Drawing the Change

Theories of Change for Urban Social Impact

CREDITS

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Table of Contents

Introduction

By Liat Rogel
Lead Expert, U.R. IMPACT

Service designer and researcher with a PhD in Design, Liat Rogel helps cities to address housing, social innovation and sustainability. She designs tools and strategies that turn complex urban challenges into tangible and community-driven solutions.

Designing for Impact

From projects to lasting change

Accompanying the U.R. Impact project from its early stages has been an extraordinary learning experience — one that reshaped how I understand the relationship between urban regeneration and social impact. This publication is not merely an end-of-project report detailing actions taken; rather, it serves as an exploration of how the concept of urban impact can be made tangible, measurable, and truly alive in our cities. It is a testament to the idea of placing citizens and their social and ecological well-being at the core of sustainable urban strategy.

The Challenge: Moving from Projects to Impact Pathways

The core challenge in sustainable urban development often lies in the historical tendency toward fragmented actions and projects disconnected from one another. This transition requires integrating social, economic, and environmental concerns, recognizing that these elements are inextricably linked in creating sustainable and resilient communities.

> " TOO OFTEN, INTERVENTIONS ARE PLANNED WITHOUT A SYSTEMATIC FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING OR EVALUATING THEIR LONG-TERM SOCIAL IMPACT. THE GOAL OF THE U.R. IMPACT NETWORK WAS TO OVERCOME THIS STRUCTURAL WEAKNESS, MOVING BEYOND ISOLATED PROJECTS TO ESTABLISHING COHERENT, MEASURABLE, AND STRATEGICALLY GUIDED IMPACT PATHWAYS. "

First Transnational Meeting in Cinisello Balsamo (December 2023)

1. Intentionality: This requires having the explicit desire to seek a solution to a community problem and generate a positive social impact from the very beginning. Local authorities must intentionally put desired social outcomes at the start of the regeneration process. This involves defining what change we want to see in the community.

2. Measurement (Measurability): Measurement allows us to track the positive or negative changes in people's lives resulting from interventions. It moves beyond simply tracking outputs to asking: how will we recognise the change we intend to make? This mandates the systematic planning and conducting of social impact assessments, defining relevant social indicators, and collecting data in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

3. Learning and Reflection: While the formal social impact methodology includes Additionality (the active involvement of citizens and community groups in design, promoting participatory planning), the ultimate goal of continuous practice is learning and adaptation. We viewed evaluation not as a retrospective technical exercise, but as a core component that supports coherence, accountability, and continuous learning. This continuous cycle allows us to adapt through feedback and reflection, ensuring that interventions remain responsive to emerging local needs.

A Shared Thinking Language: Theory of Change

Each city in the network had its own context and challenges, yet the Theory of Change (ToC) provided a shared thinking language — a coherent model

URBACT as a Lab for Learning

The URBACT programme provides the ideal environment for this transformation, functioning as an "action learning" laboratory for our nine European partner cities. As part of this network, cities collaborate to exchange knowledge, learn from one another's experiences, and apply tested methodologies to local challenges. This process is characterized by continuous testing, reflecting, and adjusting actions to ensure they are genuinely responding to the real needs identified by local communities. Our network emphasized defining a methodology for collective decision-making and civic participation to drive these regeneration efforts.

The Three Elements of Impact

To make impact a central tenet of urban development, our network focused on embedding three core elements into every stage of planning and delivery:

for articulating how and why specific actions would lead to long-term change. It helped local stakeholders clarify their vision and trace the pathway from activities to ultimate impact.

Across the network, the ToC was used in diverse ways. In Cinisello Balsamo, the Lead Partner, it helped integrate social impact assessment into public procurement to connect fragmented regeneration projects under a unified strategy. Murcia applied the framework to the ambitious South Connection project, aiming to overcome the railway divide and transform 200,000 square meters of public space into a new mobility hub. In Broumov, the focus was on revitalizing the town square through simple, people-centred actions that would bring life back to the heart of the city. Bovec tackled youth retention and seasonality by developing coworking and intergenerational hubs as year-round anchors of local vitality, while Hannut linked new cultural and business facilities to a soft mobility network to boost accessibility and regional dynamism. Kamza planned the transformation of a neglected riverside into a multifunctional park to promote inclusion and social interaction. In Longford, the ToC guided the creation of a governance model ensuring the sustainable management of community facilities such as the Pobal le Chéile centre and the Youth Café. Mértola centred its work on heritage-led regeneration, restoring historic buildings like the Hammam and Tea House to attract new residents and activity, while Bielsko-Biała focused on reviving its city centre by converting former industrial spaces into a new branch of the Medical University of Silesia, bringing fresh energy and economic growth.
Together, these nine pathways show how the

Theory of Change can translate abstract intentions into grounded strategies for impact.

