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The Urban-Italia programme in Bagheria

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The opportunity presented by the Urban-Italia Programme

The Urban Programme stimulated innovation in urban practices through the introduction of the principle of integration. Integrating resources and partners is supposed to boost the effectiveness of urban regeneration programmes.

At the initial stage, the Urban Programme seemed to promise significant financial resources; and, above all, some procedures that seemed to guarantee a degree of effectiveness and, although being complicated, a standard comparable to the highest European profile.

The Urban-Italia Programme

URBAN is a European Community Initiative, co-financed by the European Community's Structural Funds – the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF) – to improve quality of life in neighbourhoods of urban areas in the European Union, promoted from 1994-1999 (Urban I) and 2000-2006 (Urban II). The two stages of the programme selected and funded interventions in 118 cities during Urban I, and in 70 during Urban II.

In Italy, of the 89 top-ranked proposals competing for the Urban II, the first ten were admitted for European financing. Later, the next twenty ranked programmes were funded with national funds in a special initiative called Urban-Italia.

The total budget (amounting to 103.3 million Euro) was contributed by the Ministry of Economy and Finance, and was divided among the twenty selected municipalities. The Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport was responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Programme and for following the evolution of expenditure.

Urban-Italia Bagheria has been a significant opportunity for urban regeneration, as well as for renewing the style of local governance. Moreover, the proposal's design, made by professionals¹ appointed ad hoc, insists upon a new vision for the area, impinging upon the re-use of local heritage (Eighteenth century Villas); promoting new innovative projects and unconventional administrative action. The final results are considered successful in terms of the overall investment level, and the number and variety of initiatives implemented; above all, the Programme succeeded in promoting and weaving new “bonds of trust” between citizens and institutions.

Target Bagheria

At the time of the project proposal, Bagheria had a population of over 50,000 inhabitants, a high population density (1,850 p/sq.km., or 4,790 p/mi²) – considerably higher than the Palermo Province average (248 p/sq.km., or 640 p/mi²) – and a profile characterized by strong urban degradation – lack of life and poor environmental quality.

Bagheria has a new urban fabric: 83% of the buildings have been built after 1950. The recent Master Plan² showed that each inhabitant had 5 sq.m. (45ft²) of public services on the average, far below the minimum standard specified by national

¹ The project group was composed by the urban planner Marina Marino with architects Corrado Marino, Simona Balistreri, Yodan Rofè.

² The Bagheria Master Plan, designed by the University of Palermo (Coordinator prof. N. G. Leone), was entrusted in 1994 and approved in 2002.

regulations. Moreover, the city developed mostly informally, ignoring the land-use plan and regulation.

Widespread urban poverty, and the lack of urban amenities, create problems in defining a specific target area, highlighted by critical indicators of social well-being, such as income and employment.

The service sector is prominent in the local economy, with more than 50% of the total jobs. However, the city suffers from an extremely high rate of unemployment, particularly among youth, and from social problems such as deviance, delinquency and drug addiction.

At the time of the proposal, the city of Bagheria seemed destined to become a dormitory-community outside of Palermo. Furthermore, organized crime was infiltrating the economic, social and political community.

The proposal's target area identified the part of the town between the railroad and the motorway, along the historic axis up from the central railway station. The dense fabric of this area is fairly recent and consists mostly of low quality small condos, built in the once sumptuous gardens around the abandoned and neglected Eighteenth century villas.

“Restart” from the Villas

The target area in the city was chosen because of the location of the main historic Villas. Villas, squares and urban axes have also influenced the selection of urban mobility projects.

With a budget of 5,061,000 euros, the programme is articulated along investment lines and project measures. Most of the initiatives depended upon the budget line supporting infrastructure; some on the lines supporting culture and society; a line subsidised the establishment of new firms and jobs.

