

# THE EMERGING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN COUNCILS AND CITIZENS

## TRENDS TOWARDS CO-RESPONSIBILITY

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Hasan Uludag works as the education and development officer for the Konya Sports Club in Botkyrka, a municipality of more than 80,000 people on the south-western edge of Stockholm. Konya Sports runs twelve football teams from the ages of eight to eighteen, plus a club that plays in the Swedish professional league. Originally, Konya started as a club of Turkish migrants attracted to Sweden in the 1970s by manufacturing jobs. But now it is open to all-comers. When Hasan showed me the team-sheet for his Under 12s, the players had Kurdish, Iraqi, Pakistani, Bengali, Syrian and Swedish names, as well as Turkish ones.

Konya Sports get a 200,000 krona grant from Botkyrka council that covers the cost of using its modern pitches – artificial grass – and training facilities. But Hasan has wider ambitions. He is in discussions with the council for more land on which to build a multi-purpose community centre and even hotel. Further, with other associations in the voluntary sector, Konya Sports is trying to get social clauses built into a new procurement framework with the council so that local community organisations and their members can win contracts and secure jobs.



### **Changing Circumstances Require New Philosophies**

This is just one example of the new forms of relationships between councils and their citizens that are being explored across Europe. The world is changing fast. Europe's cities are more diverse and people are living longer. The traditional welfare state is under pressure. There is a growing need for new types of services and innovative forms of service delivery. This article brings together experiences and examples from different cities who work in the URBACT **TOGETHER** project.

Inspired by the broad social thinking of the Council of Europe with its new Charter for Shared Social Responsibility, **TOGETHER** is exploring *the co-responsibility approach* where councils, civic associations and

citizens in their different shapes and guises – parents, service users, patients, tenants, residents, passengers, etc. – all work together. It is a philosophy that is based on the observations and ideas of citizens themselves. The information is gathered together from sets of focus groups which ask citizens open-ended questions on what they see as well-being and ill-being. The results are then computed and analysed. This is a grass-roots, bottom-up approach. It does not happen spontaneously but is organised by the *URBACT Local Support Groups (ULSGs)* in each city. Crucially, the ULSGs in each

city bring together a combination of these three elements drawn from the councils, civic associations and citizens. It is a partnership philosophy which recognises that the state cannot provide and deliver alone, but rather must work together in different ways with the various elements found within its area. Furthermore, this must be a partnership where each player shares in the decision-making. Hence the use of the term, co-responsibility. This article highlights developments in several of the participating **TOGETHER** cities, where the ULSGs are taking this new thinking forward.

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### **Taking a Co-responsibility Lead**

The philosophy has been piloted most extensively in Mulhouse in Eastern France. It has worked with the Council of Europe in developing this co-responsibility thinking over several years and organised the eight cities in the **TOGETHER** project where Mulhouse is the Lead Partner. Its ULSG brings together a wide mixture of local players, not just from the municipality but also from civic associations, neighbourhood groups and a variety of engaged citizens. The ULSG has developed nine pilot actions utilising this co-responsibility approach over the last few years, mainly in the social and educational arenas.

### **Multi-partite contracts: a changing relationship with benefit claimants**

One interesting project has been with citizens on minimum income, run by the Social Services Department within Mulhouse. They have 1,350 clients on their books, to whom they give benefits, plus social advice and support. The Department has developed a pilot project using the co-responsibility method with its users. The intention has been to tackle the issue of social inclusion from a perspective of partnership and reciprocity rather than the more traditional authority/client relationship. The Department chose a representative sample of twenty five families and then held meetings with them along with a theatre animator and a psychologist. The group used a combination of the well-being/ill-being questions with responses being written on post-it notes and more individualised work with the two support staff. Given the precarious situation of many of the users there was a lot of anger in the discussions, which was expressed in the post-it notes. The group worked together for a three month period at the end of which around half signed up to a 10-month programme of activity and a commitment expressed in a four-way multi-party social contract. The activity programme was based on the well-being/ill-being concerns expressed by the users and the workshops

were designed to address these. The programme took place at the same time and place each week and runs for seven months. The first programme began in September 2008 and almost all the participants attended regularly throughout.