From Method to Mindset

U.R. Impact is more than a technical exercise, it marks a cultural shift. The cities that took part have begun to think, plan, and act through the lens of social value. By embedding intentionality, measurement, and learning into their everyday work, they are redefining what regeneration means in practice.
This publication and the accompanying city posters offer a snapshot of that shared learning journey: evidence that when we design for impact, we design for lasting change.
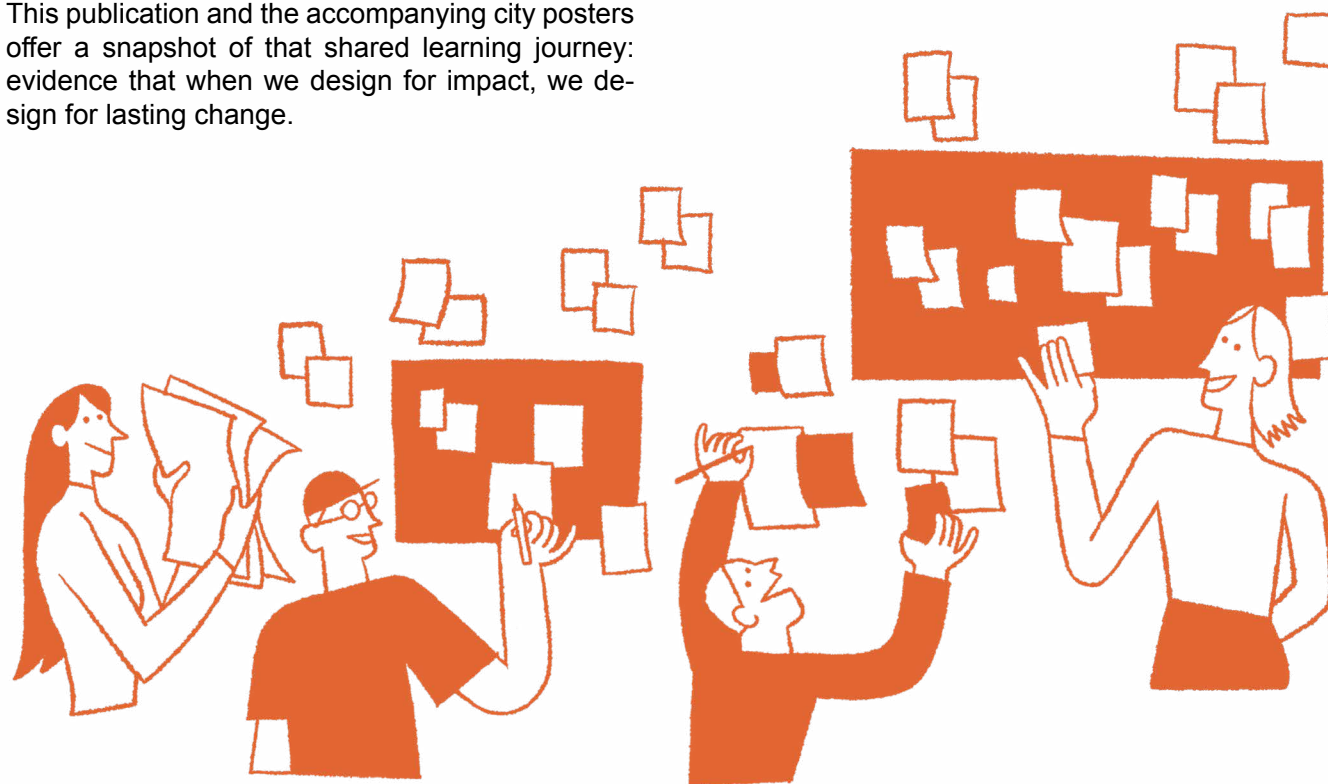
By Lidia Gryszkiewicz

*URBACT Expert,
Innovation and impact
specialist*

Innovation strategist passionate about collaborative innovation across business, public and civic sectors. Advisor to the EU and global organizations, co-founder of The Impact Lab, with a PhD in innovation and experience at Arthur D. Little, PwC and Luxembourg Institute of Science & Technology.

Framing Change

Theory of Change as a design tool

Understanding change is at the heart of any regeneration process. The Theory of Change, sometimes referred to as an impact pathway or impact chain, offers a structured way to make that understanding tangible. It maps a logical sequence — from *inputs* and *activities* to *outputs*, *outcomes*, and ultimately *impacts* — revealing how a vision of change can be turned into a strategy for action.

In other words, it is a way of working backwards from the impact we aspire to achieve, identifying what must be done, by whom, and under what conditions to make it possible. By making this reasoning visible, the Theory of Change is used to explain a project's or programme's impact logic - both to the involved stakeholders and to the broader audience.

From simple tables to elaborate visuals, Theories of Change serve one purpose: to explain in simple terms what impact we aim to achieve and how we wish to do it. A good Theory of Change should also be the basis of any kind of impact measurement attempt.

Making sense of complexity

Urban regeneration is messy. It is a complex process involving multiple municipal departments, groups of citizens and other stakeholders. It cuts through a range of urban challenges and themes. It is a system of interconnected vessels, where various inputs and activities must come together, often amidst competing priorities, for the desired urban results to take place.

Imagine you are a city representative planning to create a vibrant outdoor public square. You realise the potential of this idea goes way beyond improving the aesthetics of the city centre. You can sense this could make the citizens, visitors and local stakeholders better off, but how exactly do you express that hunch? And how can you convince the decision-makers, say the city council, to support you with all you need?

This is precisely where the Theory of Change can help. It allows you to explain that the project requires a range of *inputs* — investments, permits,

skilled designers, and developers — to carry out specific *activities*, such as identifying local needs, co-creating the design, and implementing the project. These actions lead to a tangible *output*: the creation of the new public square itself. Now, this is not where the story ends, does it? What you'd hope to achieve through that are certain *outcomes*, such as more locals and tourists coming to the city centre to socialise, or local shops and cafés increasing their sales. In the long run, this should lead to positive *impacts*, such as a revitalised city centre, improved social cohesion, increased city appeal to tourists, and a stronger local identity.

Theory of Change brings all these steps together. It offers a shared narrative that helps align citizens, designers, and decision-makers around a common purpose, beyond the completion of the action itself.

Theory into motion: the U.R. Impact experience

Within the U.R. Impact network, the Theory of Change became more than a framework — it became a way of thinking. Each participating city began by questioning its assumptions: not only what challenge it was addressing, but why it mattered and for whom. Therefore, U.R. Impact cities have sharpened their draft challenge definitions through design tools such as Causes & Symptoms Mapping, Problem Definition, Starbursting, and How Might We questioning. This critical process helped ensure that each city's efforts targeted the true leverage points for change. Stakeholder perspectives played a central role as well. With methods like Stakeholder Mapping and Stakeholder Impact Vision, cities examined whose needs and

aspirations were being served and how to incorporate those voices in defining impact objectives. Participants also had a chance to play with the Impact Amplifier tool, finding ways to potentially exceed and boost their interventions' possible positive impacts while restricting and replacing potential negative effects.