The most expensive initiatives involved the restoration of the ancient Villas in order to relocate new public services. Squares in the historic centre were upgraded and returned to the pedestrian domain, after years of being unregulated parking lots. Another large project was the transformation of the disused loading docks of the rail station into a parking lot to serve commuters, and its connection with the public space in front of the railway station, which was also redesigned to reconnect the axes of Villa Cattolica (now a museum and permanent exhibition of works by painters Guttuso), Cutò Palace (home to the Arts Department of University of Palermo) and Villa San Cataldo (restored by the Province as a secondary art school and playgrounds).

	Investment					
	Physical and env. regeneration	Entrepreneurship and Employment	Social Integration	Transportation	Information and Communication Technology	Technical assistance
Urban 1	38%	32%	23%	2%		4%
Urban 2	56%	8%	10%	14%	6%	6%
Bagheria	64%	19%	6%	5%	2%	4%

Sources: Our elaboration on data provided by: “Executive Summary of Urban I”; “The programming of Structural Funds 2000-2006: An initial assessment of the Urban”, Urban Center Bagheria.

It was widely noted and commented elsewhere that the Urban Italia programme in Bagheria was not an exception to the common profile of Urban programmes in Italy, where “construction and urban assets are still prevalent” (Cremaschi 2002, Laino 2002). Again, the programme has the classic pattern of challenging regeneration and recovery actions, for significant parts of historical and artistic heritage, with the purpose of future inclusion of productive actions or services currently not well clarified or insufficiently designed. The real problem of integration initiatives, common to all programmes, shows that the aim of integration must be understood in a reductive way, or it will prove disappointing during implementation, in relation to the programme’s design as it is used to promote public works and infrastructure rather than accompanying actions. Despite this, it is also true that a minimalist interpretation of actions integrating different operations has established itself whenever there are lacking skills, unstable forms of government, few ordinary resources, etc.

Sources: Our elaboration on data provided by: “Executive Summary of Urban I”; “The programming of Structural Funds 2000-2006: An initial assessment of the Urban”, Urban Center Bagheria.

Moreover, subsidies were provided for building and construction, the part of the economic line to be implemented most effectively. Support was also planned for innovative activities, which were not activated until the end of 2007. For example, the advanced activity of “Mobility and Environmental Quality” was directed towards a more pronounced environmental awareness at the urban level.

The summary table that compares the results of the different streams of the Urban Programmes shows clearly that Urban II devoted more funds to infrastructure than to fostering entrepreneurship, employment, and social inclusion, even more than Urban 1.

Some of the features and shortcomings of the Bagheria Programme depend upon the European Urban model, but they became more apparent when a process of radical change was started.

Part of the difficulties are due to the strongly formalized procedures introduced by the European Union to ensure common standards of quality and effectiveness. Some common clichés have evolved into a sort of repertoire of featured projects.

A great number of immaterial activities, promoted in the second phase of Urban Bagheria, have in fact complemented initiatives implemented in the first phase.

The initial involvement of groups such as artisans, traders, or local school students, was weak. In a more advanced stage of the programme it grew with a deliberate involvement of the youngest population (with particular attention to women). From this perspective, both material and intangible actions produced positive effects, the first also because being visible influenced the perceptions of the programme effectiveness.

The programme implementation

There are two distinct implementation phases: the first, 2002-2006; the second 2006-2008. They are featured by different governance styles and action types, referring also to the residual availability of time and money, and above all, the need to accelerate laggard actions in order to complete the programme on time.

In the first phase, material actions prevailed, while the intangible ones were delayed. More emphasis was put on visibility, and the recurrent attitude to favour the creation of “public works” prevailed. Often these priorities reflect skills and sensitivity of the technical staff directly involved in implementation, rather than political or social agendas. Furthermore, they depend on the belief that public works and infrastructure are always badly needed, and above all, are in some way a sort of precondition for any change of the status quo. With much goodwill, and a varied mix of technical expertise, a very small group³ took on the challenge of initializing the process of “Bagheria's renaissance” as defined by the proposal, hoping to achieve a broader involvement with the citizens. Overall, the phase was characterized by a low level of participation by citizens, who were not involved in the design of the proposal, nor even sufficiently informed.