Lydia Meyer, one of the organisers, states clearly the thinking behind the project. "Our goal is to get the users to be autonomous, to be able to live on their own." Over half of this first group found work after the end of the course and the group is still meeting. The Department has now begun its second pilot programme, this time involving seventeen users. As well as improvements in the situation of individual users, the Department is hoping that the pilots will enable them to get better, more appropriate indicators for the precarious population with whom they deal.

The project is not without problems. When asked about the potential to generalise the process so that it can be used by all the Department's users, Lydia is clear. "We shall have to find a way to shorten and abbreviate the process." Throughout, the project regularly reported back to the Steering Group, as have all the pilot actions. As the ULSG seeks to generalise this approach it will be obliged to recognise that adopting co-responsibility methods to engage with users in precarious situations requires a much broader approach than is traditional. It also requires the mainstream staff to be willing and ready to follow new approaches. Furthermore, the method requires detailed organisation and is labour intensive. The pilot makes it clear that this type of co-responsible approach is not a cheap option.

### **Engaging Children and Parents**

The "Maison des Parents" within the Mulhouse Alsace Agglomeration seeks to support and help parents and their children.

Its co-responsibility pilot project brings together 186 pupils drawn from two junior schools and a secondary school within one neighbourhood. The first part of the methodology was used with the pupils – the question on well-being – and more than a thousand

responses were received. These were then computed and from this material the most frequently-cited topics were chosen. At a second meeting the group asked the pupils to evaluate their situation. The pupils made lots of suggestions, many of which were demands. However, the officers were able to draw from the material a range of suggestions with a strong co-responsibility theme which are now being pursued with both the pupils, parents and people who live in the neighbourhood. In addition, the project is looking to establish an after-school theatre forum to help win the attention of parents, get them involved in the issues and to spread wider the ideas around co-responsibility. The initiative is still at an early stage. The capacity of the project to retain the initial interest of the pupils and to produce valuable results has still to be demonstrated. However, it is already clear that there is a keen response from the school students and a real interest shown by them in this greater engagement. This is fertile ground on which the ULSG intends to build in the months ahead.

### **Family and social issues**

Within the project, the main focus tends towards social and family issues, addressing the concerns which wider economic and demographic changes are placing on urban life. This is certainly the case in Covilha, situated in the north-east of Portugal near the country's highest mountain range. It is a city of 25,000 inhabitants and the focal point for thirty-one neighbouring villages and districts with an overall population of 70,000. Its traditional textile and manufacturing industries have severely declined with a range of new technical and service jobs replacing them. Here, as elsewhere, the world of work is changing. Many more women are engaged in the labour force and more service work is being undertaken outside of traditional working hours.



The Centre of Time is a multi-purpose community facility run by an NGO and housed in a community centre designed to meet the diverse needs of the local neighbourhood. It receives some core funding from the municipality but its other key relationship is with its users. Two of its staff outlined the thinking behind the initiative, which hinges above all on having a participative approach with the people who use the centre. The realities of contemporary economic life mean that there are new pressures on families and their time. The services which the Centre provides are designed to reconcile these time pressures of family life, work and leisure. The centre recognizes that its services have to be more flexible, more multi-dimensional and with the users involved in the shaping and evaluation of the services. Thus, the Centre offers a wide range of services including after-school activities for children; study support; ironing and laundry services; organizes birthday parties; a volunteer network; intergenerational activities; multi-media; and training facilities. Most are provided on-site but some off-site. Such a variety is a break from the tradition of a single service directed at one “client” group, for example, children or elderly. “Centro do Tempo” seeks to respond to the inter-dependency of modern life and find new ways, in partnerships with their users, of offering an integrated package of services.