The process culminated in a round of peer reviews — cities critically and constructively reviewing one another's draft Theories of Change — which fostered mutual learning and critical reflection. This open exchange tested each model's clarity, coherence, logic, and several other key criteria in an honest yet friendly atmosphere.

A mindset for collective learning

While the Theory of Change can serve as a powerful communication tool — particularly if it is supported by attractive visual design — its real strength lies in its capacity to foster collaboration and shared learning. It invites everyone involved in regeneration to sit around the same table and collectively define what long-term success looks like, what needs to happen along the way, and how progress can be meaningfully assessed.

It is, in many ways, the first step toward impact measurement, helping identify indicators across the chain of change. Yet beyond metrics, it creates a space for dialogue — a framework for thinking about transformation together.

If you have never used the Theory of Change approach for your city, let yourself be inspired by the ones in this publication, and give it a try!

Measuring Social Impact Workshop in Murcia (March 2024)
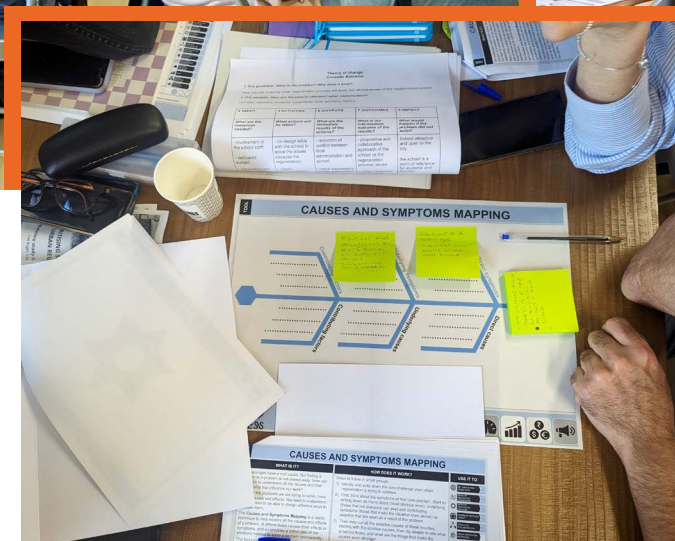
By Massimo Capano
Project Coordinator,
U.R. Imapct

Permanent employee of the Municipality of Cinisello Balsamo with extensive experience in social, cultural, and educational planning. Active at the European level since 2010 and creator of the Youth Plan promoting innovation, participation, and inclusion through strong local and international partnerships.

By Marica Gagliardi
Finance Officer,
U.R Impact

Permanent employee of the Municipality of Cinisello Balsamo, expert in communication, cultural heritage, and fundraising. Experienced in managing EU projects and creating cultural and educational initiatives that foster inclusion and civic participation.

Leading for Impact

A city's perspective

The U.R. Impact: Prioritising Social Impact in Urban Regeneration network challenged us to explore how cities can truly prioritise social impact in urban regeneration — not only through infrastructure or policies, but by actively engaging local communities and measuring the change we generate together.

Taking the lead in a European network

When we decided to take on the role of Lead Partner, we knew it would be both a great opportunity and a demanding responsibility. Coordinating a European partnership — many of whom were experiencing the URBACT programme for the first time — meant learning to lead through collaboration, trust, and shared purpose.

The Municipality chose to take on the role of a territorial catalyst: not only as an implementing authority, but as a promoter of capacity building, co-creation, and innovation, aimed at strengthening the human and social capital of our local community.
The Municipality of Cinisello Balsamo has taken on a dual responsibility: on the one hand, as Lead Partner, to coordinate and stimulate the transnational exchange of good practices and competences; and on the other, as member of the network, to translate the shared methodological reflections into local practice, promoting workshops with citizens, stakeholders, and the municipal administration. For this reason, we worked locally to create a shared set of social impact indicators, adaptable to different territorial contexts, to tangibly assess the benefits generated by urban regeneration actions.

Designing impact pathways together

Each partner city's IAP reflects this strategic vision: a roadmap that links needs, resources, actions, and expected results, built through the active participation of the community and local partners. For our Municipality, this approach has represented a unique opportunity: to become, in a European context, both an agent of change and a local driver of urban regeneration that is truly inclusive. It means focusing not only on material actions, but also on

immaterial ones: understanding needs, activating participatory processes, defining indicators that make visible the social impact generated (intentionality), actively involving citizens, institutions, and stakeholders in all project phases (additionality), and building data collection and analysis systems capable of measuring the effects produced (measurability). These three principles form the theoretical and operational framework of the entire process of this nearly three-year journey from the Baseline Study, to the development of the Theory of Change, until the elaboration of our IAPs, which will orient our actions for the coming years.

Collaborative leadership and learning cities

Taking on the role of Lead Partner in a European project of this scale has also meant learning how to exercise an open and collaborative leadership, based on cooperation and mutual trust among partners. The project's complexity has taught us that leadership is not only about coordination, but also about listening, mediating, valuing differences, and building together. Working with cities from diverse cultural and institutional backgrounds has challenged us, but also taught us to embrace a trust-based and cooperative approach. It was precisely this climate of collaboration that allowed us to transform complexity into value and ensure that each partner could feel part of a shared process of learning and growth.

This project also led us to reflect on the role of cities as true learning organisations. The Municipality of Cinisello Balsamo, like the other partner cities, has been able to experiment with a model of

Fourth Transnational Meeting in Mértola
(March 2025)

governance in which collective learning becomes an integral part of administrative action. We have understood that cities, to be truly innovative and inclusive, must equip themselves with tools and processes that allow them to learn from their projects, to capitalise on their experiences, to circulate

for the future, precisely as URBACT encourages. In this sense, U.R. Impact has been a real laboratory of institutional learning: an opportunity to strengthen human capital and to consolidate trust-based relationships both within and beyond the municipal administration.

A shared commitment to inclusive regeneration

We approached this journey with enthusiasm and awareness. For us, urban regeneration is above all a social process: an opportunity to strengthen community ties, enhance inclusion, and generate positive change in people's lives.
Looking ahead, we want to build on what we have learned — to continue fostering trust, participation, and shared responsibility in our territory.