The second phase of the programme's implementation is marked by the Minister's threat to stop funding because of the low level of investment in the previous period. At that point the new Mayor, and a new manager⁴ in charge of the programme were struggling to save and to complete it. The new phase is thus characterized by the urgency of making timely and effective decisions, close deals and payments, and respecting the budget deadlines. Only after the financial rescue, were old actions (abandoned, or never activated, such as the assignment for the work at Palazzo Butera) re-examined, and better communication with, and a deeper participation of, the public were finally initiated.

The new phase was also enriched by the arrival of a new member in the Urban team: a Programme⁵ Coordinator who, in cooperation with the new Programme Manager, achieved a significant turn in the priorities and style of work.

The Urban office, initially placed inside the Municipality offices, was boldly relocated in October 2007 to an under-used communal property. Awaiting the

³ In addition at the Mayor, arch. Fricano, the main working group was formed by ing. Mineo and geom. Amenta.

⁴ It is perhaps useful to clarify that the two people were not in fact entirely unrelated to the Programme before: the Mayor Biagio Sciortino, elected in May 2007, was Culture Alderman of the previous City Government, while Marino, member of designer group, has been Head of the programme control in the first phase.

⁵ Maria Cristina Lecchi, selected for her skills in public communication and previous involvement in several European programmes.

completion of the future prestigious location (within Palazzo Butera), the vibrant Urban Centre was placed near the Palazzo Butera, dressed with a huge banner announcing the Urban activities inside. The Urban Centre is an open and public space, in a busy location where people pass daily. Presentations, discussions and operational meetings are held frequently, and it is possible to apply to the cultural initiatives, or to request information about the Programme.

In June 2008, the Programme website was re-launched and optimized, by giving timely information on ongoing projects, events and initiatives. In this way, the programme let on a motivated group of young (mostly local) people, intrigued by the vision of Urban, and by the opportunity the Programme offered for their new untapped professional capabilities.

In the second phase, attention to citizens was renewed, especially to younger people and women – undoubtedly the main resources of the territory. Within this sparkling atmosphere was born the first festival (a “white night”) called “Ricominciamo dalle ville”, – which marked the official and public re-launching of the programme, followed by a second event called “The cities that we have inside” in September 2008.

These animation and social recreation actions marked a decisive step towards the resumption of new energies that led to completing the Programme, paying greater attention to the citizens, especially those young people who contributed voluntarily. This has also allowed some long dormant actions to restart with renewed force. For example, the “Time Bank”, concerning innovative and alternative services, was located inside the Urban Centre, which was re-interpreted as an incubator for ideas and projects (more than merely for business). This renewed vision included the “crop-agricultural laboratory”, the promotion of “Summer Time” – a long afternoon of creative activities for children – and other initiatives supporting culture, such as the AgoràUrban, Velavogando and Impara Parte (Learn art).

AgoràUrban is a programme of summer initiatives, with film screenings, more or less d’essai, held in the “Urban Squares”, places that the Programme has helped to give back to the city and to its citizens.

Velavogando is an initiative meant to promote tourism and the rediscovery of the sea, and was activated following the same device used to activate the UrbanPoint. An existing cooperative, more or less non-profit, was supported and advertised by the programme, making it more efficient and effective. Moreover, the UrbanPoint, the tourist information kiosk in the middle of the city centre and its small pedestrian area, is relevant to practices of institutionalization due to a deeper and stable sharing of the Programme’s purpose by members of the Association, in addition to the clear common goals of enhancing and promoting the city.

In September 2008, following a similar logic, but with a clearer target audience (women) and purpose (the recovery of traditional activities), and with the participation of another local association (“Zagare e limoni”), the Programme has turned on a course to promote the art of embroidery and all manual activities for the preservation and rediscovery of local traditions.

Urban Bagheria’s Values and Innovations

The main challenge that the programme handled consists, firstly, in the commitment “to deliver”.

