FR, February 2021). He described the municipality's youth services as a public service of proximity, referring to himself and his colleagues as "first-line actors." This proximity was translated into different principles in their work, among them, working outside the walls of city hall (*hors les murs*) and reaching out to the public rather than waiting for residents to come to institutions (*aller vers*).

To realize this way of working, they used "mobile structures," like a camper that served as an office, to go into the neighborhood. The work of department-level professionals was also described as being in the heart of the neighborhood, in proximity to both residents and local associations (Fieldnotes FR, February 2021). Most professionals brought up "proximity" themselves as a discussion topic when I asked them to tell me about their day-to-day work. One professional described proximity as a key element of the *politique de la ville*: working at a decentralized, local level, with trust, physical presence, and encounters between professionals and residents who know one another (Interview FR, June 2021). Another professional commented that just the evening before he had been out knocking on doors to start conversations with residents. He described proximity as "I'm coming to see you" (Interview FR, May 2021).

Others responded affirmatively when I asked whether working in proximity was important in their jobs. They described proximity as part of their daily tasks (Interview FR, November 2021) and as being present in the neighborhood (Interview FR, May 2021). One urban professional responded "of course" proximity was how he would describe his job, explaining it as "placing yourself physically close to a person and looking [at their issues] with [their] eyes" and "being there for many years" (Interview FR, October 2021). Another urban professional, however, laughed when I asked about proximity, saying: "I don't care about those terms. But if someone had to translate what I'm doing, in effect, they'd say, he's working the *politique de la ville* way, because he's really close to all the people. He is working with proximity" (Interview FR, September 2021). Overall, professionals talked about 'proximity' as an obvious part of their job. Residents, too, agreed on the importance of proximity as *aller vers*, or reaching out: "You have to go to people to understand their problems, because these are not people who come to you" (Interview FR, May 2021).

4.2.2. How Proximity Changed and Remained the Same in France

In France, like in the Netherlands, the pandemic impacted proximate urban governance. First, physical presence in the neighborhood was challenged. One French professional said that, due to the pandemic, it was no longer possible to go out into the neighborhood, though that was still very much needed (Fieldnotes FR, February 2021). Yet, this keen awareness of the presumed value of proximity as physical presence meant it did not entirely disappear. Although frequencies were drastically reduced, neighborhood residents and urban professionals still met: wearing face masks, separated by plastic screens, outside and at a distance.

Moreover, urban professionals practiced different modes of proximity to respond to residents' needs. This included daily contact, particularly via telephone, drawing on interpersonal relations. This responsiveness was not new. Interpersonal relations and daily contact often existed pre-pandemic, and this continued when the health measures were put in place: "The basis remains. We are close by, living in the neighborhood. We have regular contact" (Interview FR, June 2021). That contact intensified, however, during the pandemic, becoming crucial for first response and crisis relief. For instance, grocery and food delivery services were provided for the elderly, and laptops were distributed to enable homeschooling (Fieldnotes FR, February 2021).

Second, the pandemic complicated integrated service delivery. Discontinuities were reflected in a divide between associations: Some were capable of continuing their work during the pandemic, while others came to a halt (Fieldnotes FR, February and September 2021). Additionally, the pandemic forced new prioritizations within the already prioritized neighborhoods. Neighborhood social centers, for example, were sometimes open only for children and sometimes entirely closed (Fieldnotes FR, January 2021). This

contradicted the normal function of these centers, which aimed to provide an accessible contact point for all (Fieldnotes FR, February 2021). The priority given to children's activities brought an end to the integrated family approach that had been taken pre-pandemic, since including parents in work with children was now no longer possible (Fieldnotes FR, January and February 2021).

Regarding the third promise, a dynamic local community came into action during the pandemic. Local actors, like residents and neighborhood (welfare) associations, played a crucial role in responding to the daily needs of residents, often coming into action before the national government (Fieldnotes FR, February and October 2021). According to one French urban professional, "these services [local services from the municipality and associations] have taken the role of the state in cushioning the shock of the lockdown" (Fieldnotes FR, February 2021). Urban professionals stressed that the grocery and food distribution services signaled "strong solidarity," and "nowhere was solidarity in response to the pandemic as visible as in the banlieue" (Fieldnotes FR, February 2021).