A sincere thank you to all partners — colleagues who have now become friends — for their valuable contributions and for the journey we have taken together. The change we imagined together is beginning to materialise, and this exhibition is a tangible expression of that collective effort.

By Marta Giacosa
Visual Design Team

Service designer driven by curiosity for how cities evolve and people shape them. With a background in design thinking and visual communication, she uses research, co-creation, systems mapping, and storytelling to make complexity visible and actionable.

By Stefano Zappia
Visual Design Team

Illustrator and visual designer based in Milan. He works between paper and pixels, exploring the intersection of art and design. Through a blend of illustration, editorial projects, and participatory practices, he uses visual language to connect people, ideas, and places.

Making change visible

Turning theories into illustrated stories

How do you draw a theory? How do you turn arrows and assumptions into something people can actually see and understand?
This was the question we faced when we set out to transform the cities' Theories of Change into illustrated posters for the final U.R. Impact exhibition.

From complexity to clarity

Each Theory of Change was, in essence, a dense ecosystem of ideas: logical, structured, and carefully reasoned. But their power risked getting lost in that very complexity. Our task was not to decorate them, but to translate them — to move from analytical maps to visual narrations that could be understood at a glance, without losing substance.
This process required identifying the essence of each city's change story: what defined its narrative core, what could be simplified without distortion and what needed to remain intact. Every poster began with this kind of distillation — the search for a narrative thread that could connect actions to outcomes, mission to vision.

Speaking through images

Working visually forced us to understand each theory in a new way. Every drawing decision — a line, a colour, a symbol - became a test of logic and clarity, a way to verify whether the message still held true and whether it effectively conveyed what "impact" meant in each context. In that sense, illustration became another form of inquiry, a dialogue between accuracy and storytelling.

All posters share a common framework, uniting them under the identity of the U.R. Impact project. On the right, each city's vision is depicted as a large illustration — the horizon of change they aspire to. Around it, a constellation of smaller images represents the key steps, outputs and outcomes leading there. Some are almost documentary; others are more abstract. The tone adapts to each city: playful or precise, poetic or pragmatic.

The value of visualization

The goal was never simplification for its own sake, but accessibility. Each poster invites viewers to pause and see how ideas translate into actions, and how actions, in turn, reshape collective meaning. And now, gathered together in the final exhibition, these images form a gallery of urban intentions - nine visual stories of change.

Perhaps that's the real value of this exercise: when impact becomes visible, it becomes shareable. A Theory of Change stops being just a framework on paper — it becomes something a community can see, discuss and believe in.

Exhibition

Drawing the Change

Theories of Change for Urban Social Impact

This exhibition brings together nine European cities from the U.R. IMPACT network. Each of them has been working to understand and show how social change takes shape — how it can be mapped, shared and made visible through a common tool: the Theory of Change.

What you see here is not just a set of posters. It is a collective experiment in making ideas visible — a visual record of cities learning to connect intentions with outcomes, and imagination with evidence.

Each illustration tells the story of a local journey: moving from isolated projects to more connected ways of acting and learning. Together, these works reflect a shared belief: that impact is not something abstract or distant, but something we can recognise, design and experience in everyday urban life.

Theory of Change
Poster

Exhibition
Catalogue

Cities'
Artefacts
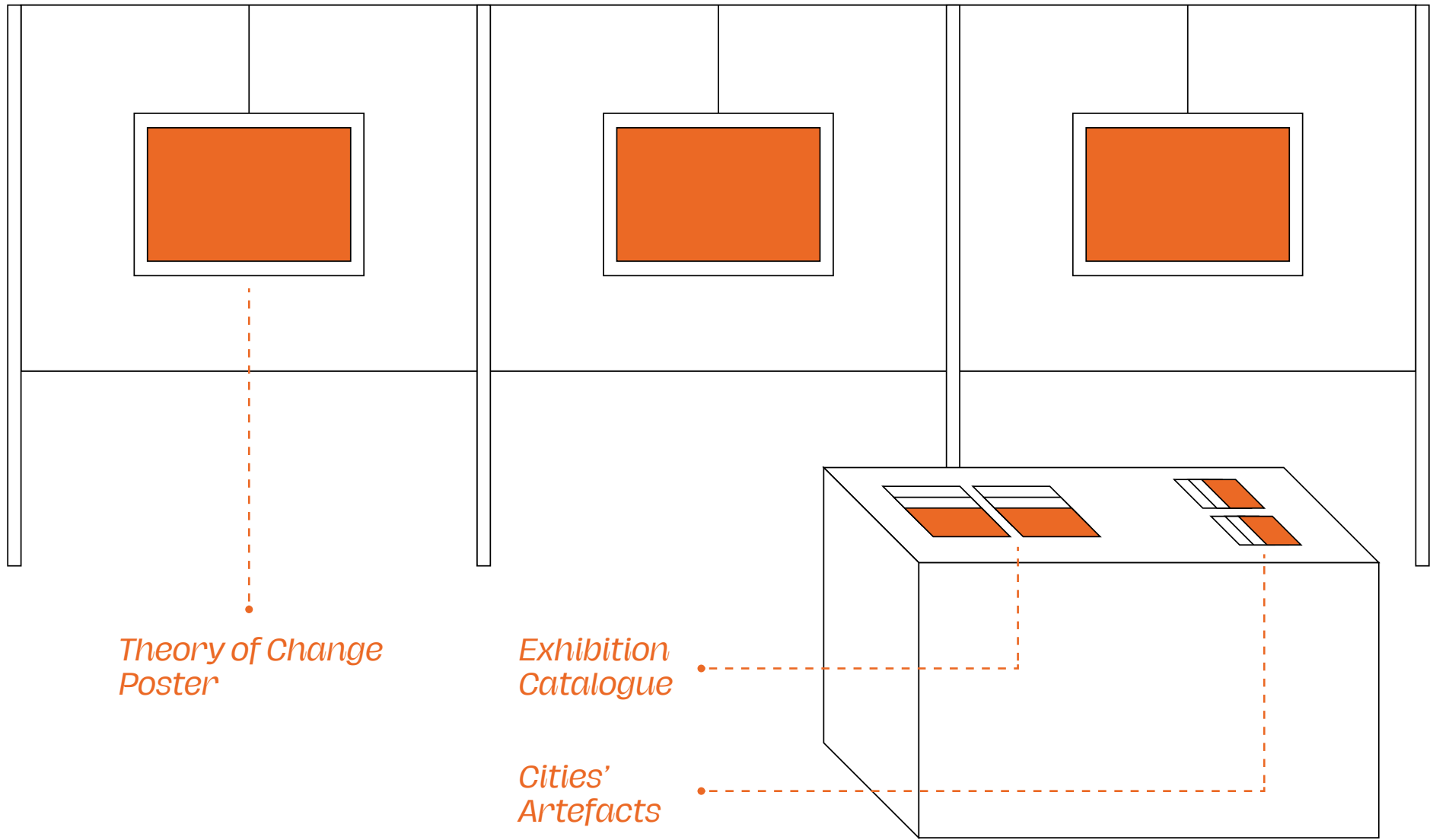
Cinisello Balsamo (IT)
Measuring What Matters