Centro do Tempo has its origins in an EU Equal programme on empowerment. The initiative serves to remind the **TOGETHER** partners and each ULSG that its URBACT project



is occurring at a time when there are other initiatives already happening on the themes of citizen engagement and participation. The task in Covilha and elsewhere is to weave the distinctive aspects of the **TOGETHER** project with other engagement initiatives and to strengthen this overall perspective. In Covilha, the ULSG is drawing on this multi-purpose experience as it focuses on the diverse needs of its senior citizens.

In Pergine, a small city within the Autonomous Province of Trento (PAT) in north-eastern Italy, there is considerable interest in the well-being agenda and its potential impact on family life. The Autonomous Province has just passed a new family law on 2 March 2011 designed to promote the well-being of families. Luciano Malfer, the Director of Family and Welfare Policy, and his team have been the key architects of this law. He argues that “well-being is structured family policy. Well-being is for all citizens whereas welfare is aimed at the poor...we are focussing on normal conditions ...we are looking to develop area family-friendly agreements in municipalities across the Province.”

Malfer and his team are developing the concept of “family districts”. These are places where there are family-friendly services, for example in restaurants and pubs; where work-life balance is promoted at work; where public transport is accessible to families with young children; where access to museums and leisure centres is encouraged by the use of family cards and discount pricing; where healthy life-styles and access is promoted by the provision of cycle paths, etc.

These ideas are being put into practice by the “Sportello Famiglia” a “Forum of family associations” managed as a not-for-profit association. This has an agreement and funding from the Province to manage a group of services for children and families. With three staff, the Forum provides a range of advice services for families through its help desk, which in 2010 dealt with 2,329 enquiries. But the Forum also acts as the public voice for more than forty local voluntary associations such as those working on drug issues, disabilities, diabetes, leisure and play activities, etc including those working in the Pergine area. In this way the Association has been able to develop a common vision and policy on family-related issues. Alessandra Viola and Valentina Merlini are the two staff who have been most involved with the development of the association since its establishment in 2006. The Forum has contributed to the drafting of the new family law. As Alessandra



explains it, “We were involved in drafting the law. We shall be involved in the operation of the new law. Article 21 gives us a specific role. The province will consult with the Forum on the configuration and planning of new services.” Furthermore, Article 33 says that the province will evaluate the policy consequences of this well-being policy and the forum will be engaged in this process too.

Here is an existing practical example of how public authorities are beginning to implement aspects of the well-being agenda and how it can be undertaken with a co-responsibility approach with civic associations embedded in the policy and legislative process. **TOGETHER** and the ULSG in Pergine are building on this experience for the pilot initiatives with young people which they are currently developing.

### ***The Economic Dimensions of Co-responsibility***

These new approaches need not apply exclusively to social, family and educational questions. They can also relate to economic matters. In Botkyrka, more than a decade ago, the council recognised the need to stimulate and encourage new economic activity and that within this arena the cultural and creative industries offered a particular opportunity. So, it set up a company to develop the creative industries and gave it some disused industrial premises. Subtopia opened in 2002 with four organisations. Today, forty-five organisations and companies are based on

the site; 3,400 people work there; and in addition, each year 38,000 people attend conferences and seminars.

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Jonas Boutani Werner, Subtopia's film and media co-ordinator, is enthusiastic about the progress that has been and continues to be made. "Our job is to attract creative industries to work here and we have been really successful, above all with circus and performing arts but also with film and media." Companies are attracted by cheap rents – 500 krona per square metre a month – and free wi-fi, plus the ambiance. As Werner recognises, this is a slightly unusual project in that "we're growing it from the top down." Effectively, the council makes available the premises; manages the overall operation; but gives the opportunity for companies and cultural associations to base themselves in Subtopia and to develop in their own way with no restrictions placed on them. Thus, the council acts as the springboard for economic development, particularly for the small and micro business sector.

The municipality is keen to apply co-responsibility thinking to the social economy too. Dennis Latifi, the council's Development Officer for the Alby district within Botkyrka works closely with the local voluntary associations as a central part of his job of promoting effective community development within Alby. Along with Ingrid Ramberg from the Multi-Cultural Centre, he co-ordinates the engagement of Botkyrka in the **TOGETHER** project and oversees the work of the Botkyrka ULSG. The **TOGETHER** project and its ideas of co-responsibility and citizen engagement from the bottom-up coincide with the broad community development approach which is being pursued in Botkyrka, above all in Alby.