4.3. Comparison and Synthesis

4.3.1. How Proximity Changed and Remained the Same in the Netherlands and France

In the Netherlands and France, the Covid-19 crisis similarly impacted the three promises of proximity identified by Vollebergh et al. (2021). Some aspects of proximity changed due to the pandemic and the imposed health measures. First, the physical presence of professionals and their direct, face-to-face contact with residents decreased. This instigated a shift in modes of daily contact and crisis response and relief. Specifically, day-to-day contact via telephone and video calls became more dominant. Second, and related to the promise of proximity as civic engagement, community involvement at a distance increased, as evidenced by the emergence of grocery services and the "community pantry." Yet, many neighborhood activities were canceled and some associations and services were unable to switch to alternative programming, online or otherwise. Combined with new prioritizations of particularly vulnerable groups, the pandemic thus, thirdly, limited an integrated and all-encompassing approach. However, some aspects of proximate governance remained the same. Urban professionals and residents in both the Netherlands and France said that reaching out to residents and developing interpersonal relations with them continued to be at the core of the urban professionals' work during Covid-19.

The pandemic also exposed existing difficulties with proximate neighborhood governance. While these were aggravated by the Covid-19 context, urban professionals and residents described them as a continuation of ongoing issues rather than as something new or connected to the pandemic specifically. First, Dutch and French urban professionals indicated that, even before the pandemic, they struggled to prioritize urgent issues while avoiding fragmented responses, aiming for an all-encompassing approach. One professional working in a French priority neighborhood described his work with neighborhood youths as follows: "We receive money to put out fires, instead of making structural change" (Fieldnotes FR, February 2021). Another urban professional, working in a different French priority neighborhood, shared frustration at the structural effects of the work: "We carry out activities, but that's not enough" (Fieldnotes FR, February 2021). Yet another, describing the physical renovation of a neighborhood, commented: "It changes the neighborhood, but not their lives" (Fieldnotes FR, June 2021). While in both countries the ambition was to work "across domains" and with an "integrated approach," in reality, fragmented prioritizations and urgency

remained forefront in resource allocations, within the already prioritized and "urgent" areas. The difficulty of an integrated approach was not described as pandemic-specific, but as a limitation of proximate governance in general, though it became increasingly evident during the pandemic.

Second, while in both the Netherlands and France the local community was emphasized as highly valuable, its role in the neighborhood was controversial, in pandemic times and before. Both Dutch and French residents and urban professionals described the solidarity and value of the neighborhood community, not only during the pandemic but also in discussing the neighborhood more generally. This was presented as a counternarrative to the negative and stigmatizing stories about the neighborhoods that, they explained, were more dominant (Interviews NL, November and December 2020).

Yet, there were also comments about "who belonged" to the neighborhood community and what types of community life were appropriate. In the Netherlands, for instance, urban professionals and residents talked about activities focused on "migrants," where no Dutch was spoken, remarking that these alienated some residents, making them feel no longer at home in the neighborhood (Fieldnotes NL, February 2020). In France, such discussions took a more prominent role and were centered on the idea, or danger, of *communautarisme*, or divisions among and retreat into separate community groups. One urban professional explained: "The communities really stay to themselves. There's an Arab community, a Malian community, etc. And, well, the idea of [our association] is to try and mix them….People stay among themselves and in their community, and at times that's safe for them, but at times, well, it closes [them] off. It prevents them a bit from discovering the other, encountering the other, and opening up to others" (Interview FR, May 2021).

4.3.2. Governing Urban Marginality in Proximity, in and Beyond Pandemic Times

During the pandemic, proximity changed and remained the same. This tells us three key things about the methods of urban professionals and residents to improve living conditions in marginalized neighborhoods, in and beyond pandemic times.

First, day-to-day contact and interpersonal relationships of trust are as important, if not more important, than physical presence in responding to local needs. As suggested by others (Barnett, 2020; Brown & Purcell, 2005; Purcell, 2006), the local scale did not seem to have inherent qualities supportive of responsive service delivery. Although urban professionals and residents stressed the importance of being physically present in the neighborhood, they also underscored the need to complement physical presence with daily contact between urban professionals and residents. In both countries, daily phone calls and conversations via WhatsApp brought about closer connections between residents and urban professionals and were described as highly valuable for responding to the neighborhoods' needs. When physical presence decreased, this contact on a daily basis enabled proximity to remain a key element of their way of working. Proximity for responsiveness (Vollebergh et al., 2021), thus, appears to be about daily contact and interpersonal relations, beyond proximity as merely physical presence.