Located on Milan's northern edge, Cinisello Balsamo has been reinventing itself since the closure of major factories in the 1990s. The economic shift left the city with fragile employment, a lower-than-average income level, and a lingering sense of imbalance between neighborhoods. Past regeneration projects tried to respond but often remained fragmented, each promising improvement without proving real change.

This is where Cinisello Balsamo decided to take a different path. The city's focus is the Crocetta district, which embodies the complexity and potential of urban change. Here, the municipality is developing a Social Impact Assessment Toolkit — a structured method to understand if public action truly improves people's lives. Cinisello Balsamo is building a culture of reflection and accountability inside City Hall. Its goal is not just to regenerate spaces, but to ensure every intervention leaves a lasting impact on wellbeing.

THE BIGGEST CHANGE U.R. IMPACT BROUGHT TO MY CITY IS...

…a stronger awareness of how essential it is to involve local communities and stakeholders so that regeneration creates real social value, along with a more coherent shared vision and a greater capacity for collaboration across the municipality.

THROUGH THE THEORY OF CHANGE, WE LEARNED...

... how to look at reality from new and challenging angles, gaining a tool that will guide us in mapping future strategies and actions with greater clarity and intention.

SOCIAL IMPACT MEANS...

…shifting our perspective toward long-term change, moving beyond short-term outputs, and committing to a concrete strategy that genuinely improves our community and its territory.

AFTER U.R. IMPACT, WHAT REMAINS IS...

...the awareness that only an integrated and strategic plan -built on precise, well-designed actions - can support the conscious growth of both the territory and the human capital within the administration.

Cinisello Balsamo

AREAS OF INTERVENTION
- Governance Model
- Impact Indicators & Measurement Pilots
- Impact Measurement for Public Procurement

Our mission is to ensure that

urban regeneration projects truly improve citizens' lives by integrating social impact assessment and rebuilding trust between people and institutions.

We will do this through some activites:

- Training programs and ongoing capacity-building on social impact assessment methods
- Development of an Impact Assessment Toolkit with practical guidance
- Establishment of a Social Impact Assessment Working Group within the Municipality
- Co-creation of impact indicators with local stakeholders
- Structured observation and participatory monitoring of urban interventions through the use of co-designed indicators
- Training program on integrating social impact into public procurement processes
- Definition and formal adoption of social impact procurement guidelines through Executive Resolution
- Dissemination of practices to other municipalities

These efforts will lead to immediate results:

- Increased municipality and stakeholder knowledge on social impact assessment methods
- Publication of the Toolkit with guidelines, tools, and core indicators
- Official municipal regulation establishing working group and plan
- A set of indicators ready for testing
- Systematic collection of evidence-based insights on social and urban impacts
- Procurement staff trained on social impact criteria
- Approved guidelines for procurement processes
- Publication of case studies and best practices

We will begin to see the following shifts happening:

- Enhanced understanding and readiness to apply social impact assessment methods in municipal planning
- Municipal departments and partners adopt the toolkit for planning and evaluation
- First applications of social impact assessment in selected areas
- More responsible, indicator-based management of interventions
- Improved risk mitigation and refinement of social impact indicators through observations and civic engagement
- Greater use of social impact criteria in procurement, leading to more socially responsible contract awards
- Standardized application across all procurement processes
- Embrace of social impact criteria by other municipalities

When this happens, we'll see:

- Urban regeneration interventions, managed by the Municipality, generate positive, lasting outcomes, strengthening citizen well-being and city quality of life
- Improved participatory and data-driven governance for more effective and socially responsible interventions
- Strengthened institutional capacity and leadership in embedding social impact considerations into public procurement

By 2030, Cinisello Balsamo will be a model of sustainable urban regeneration, where social impact assessment guides all interventions. Through strong collaboration between citizens and local authorities, the city will foster inclusive, resilient, and community-driven development.

Longford - Ballymahon (IE)
Building Community from Within

Ballymahon, in County Longford, is a small town with a strong sense of community but persistent social challenges — high poverty rates, migration, and limited local employment opportunities. With nearly 40% of residents born outside Ireland, the town's diversity is both a strength and a call for better integration and support.

Through the Pobal le Chéile regeneration project, Ballymahon is transforming vacant spaces like the old convent into a Family Resource Centre and Day Care Centre. Yet the focus goes beyond renovation, it's about ensuring that these places thrive over time. The city is developing an innovative governance model to secure leadership, sustainability, and true community ownership, turning regeneration into a long-term process of empowerment.

THE BIGGEST CHANGE U.R. IMPACT BROUGHT TO MY CITY IS...

...a greater understanding of the role of social engagement and citizen inclusion in the delivery of impactful urban regeneration. It has supported the municipality in the development of a new mindset and approach to projects, engaging citizens and stakeholders in a meaningful way.