The Urban Bagheria programme suggested one of the classic planning dilemmas, that is, whether it is better to reinforce the strong points of a situation (at risk of

appearing far from “real” problems and difficulties of “real” people); or to address the main issues, often too difficult to be faced by a single initiative.

Bagheria offers some arguments supporting the first strategy: galvanizing social capital through symbolic actions. This kind of choice was used to influence the selection of target areas inside the Urban Programmes: «the strong ties of economic and managerial efficiency, pushed the Municipalities to address not the worst issues and situations, but rather those potentially most easy and successful» (Cremaschi 2002).

Certainly, positive and visible outcomes are a mean also to reconstruct the bonds of trust between citizens and institutions, such “normal” conditions having being eroded or denied during the long array of political and institutional crisis. The Programme contributed to the reconciliation of public and institutional partnerships, simultaneously creating skills and a “sense of citizenship”. In this way, citizens, at first reticent, have gradually accepted the challenge of change as proposed by the Programme.

In this view, the regulation of procedures for the rehabilitation of buildings located inside the historic centre boundaries can also be considered. It has simultaneously produced the following effects:

- to push the Municipality to take on new commitments, even ordinary ones such as building maintenance;
- to amplify the resonance of Urban’s projects, further spreading the effects of regeneration;
- to renew the public image of the city of Bagheria.

Finally, it was also agreed that public funds for facade rehabilitation could be devolved only for the facades of legally constructed or condoned buildings. In addition to the request of an Anti-Mafia Certificate from all the building firms involved. The new regulations produced tangible effects such as the contextual legalization of buildings that were to be rehabilitated.

Once again a “traditional and material” action had the potential to generate important and unexpected effects. In this case, the procedural “bottlenecks” have been eliminated, balancing duties and exemptions to activate economic participation.

In this sense, from the renewal of the squares, to the extraordinary purchase of Palazzo Butera, the Programme has undoubtedly made a significant contribution. To achieve such an ambitious outcome, a different idea of “public” was adopted, and a kind of encircling technique realized through a series of operations based mainly on transparency.

Especially in the first phase, this concern with transparency was the only aspect connected by the citizens’ participation and involvement. However, even later a real participatory process was never put in place, unless in the form of a stronger informative effort (posters, leaflets, information gazebo, etc.) or public events.

Although not really participatory events, public events such as festivals are able to reach more people, and overcome some ancestral barriers of distrust and indifference. In short, they are an intermediary step, suitable when political participation is traditionally weak.

It is undeniable that some effort to involve the inhabitants and local participants should be made from now on, because participation “has to be learned” by both institutions and citizens; and every opportunity missed is a loss in terms of mutual learning.

Overall, however, the institutional partnerships followed a ritual of procedures with constant presence at meetings, at tables or at the various committees. Yet, real processes of sharing decisions or responsibilities for actions were not started. In fact, it is clear that some programmes seem to require a strong partnership in the starting phase, but do not enforce continued partnership during implementation.

A reflection of this critical point, for example, is Palazzo Butera, the Programme's core-project; even if it were acquired through a complex operation that put together funds of a different nature, it still does not have a project management plan capable of consolidating the success.

However, in a partnership tissue structurally divided, a necessarily different and undoubtedly positive role has been played by the school, in the form of the "Babel Gherib" network, which has successfully integrated the purposes of the programme with its own.

Beyond its presence in the Programme Surveillance Committee, this network of local schools has been able to contribute to the promotion of activities in and outside schools, while simultaneously increasing both school and programme aims through a fruitful exchange of human and financial resources, benefiting the growth of young people in a wide range of small projects (recycling, summer activities, etc.).

Although the school was a partner from the beginning, it is evident that, for the target group (youth) and size (small budget), this success matches some of the second phase features. For example, one action which stands out is the activation of a young motivated local team (mostly with a high profile training), beneficiaries of small work grants.

It is likely that the initiation of these participatory processes is simultaneously the best promise of long lasting achievements, and the most precious element to be protected for the future.

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