The Local Support Group which they have convened to oversee the project reflects the diversity of the Alby district with a mix of local associations, representatives of youth groups and migrant organisations, teachers and council officials. The Local Support Group consists of 24 people. As Ingrid says, "Our first step to find candidates was to scan existing formal and informal networks. We also

consulted key persons within different fields of activities for new names. After having arrived at a list of top 25 candidates we sent out personal invitations which we also followed up by telephone calls. With one exception all invited accepted the invitation."

The ULSG comprises 13 men and 11 women. Half of the group live in Alby, the targeted neighbourhood. Two people are retired and four are around 20 years of age. Two are researchers, four come from the NGO sector, one is a senior politician. One is an architect; one comes from the local housing corporation; five work in the mayor's office; three come from the school sector and one is the local librarian.

The group is exploring a potential pilot co-responsibility action on the procurement of services. Ali Khan is the chair of the voluntary Council of Associations in Botkyrka and he sits on the ULSG. Along with Hasan Uludag and other local civic organisations he is working jointly with council officials on the criteria for the contracting of local services such as the cleaning, catering and security of community facilities and council buildings. Together, they are looking to draft specific criteria that will root these services much more closely to the communities they are designed to serve with the expectation that locally-based community organisations will win the contracts, so that the work will go to local people. Project work on the criteria is already underway. The thinking behind the proposal is aligned closely to the co-responsibility approach and is geared to helping disadvantaged communities in low income neighbourhoods both to find work and also to strengthen their own social organisations. Here is a good example of where **TOGETHER** and the ULSG is giving impetus and encouragement to local thinking and promoting favourable conditions in which it can flourish.

### Taking things forward

The whole project is currently analysing the results of its work with local focus groups where citizens are asked open-ended questions on well-being and ill-being and their observations are then coded and computed. Early indications are that citizens have a much wider range of interests and concerns than just the "bread and butter" issues of income, work, health and education. For example, in Braine l'Alleud, a town south of Brussels, Belgium, they organised fourteen groups. In the more than two thousand observations made on the post-it notes, they found a whole

variety of issues which had not been addressed in the town's current social Plan. They have picked up many cross-cutting issues, the topics that do not fit simply into local government Departmental boxes, but which nevertheless are very important to people. Issues raised frequently in the focus groups included a lack of respect shown both by other citizens and by public institutions; matters within the family; the importance of friendship and conviviality. These matters may appear rather intangible or less easily amenable to action by the municipality. However, it is possible to develop responses. For example, in the last few years many schools have developed policies to counter the bullying of pupils, whereas a generation ago, such an issue was usually ignored by school authorities. **TOGETHER** is in the process of collecting all the information from the focus groups and these findings are helping to shape both the pilot actions and also the overall thinking of each municipality. This focus group approach because it is open-ended and not problem-oriented tends to generate a much wider set of responses from citizens than a traditional consultative approach. And furthermore, it has the potential to address the matters that citizens see as central to their well-being.

In each city, **TOGETHER** and its URBACT Local Support Groups are seeking to build on and develop initiatives that arise from this wider framework of consultation. What makes the Botkyrka case particularly interesting is that the municipality has already established processes for community engagement but is seeking to strengthen these. The **TOGETHER** project offers the opportunity to inject new practices into these processes with the potential to deepen the democratic engagement of the local community and its organisations. In Mulhouse, which has been pursuing this approach longest, the ULSG reviewed progress at a seminar in May and is considering how its pilot actions, which pre-date the current **TOGETHER** project, can be generalised more widely across the city and thereby act as a trail-blazer for the other cities.

All the ULSGs know that they face a difficult task. But the spirit of new thinking and co-responsibility is evident on the ground. In the coming months each ULSG will be seeking to test out further the approach and apply it more widely across each city. ●



#### MORE INFORMATION

**TOGETHER** project: <http://urbact.eu/together>

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