THROUGH THE THEORY OF CHANGE, WE LEARNED...

...how to get clarity on the link between the actions we propose and the long term impacts of those, as well as immediate outcomes.

SOCIAL IMPACT MEANS...

...putting the community at the heart of decision making and projects, ensuring urban regeneration projects are developed in collaboration with the community and meets their needs.

AFTER U.R. IMPACT, WHAT REMAINS IS...

...a stronger culture of community engagement on urban regeneration projects, embedding citizen engagement in the process of project development.
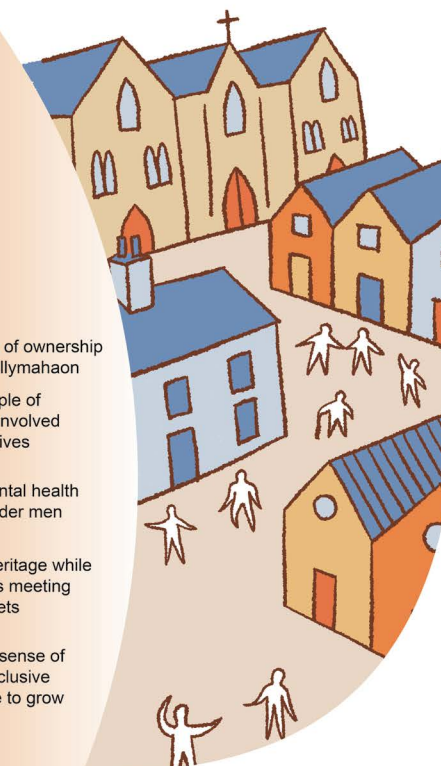
Ballymahon

Our mission is to ensure that

Ballymahon supports the older community, provides safe and engaging spaces for youth and strengthens the community through new inclusive governance structures.

We will do this through some activites:

- Development of a new inclusive governance structure
- Renovation of a vacant building for the Men's Shed to meet and be creative and supportive
- Creation of a youth cafe in Ballymahon

These efforts will lead to immediate results:

- Strong governance model to support the delivery of improved services and amenites
- Clear vision of the needs/ requirements of the community
- A building for the Men's Shed to operate from, welcoming new members from across the community
- Derelict building brought back into active use
- A new youth facility for young people to meet and interact

We will begin to see the following shifts happening:

- New community governance structure
- Enhanced social cohesion in the community
- Increased engagement of older men in the community
- Sustainable regeneration preserving local heritage
- Safe, positive, inclusive space for young people to meet their friends and enjoy activites together

When this happens, we'll see:

- Increased the sense of ownership by community of Ballymahaon
- Encourage the people of Ballymahon to get involved in other town initiatives
- Support for the mental health and wellbeing of older men in the community
- Conserving local heritage while contributing towards meeting climate change targets
- Give young people a sense of belonging with safe inclusive space for young people to grow

By 2030, Ballymahon will be a place where everyone feels a sense of belonging and pride - a vibrant, connected community that supports one another, celebrates its people, and honours our rich heritage while building a shared future together.

Bielsko-Biała (PL)
Reviving the Heart of the City

The historic center of Bielsko-Biała, known as the center of Biała district, has long struggled with depopulation and the loss of commercial vibrancy, leaving behind empty shops and limited opportunities. Despite past revitalization attempts, the area's social and economic decline persisted, revealing that infrastructure alone couldn't spark renewal.

Now, the city is turning the page with a vision focused on people and purpose. By transforming former industrial sites into a new branch of the Silesian Medical University and creating new cultural institutions, Bielsko-Biała is redefining its urban core. The goal is not just to renovate buildings but to reclaim identity — attracting young residents, students, and entrepreneurs, and breathing life back into the center as a multifunctional, thriving hub where community wellbeing takes precedence.

THE BIGGEST CHANGE U.R. IMPACT BROUGHT TO MY CITY IS...

...a greater focus on perceiving revitalization as a social process that engages residents and truly improves their quality of life, broadening our perspective on social inclusion and on assessing the real impact of such efforts on the local community.

THROUGH THE THEORY OF CHANGE, WE LEARNED...

...how to properly formulate interventions as a logical cause-and-effect chain, and how to recognize the different perspectives of various stakeholder groups.

SOCIAL IMPACT MEANS...

...the community's perception of the results of revitalization actions – that is, initiatives aimed at transforming urban spaces, improving residents' living conditions, and strengthening the local community.

AFTER U.R. IMPACT, WHAT REMAINS IS...

...a lasting capital of knowledge, collaboration, and tools that will enable the city to continue the revitalization process in the spirit of sustainable development, with a priority on social impact.

Bielsko-Biała

Our mission is to ensure that

the center overcomes depopulation, economic decline, and social fragmentation by reactivating public spaces and attracting new users and opportunities.

We will do this through some activites:

- Investments in housing
- ■ Encouraging and activating actions dedicated to existing entities or those planning to start a business
- ★ Transformation of the centre of Biała into a multifunctional space
- ▲ Consultations and workshops with local community to strengthen local identity and enhance the sense of belonging

These efforts will lead to immediate results:

- Better standard of housing in the city centre
- ■ Support services and space for people who want to run bussines at the center of Biała
- ★ New functions at the center of Biała
- ▲ People more involved in social life

We will begin to see the following shifts happening:

- More people interested in living in the city center
- ■ Increase in the number of companies in the center of Biała
- ★ New residents and users attracted to the centre of Biała
- ▲ Strengthened people's sense of belonging to the centre of Biała

When this happens, we'll see:

- ● ■ ★ ▲ Lively city center with stronger local identity offering a multifunctional space

By 2030, Biała's center will be a thriving socioeconomic hub of the city attracting residents, students, and visitors, with improved quality of life and community well-being.

Bovec (SL)
Keeping Youth Close to Home

Tucked in the Julian Alps, Bovec's postcard beauty hides deeper social challenges - an aging population, youth outmigration, and a local economy tied almost entirely to seasonal tourism. Many young people leave after age fifteen, seeking education and stability elsewhere, while rising housing costs make returning home even harder.

