

**URBACT Annual Conference 2012
Cities of Tomorrow, Action Today
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**REPORT ON THE URBACT CAFÉ
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The URBACT Café has now become one of the main highlights of the URBACT Annual conferences, standing as one of the most valued moments for informal exchange and networking. For this year's edition, participants were invited to discuss, with national counterparts, on possible ways to improve the efficiency of the programme in supporting cities and urban policies across Europe.

Sitting around over 40 tables, delegates were to explore a series of questions related to the URBACT programme and report on their findings on the conference website at the end of the session so that these could be processed and presented during the final plenary at the end of the day. The discussion was organised around 3 main questions:

1. Which are the most important challenges faced by cities in your country? How can the organization of the URBACT networks be improved to better help cities to deal with them?
2. What kind of capacity-building will be required to help cities to translate the lessons from URBACT networks into concrete action on the ground?
3. What can be done in your country to spread the lessons from URBACT to a wider audience of cities and practitioners?

Following the conference, at a time when the design of URBACT III is being launched, the outcomes of this URBACT Café will constitute a valuable input for policy-makers and practitioners involved in the elaboration of the next programme. So now is the time for all of us to make the most of it!

1. **URBACT thematic networks as a tool to support cities in addressing urban challenges**

The answers provided by the participants to the first part of the question clearly demonstrate how the main challenges faced at local level are perceived as strictly interconnected. Participants stressed that the actual situations of economic stagnation and decline are pushing a larger share of the population out of the labour market, contributing to the dramatic increase of income disparities, social and spatial polarization. This happens in a context of scarcity of natural resources which requires a more sustainable model of development for the cities of tomorrow.

In addition to the challenges addressed during the Conference, several tables reports outlined the necessity for local authorities to find new inclusive ways to manage the flow of migrants in order to turn the diversity in a real asset for the local development.

Finally, participants recognised that the existing governance systems need to be adapted to the evolving circumstances as to take into account the changing territorial and temporal scales of the modern urban challenges.

For what concerns the role of the Programme, a majority of delegates recognised that, since 2007, Urbact has effectively supported local authorities in designing integrated and sustainable local policies, combining the exchange of experiences at transnational level with the involvement of local key stakeholders. But in order to increase the effectiveness of the support provided, two main directions have been identified by the participants to the Urbact Café.

First of all the link between the Local Action Plans and the funds available at national and regional level must be enhanced. The active involvement of the Managing Authority throughout the process of elaboration of the Action Plans, as well as better matching of the program's activities with the calendars of the Operational Programmes, are regarded as essential factors. Dialogue and collaboration with the Managing Authorities should allow easier access to the funds available for the Action Plans developed with an integrated and participative approach. This dialogue is even more important in the current context, with the Managing Authorities engaged in defining priorities and mechanisms for the funding period 2014-2020.

In the other hand, with several cities in position to start the implementation of the Local Action Plans and having in mind the new tools for sustainable urban development for 2014-2020, there is a growing demand for the Urbact Programme to provide a platform for exchange and capacity building for the concrete implementation of the activities planned. In this perspective there were several proposals for the URBACT Programme to diversify the tools for exchange and learning to be offered to the European cities in the next funding period. Along with the thematic networks dedicated to the definition and elaboration of new urban policies, the Programme should consider the possibility of networks of cities implementing (delivering) integrated actions at local level. Here the exchange process could cover, among other dimensions, aspects like the internal organisation

of the municipality (creation of multidisciplinary municipal teams), the involvement of the local stakeholders in the implementation of the actions (also considering the opportunities offered by the Community Local Led Development Initiative) or the use of indicators and assessment tools for the evaluation of the activities being delivered. The partners in these networks could be cities having ensured funds through the Integrated Territorial Investments (I.T.I.) but also any other city in the process of implementation integrated actions for sustainable urban development.

Practical suggestions were also raised concerning the possible simplification of the management system for Urbact Thematic Networks as the use of flat rates for some categories of expenditures or the improvement of some functionalities of the Presage System.

2. Needs for capacity-building and possible ways for URBACT to cater for these needs

Enthusiastic feedback on the actions developed by URBACT in the past months in terms of capacity-building and training was the first entry point into the matter for a vast majority of delegates. A vast majority of the Café tables referred to the URBACT Summer University for ULSG members Krakow, August 2011) as being an appropriate action for the programme to go forward with capacity-building and strongly recommended that this action be renewed.

Delegates also outlined a wide range of needs, among which needs related to city management skills rank in first place such as:

- Participative action planning
- Integrated action planning (including coordination across departments, working across departments, etc.)
- Engaging with civil society
- Communication to local stakeholders on policy challenges and responses
- Dissemination of exchange and learning results, Local Action Plans, etc.
- Understanding and managing EU funding streams

A second series of needs were also expressed related to specific policy challenges and tools, among which:

- Strategic urban planning
- Sustainable urban development
- Handling austerity
- Public private partnerships

A large majority of table reports calls for capacity-building activities to be developed both at transnational (e.g. Summer University for ULSG members) and national level (e.g. National training scheme to be implemented in 2013).

The first target audience appears to be city staff, but local elected representatives and Managing Authorities of Operational programmes are frequently outlined as potential beneficiaries.

Training seminars organised by the URBACT programme appear as the main tool for capacity-building. Yet in some cases, discussions also led to various interesting recommendations such as: promoting e-learning, building on study visits, including capacity-building actions in the list of deliverables to be expected from URBACT thematic networks (i.e. inviting URBACT partners to develop such activities as part of a network work programme). To be considered for the next period, for sure!

3. Improving dissemination of URBACT lessons to a wider audience of cities and practitioners at country level

Stressing the importance of dissemination of URBACT results in the different countries, participants encouraged the programme to strengthen cooperation with existing players such as national or regional networks of cities. Specific URBACT tools such as the National Dissemination Points were also highlighted as a good starting point for dissemination of results. Yet several tables stressed the need for more NDPs, meaning a better geographical coverage, and for more content being disseminated through the NDPs for urban practitioners.

However, when it comes to improve the dissemination of URBACT lessons to a wider

audience, the most appealing tool in the eyes of participants seemed to be the development of “national networks on urban issues”. It was proposed that such national networks would involve national authorities, regional authorities, URBACT partner cities and cities beyond URBACT, etc. They could serve as a platform for exchange and learning on urban issues, as well as a two-way bridge for a regular dialogue between national authorities and cities. The role of the URBACT programme in the development of national networks on urban issues would need to be further explored but there was a strong call, in the table reports, to the Programme and to national authorities to work in this direction. A few

countries have already built up such networks (France, Germany and Austria for instance), and their experience and practices should inspire other countries. Let’s turn this into a good practice to be disseminated and hopefully transferred across the different Member and Partner States!

No doubt the discussions that took place during this 2012 edition of the URBACT café and the ideas put forward in the table reports will be inspiring food for thought for the preparation of the next programme.

URBACT II

URBACT is a European exchange and learning programme promoting sustainable urban development.

It enables cities to work together to develop solutions to major urban challenges, reaffirming the key role they play in facing increasingly complex societal challenges. It helps them to develop pragmatic solutions that are new and sustainable, and that integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions. It enables cities to share good practices and lessons learned with all professionals involved in urban policy throughout Europe. URBACT is 300 cities, 29 countries, and 5,000 active participants

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