Second, the involvement of the local community is not a given, but rather the outcome of a political struggle by local actors and is highly dependent on the specific context (Swyngedouw, 2004). Who belongs to a community is a dynamic and fluid social construction, constantly negotiated by local actors. The neighborhood did appear to be "a locus of community, sociality and civic engagement" (Vollebergh et al.,

2021, p. 744), during the pandemic and before. However, community engagement also had a shadow side. While the solidarity that emerged during the pandemic was presented as "the right kind" of community, other forms of community in marginalized neighborhoods were perceived, by some, as difficult or even dangerous. Negotiating these different communities and community practices also appeared to be part of the governance of urban marginality. This was the case before and during the pandemic period and was especially evident in France, with its national context of *communautarisme* and *laïcité*.

Third, a simultaneous proximity and far-awayness of the state may challenge local actors' ability to improve living conditions in marginalized neighborhoods. Proximate governance approaches have not simply meant that governments have moved closer to citizens (Dikeç, 2007; Uitermark, 2014; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013). As demonstrated by the local responses to the pandemic in France, neighborhood residents continued to experience the national government as far away or even absent; the local community had to step in to provide crisis relief. At the same time, in both the Netherlands and France, the state's presence was evident in local actors' dependence on the limited budgets provided by the national government. The more diffuse role of the state manifested in relationships of trust, but also of dependence and abandonment, challenging the centrality of "the local" in urban governance (Barnett, 2020; Brown & Purcell, 2005; Purcell, 2006). Here, too, national context mattered. With France's more hierarchical state structure—compared to the rather decentralized state structure in the Netherlands—the state was experienced as even more "far away" in France than in the Netherlands.

5. Conclusion

This article examined the impact of Covid-19 on urban governance in neighborhoods expected to be particularly severely impacted by the pandemic. I asked what the "promise of proximity" entailed, as a core aspect of local governance in marginalized neighborhoods in the Netherlands and France. Additionally, I asked how that promise changed and remained the same during the pandemic, and what that means for the way urban residents and professionals work together to improve living conditions in marginalized neighborhoods, in and beyond pandemic times.

Drawing on ethnographic research in marginalized neighborhoods in the Netherlands and France, I demonstrated that proximity was, indeed, challenged by the pandemic. Physical presence decreased and neighborhood activities were suspended. However, the pandemic did not simply challenge proximate governance. The pandemic also instigated new modes of proximity through direct day-to-day contact and community response and relief, albeit at a distance, for instance, via grocery deliveries to vulnerable residents. Even more, however, the pandemic exposed and aggravated existing difficulties of proximate governance in marginalized neighborhoods. First, urban professionals stressed the difficulty of working "integrally" and questioned the structural effects of their work. Second, while solidarity and civic engagement during the pandemic were celebrated, managing different communities and community practices perceived, by some, as difficult or even dangerous appeared to be part of the governance of urban marginality. Both these difficulties existed prior to the pandemic, but came much more to the fore in pandemic times.

With these insights, this article, first, extends existing scholarship on the "promise of proximity" (Vollebergh et al., 2021), particularly highlighting the importance of day-to-day contact between urban professionals and

residents, beyond mere physical presence, to respond to local needs. Second, the analysis deepens existing understandings of civic engagement in proximate governance by revealing that what happens on the local scale is not fixed. Rather, it is the result of a political struggle within the neighborhood (Swyngedouw, 2004), as demonstrated by local actors' continual negotiation of what appropriate community involvement entails, especially in France. Finally, the article demonstrates that in the context of urban marginality, the state may be simultaneously proximate and far away, manifesting in relationships of trust as well as in abandonment and dependence. As such, I join other scholars in challenging the assumption that "the local" inherently possesses qualities beneficial to urban governance (Barnett, 2020; Brown & Purcell, 2005; Purcell, 2006) and contribute to existing knowledge by demonstrating that the persisting presence of a "far-way" state complicates local actors' ability to improve living conditions in marginalized neighborhoods, in and beyond pandemic times.

For those whose everyday life or work centers on proximity, involving physical presence in marginalized neighborhoods and direct contact between urban professionals and residents, comparative insights from the Netherlands and France showed that proximity was not simply a promise, but a possible pitfall as well. The pandemic exposed and aggravated strengths and weaknesses of proximate governance, and these should be considered in shaping local neighborhood approaches beyond pandemic times. This calls for further research on how different government levels can interact to address national (or even global) issues that manifest locally. For the French case, moreover, it underlines (Dikeç, 2007; Slooter, 2019) the need to unpack and develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between the state and its banlieues and the communities living there.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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