Bovec's Theory of Change focuses on creating the conditions for young people to stay and thrive. Through spaces like Buška Izba, the Civic Center known as the town's "living room," and a new coworking hub for remote professionals, the city is building a sense of possibility. By strengthening community ties and diversifying the economy, Bovec aims to evolve from a seasonal destination into a place where the next generation can truly imagine their future.

THE BIGGEST CHANGE U.R. IMPACT BROUGHT TO MY CITY IS...

...the strengthening of community connections, greater inclusion of immigrants and young people, and more open communication about current social issues.

THROUGH THE THEORY OF CHANGE, WE LEARNED...

...how essential it is to connect every activity - from coworking spaces to youth programs and the Buška Izba - with broader goals of empowerment, inclusion, and sustainability. I realized that real change happens when local people are actively involved in planning and activities, and when places become spaces for collaboration, creativity, and learning.

SOCIAL IMPACT MEANS...

...building a community where people feel connected, supported, and proud to belong. It's about creating positive change that improves not only individual lives but also the community we share.

AFTER U.R. IMPACT, WHAT REMAINS IS...

...all the lessons learned and the new friendships built across the network. And, of course, we will continue striving for what we aimed for: a strong sense of belonging among young people and vibrant, community-driven spaces that live on.

Bovec

Our mission is to ensure that

Young families and people see their future in Bovec through better access to jobs, housing and shared spaces - countering outmigration and seasonality.

We will do this through some activites:

● Assessment of needs, securing of funding and equipping of coworking space

Development of support services and employment of a coordinator

■ Preparation and improvement of youth infrastructures

Co-design and organisation of regular activities for learning, culture and social connection

★ Renovation and activation of a community hub with an ongoing program

These efforts will lead to immediate results:

● Operational coworking space offering training, mentorship and networking services

■ Continuous programme of youth workshops and events fostering participation and creativity

★ Accessible and multifunctional civic center hosting community-driven initiatives

First events held and attracting new participants

We will begin to see the following shifts happening:

● New opportunities reducing reliance on seasonal jobs and support to modern professions and entrepreneurs

■ Increased youth engagement and learning exchange

★ Stronger local identity, cooperation and well-being

Increased social interaction and inclusion across generations

When this happens, we'll see:

● More resilient local economy creating long-term work opportunities

■ Empowered young generation actively contributing to community development

★ Culturally vibrant and socially cohesive community preserving local heritage

By 2030, Bovec will be a dynamic and sustainable town where young people and residents feel rooted and connected. A vibrant local life will strengthen creativity, identity, and social ties - ensuring balanced demographics and long-term sustainability.

Broumov (CZ)
Restoring Trust and Life in the Center

Broumov's stunning historic setting has also been a source of isolation, both geographical and social. Over time, demographic decline, unemployment, and the departure of younger generations have left visible marks on its once-vibrant center. Shops and cafés closed, and trust between residents and local authorities weakened.

With U.R. Impact, Broumov is reclaiming its civic heart. The city's vision — Broumov: a good place to live — centers on restoring vitality to the public square, starting with small, visible pilot actions like adding tables and chairs to encourage gathering. Alongside physical renewal, the municipality is experimenting with new participatory approaches to rebuild confidence and connection. What's emerging is a more open, community-driven Broumov, rediscovering its strength through collaboration.

THE BIGGEST CHANGE U.R. IMPACT BROUGHT TO MY CITY IS...

...the creation of an interdisciplinary team that regularly collaborates to find solutions for the city's development. This improved coordination, strengthened trust in European initiatives and sparked lasting interest in Broumov's future.

THROUGH THE THEORY OF CHANGE, WE LEARNED...

...to see a "problem" as a comprehensive challenge and to think about it in a complex way.

SOCIAL IMPACT MEANS...

...revitalizing the city center so that it belongs to everyone without distinction, everyone feels comfortable there, and the center offers them a variety of activities.

AFTER U.R. IMPACT, WHAT REMAINS IS...

...a new mindset: the desire to try things, pilot them, learn from them, and enjoy even the small steps.
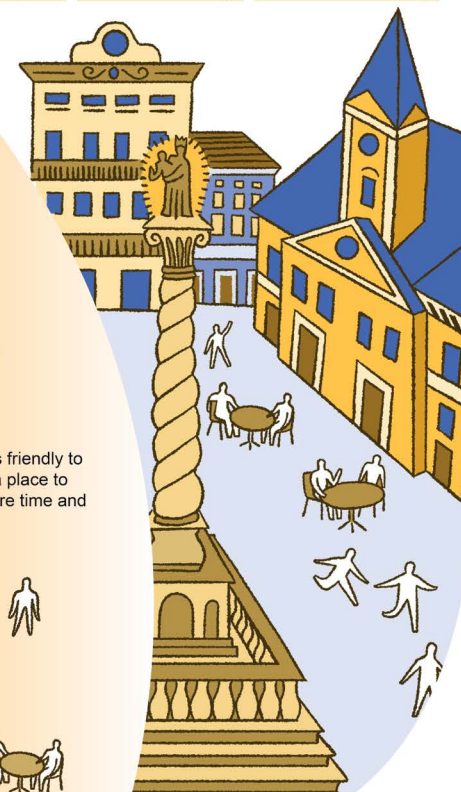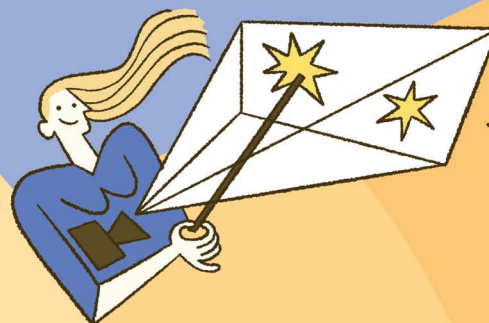
Broumov

Our mission is to ensure that

Broumov responds to demographic decline, social exclusion, and weak civic participation by empowering residents to shape a vibrant, inclusive city center.

