



Co-creation and participative approach: theory vs. reality / lessons learnt from our first involvement in an URBACT project

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“Working in silo” is a trendy saying expressing however accurately how too many structures are used to work.



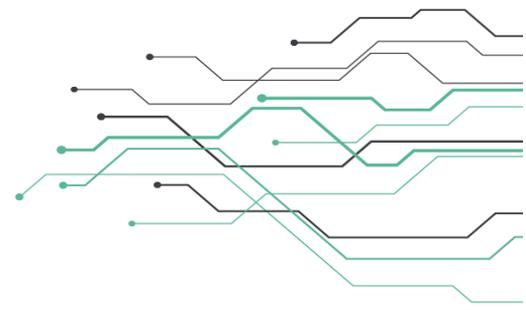
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It basically means that the different departments within these structures are working independently from one another, autonomously, without real information and project sharing.

It is not necessarily due to a will not to share one’s knowledge and therefore power and control, but also sometimes simply to everyone being too focused and caught up in their daily tasks to take that step back and think of the bigger picture.

So, joining the very first URBACT project came out as the opportunity for the local authority and its services to experiment integration method, on a matter that was really transversal and need collaboration and cooperation from all stakeholders.

Although overall the experience was said to have been a very interesting one to all members that were part of the ULG at the end of the project, truth is this group was not as big and complete as wished at the beginning in 2019.



Why then, and what could have been done differently?

It all started so promisingly. URBACT and the work of the lead partner and lead expert in the project really helped at the beginning of the project to structure the integrating approach, taking time to think through the who, the how, when, etc, and to write it all down, using URBACT tools and guided along by our expert and partner.

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Potential stakeholders coming from all type of groups were identified, and representatives from public organizations, businesses, knowledge centres, administration, officials... were invited to a first introduction meeting in 2019 in phase 1 already, in attendance of our lead partner and expert that were here for the city visit.

15 stakeholders attended this meeting, with some others having been invited but not available. All attendees showed interest and willingness to find out more about the project and how they could be part of it.

The IoT Xchange project's application for phase 2 was then approved mid-2020.

Afterwards, an external expert was hired after a procurement procedure, with a detailed requirements specification.

And one of the stakeholders and potential funder, the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté Région, was about to launch a call for proposals aiming at funding projects linked to sustainable and smart territory, with a deadline to answer it on April 30th, 2021.

However, 3 years later, the ULG ended up being made up of 8 people, mainly part of the same group type.

What happened then?

Well, first of all, COVID happened. People had to put their project aside to deal with an unprecedented crisis. That meant in local authorities, for example and amongst other things, internal and HR reorganization, setting up vaccination centres, supporting the population, businesses, schools, health centres, ...

So, they had little time to deal with other projects that were less urgent.

Also, with the pandemic came the need to urgently change our habits, our work methods and our communication channels.

And although everyone generally adapted surprisingly well, it did take some time, during which everyone was legitimately focused on their own projects, teams etc.





Also, as we all eventually realized, you just cannot engage people as fully online as in physical; there are the technical issues first (internet connection, variety of tools available for online meetings and getting used to each,...) but also and mainly everything that happens outside the meeting itself, like meeting people in hallways or around coffee and reminding them about a coming meeting, about the project, why their participation is important.

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So, working remotely on such an integrated project requires a lot more organization and structure outside of meetings themselves to keep people aware and involved in the project.

Then we also had to face the departure of the ULG coordinator, who was not immediately replaced.

Without a “leader”, someone dedicated to animating these groups and keeping the dynamic going, it naturally slowly faded away. People focused on other projects they had going, causing this one to slow down for some time.

There again, the URBACT tools and methodology, and the work from the lead partner and lead expert helped us overcoming this challenge:

Having a road map that had been clearly defined helped the ULG and the project to stay on track.

But mostly the support for the lead expert and partner, taking time to understand the situation and to take part in ULG meetings on how to organize the follow up, and the involvement of the core members of the ULG, who understood what was at stake, and how they could benefit from it, made it possible to carry on the project, and to eventually come up with the expected Action Plan.

So, what lessons are to be learnt from this first experience:

1. It is important to structure the approach:

You have to set up the milestones of the project; it will make you more confident to start with and will also be something to hang up to in case of unexpected event.

But you also must ensure constant follow-ups, with minutes from meetings, to-do list, and projections, for everyone to know what is expected, what to do and where to go next.



2. Use the tools that are available:

URBACT created quite a large toolbox in terms of integrated approach that you can use for any type of project. Find the ones that are appropriate for each type of project and meeting, whether online or physical, and use them!

3. Adaptability is essential:

A project is by definition alive and will evolve with time. Unexpected events will happen, make sure you adapt yourself and your project to it.

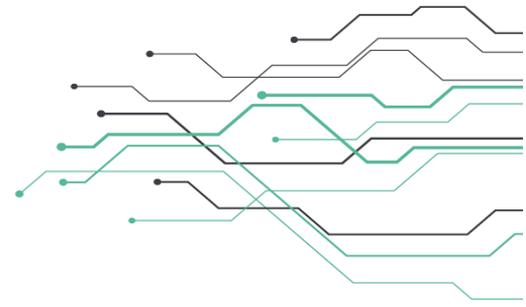
4. It is all about people!

An integrated approach only works if people are engaged to start with and understand the ins and outs of the project. So, make sure you take the time for people to understand the project, and keep it alive even outside of planned meetings. Also always keep in mind that people also have their own projects going on, their own missions to fulfil, so be patient and listen to people's need, concerns, and restraints.

And because no matter how well planned and organized, things will probably not always go your way,

In difficult times as someone once said, "Keep calm and carry on".





#IoT Xchange



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