

## CASE STUDY

### The EU URBAN II Community Initiative in North Belfast

#### OVERVIEW

This case study looks at the experiences of the EU URBAN Programme and its attempts to regenerate disadvantaged areas of metropolitan Europe (see Carpenter, 2006 for a fuller description). The Programme has two objectives:

*First*, to promote the formulation and implementation of particularly innovative strategies for sustainable economic and social regeneration of small and medium sized towns and cities or of distressed urban neighbourhoods in larger cities;

*Second*, to enhance and exchange knowledge and experience in relation to sustainable urban regeneration and development in the Community.

This case study looks at the attempts to tackle ethno-religious segregation through area-based integrated development programmes. The initiative had important successes in building bottom regeneration processes and participatory capacity but also illustrates the limits to programmes in highly segregated and ethnicised communities.

#### BACKGROUND

The URBAN II Programme was targeted on inner North Belfast (31,000 people) with £13m worth of investment between 2000 and 2006. The area is the most disadvantaged in Northern Ireland; 21 *peace lines* divide Protestant and Catholic areas; it has suffered

from some of the highest rates of violence and deaths during 3 decades of conflict. The *Operational Programme* document describes how the money will be spent and how it should be delivered. The North Belfast Partnership

Board, which consists of representatives from the political, statutory, and private and community sectors took control over delivery including funding decisions, financial control and monitoring and evaluation of the implementation process. A process of community consultation helped to establish the high level priorities or objectives as well as the specific measures, which concentrate more on expenditure projects.



#### THE PROJECT

The Operational Programme was therefore set out as a series of Priorities and Measures: Priority 1: Developing the potential of physical and social resources included: Measure 1.1 Sharing places; Measure 1.2 Providing physical opportunity; and Measure 1.3 Environmental Improvements.

#### Key Words

■ Partnership ■ Community ■ Brownfield ■ Cohesion



Priority 2: Developing the potential of people resources also included 3 Measures including: Measure 2.1 Accessibility; Measure 2.2 Development of community businesses and the Social Economy; Measure 2.3 Community capacity Priority 3: Developing the potential of the programme through Technical Assistance included: Measure 3.1 Programme resources; Measure 3.2 Technical Assistance. Most of the resources were allocated to regenerating contested sites that were un-developable because of their proximity to the interface between Catholic and Protestant, neighbourhoods. However, Priority 2 also recognised the importance of labour market access, skills and the social economy as drivers of urban renewal.

## **THE IMPACT**

The Programme had important quantifiable impacts on the number of community groups supported (115), buildings refurbished (26) and major environmental improvement projects supported (4). The Programme also developed nearly 4000m<sup>2</sup> of new floor space for commercial and community use and levered £300,000 of private investment into the area. Its performance was less successful in establishing new community businesses, large scale capital projects and cross-community initiatives. For instance, the plan anticipated that there would be eighteen new cross-community initiatives developed in an area with such a high concentration of interfaces, yet only three materialised. Here, inter- and intra-community conditions in North Belfast deteriorated despite the ceasefires and some form of political progress. There was a Loyalist feud between rival paramilitary factions; Orange Order parades raised local tensions; and a dispute over Catholic children accessing their school through a Loyalist area increased community polarisation in the north of the city. All of this made it difficult to make progress on contested sites and achieve the targets set for the programme; in particular, in

regenerating Brownfield schemes in contested interface areas. As the Programme developed into 2003/4 trust began to develop as both communities and politicians agreed priorities and projects against quite strict de-commitment targets. These targets mean that the Partnership could lose EU monies committed in one year but not actually spent two years later. Representatives from the political extremes worked together via the Partnership to appreciate each others' circumstances, reduce stereotyping and to ensure compliance with financial and operational performance targets. Differences were not dissolved but as one representative put it 'a page has been turned' in local relations and the experiences, contacts and networks created by participation in URBAN II. The project has provided a basis for the successful creation of Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships in the north of the city. Difference was not dissolved but it was also not violent, likely to unravel cross-community relationships or cause the sort of resource competition that characterised area based programmes in the past. The Police reported a significant reduction in interface violence over the latter part of the Programme in particular and highlighted the value of partnership

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

- The design of the Programme envisaged a smaller number of larger capital led regeneration projects, which proved problematic as paramilitary feuding and tensions around schooling and parades escalated at the start of the decade. Work on community cohesion will always be subject to wider circumstances, tensions and events whether they are at the local, national or even international level. Trust building is a slow and patient process that cannot be accelerated by external interests or funding priorities.
- It is also important to acknowledge the advantages that segregation seems to

offer polarised communities whether it is about safety and protection, cultural binding or securing assets and resources. Territoriality is a deeply structural phenomena and area based interventions need to be delivered with caution, especially where they offer simplistic notions of integration, desegregation and cohesion.

- It is important not to overstate the significance of the programme in desegregation space, reducing social distance between different ethnic groups or developing sustainable capital projects. Its strength is that Partnership working created the space for different groups to understand each other better, appreciate what they have in common and work on issues, especially around social disadvantage.
- The devolution of resource allocation to very local levels also has problems. The community and political representatives on the Board did not address the development opportunities of Brownfield sites and cross-community working around the interfaces was limited. There was an accusation by one statutory representative that 'permitting sectarian groups to run the show resulted in a carve-up where each group got their own bit and were happy with that'. Partnership is clearly doubled edged and consensus and collaboration may simply be unrealistic in highly ethicised places.
- What might be more relevant is the skill base and competencies required to deliver major development projects. The experience of URBAN II enhanced skills in project management, financial planning and social economics and the type of expertise that will be more relevant as the Structural Funds withdraw from the region and as Government looks for more

sustainable forms of community development.

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### Other relevant contacts:

URBACT is a network of URBAN II cities across Europe and information on their work can be found at [www.urbact.org](http://www.urbact.org)

### Project publications:

Publications available from the North Belfast Partnership Board include:

Department for Social Development (2001) *EU URBAN II 2000-06 Operational Programme in Northern Ireland*, Belfast, DSD.

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NISRA (2005) URBAN II Mid-term Evaluation Update: Final Report, *Belfast, NISRA*.