We will do this through some activites:

● Change the physical appearance of the square

Reopen of Café Herzog in the city centre

■ Regular meetings between enterpreneurs and city management

Discounted promotions and grant support for bussinesses

Expand sales of regional products at the Information Center

★ Support art in public spaces

Regular community and cultural events

These efforts will lead to immediate results:

● New seating in front of shops, refurbished shop windows, fewer parked cars, and more space for pedestrians

Cafés on the square

■ Entrepreneurs involved in various projects and events

Supported network of local bussinesses

More regional products for sale

★ Regular public art exhibitions in city spaces

Culture as a regular city centre feature

We will begin to see the following shifts happening:

● Higher satisfaction, quality of life and time spent in the city centre

Architecturally high-quality space where people can enjoy time in the city centre over a good coffee

■ Stronger engagement and communication between entrepreneurs and city management

Increased purchases in local shops by residents and tourists

Increased local prooduction and sales

★ Public spaces with high-quality art

People feel happier and connected to their community

When this happens, we'll see:

● ■ ★

The public space is friendly to people - it offers a place to meet, spend leisure time and shopping locally

By 2030, Broumov aims to be a model for small rural cities, with a vibrant, people-centered city center shaped through active citizen participation.
Public spaces will be welcoming, lively, and accessible, supporting local life, culture, and inclusive community development.

Hannut (BE)
Reconnecting a City in Motion

Once a bustling crossroads of regional trade, Hannut has seen its commercial fabric fray over time, with declining local commerce and fading appeal. Yet the city's response is bold and forward-looking. Hannut's vision is to reclaim its role as a dynamic, human-scale center through an integrated approach that blends culture, mobility, and public life.

At the core is a major new complex combining a library, cultural center, concert hall, and business hub — linked seamlessly to the existing center through safe pedestrian and cycling routes. This new connection embodies the "15-minute city" concept, making urban life more accessible and vibrant. By creating reasons for people to come, stay, and interact, Hannut is reweaving its urban fabric one encounter at a time.

THE BIGGEST CHANGE U.R. IMPACT BROUGHT TO MY CITY IS...

…the introduction of a 360° citizen-centered mindset and vision, pushing us to challenge more traditional or standard approaches to project development. It allowed us to integrate well-being indicators and, ultimately, to strengthen citizen engagement and the overall quality of life (from 1st Deputy Mayor Martin JAMAR).

THROUGH THE THEORY OF CHANGE, WE LEARNED...

…to build a clear link between our goals and the actions we take, ensuring every step contributes to achieve a part of the objective, and keeps us focused on impacts and results.

SOCIAL IMPACT MEANS...

…recognizing that regeneration is not only about renovating places, but about improving people's daily lives - going beyond physical change to create real benefits for citizens.

AFTER U.R. IMPACT, WHAT REMAINS IS...

…a practical methodology - Theory of Change, testing actions, and an integrated planning approach - strengthened by the energy of an engaged ULG that helped embed social impact into the design of a new business centre. It's a way of working we can adopt for every major project ahead.

Hannut

Our mission is to ensure that

the city centre remains vibrant despite the decline of retail, while Le Champ des Possibles strengthens the city's appeal by attracting new visitors.

We will do this through some activites:

● Build new concert hall hosting cultural centre, library & business centre

■ Improve communication on "What to do in Hannut" for both residents and visitors

★ Create pleasant walking paths from city centre to concert hall

Develop safe cycling routes linking city centre to surrounding villages

▲ Enhance architecture & identity of city centre

◢ Hold regular meetings between authorities & retailers; joint activities are proposed for users

These efforts will lead to immediate results:

● Major cultural & economic events organised in the concert hall

■ Numerous successful events are organised every week

Increased visibility of the city centre attracts new visitors

★ Resting areas, children's activities, art installations are present along pathways

People use bikes for trips between villages and city centre

▲ The city image is recognisable in media and public perception

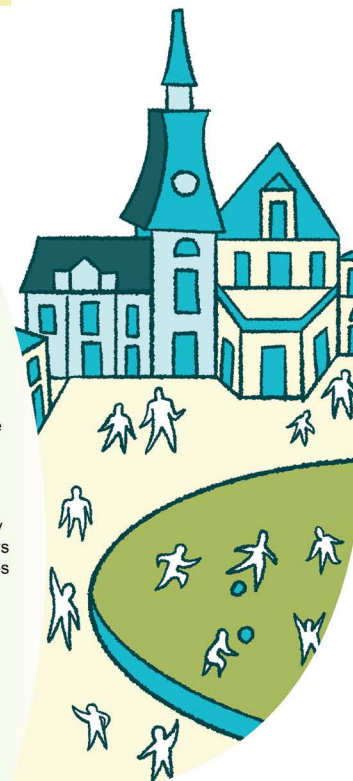◢ Retailers are engaged & informed about city developments

We will begin to see the following shifts happening:

● More people stay and enjoy the city

■ People attend events and spend time enjoying the city

The city centre becomes vibrant and lively, supported by visitors

★ People enjoy walking between areas; families make use of leisure spots

Less car traffic, safer streets, more walking & cycling

▲ Stronger civic pride; inhabitants love spending time in the concert hall & city centre

◢ Cooperation helps local shops succeed; each city part contributes to the success of the other

When this happens, we'll see:

● ■ ★ ▲ ◢ Hannut attracts cultural and business visitors who also enjoy events, shops, and leisure in the city centre

● ★ ▲ Pleasant walking paths link key areas, encouraging longer stays and supporting local businesses

● ■ ★ ▲ Tourism boosts activity, making the city centre a vibrant, welcoming hub for residents and visitors

By 2035, Hannut will stand out in the region thanks to its concert hall, which will attract more visitors than today. Residents enjoy a higher quality of life with access to engaging events, schools benefit from a vibrant cultural centre, and people choose to stay in the city for a lifetime.

Kamza (AL)
Reclaiming the River for the City

Kamza's rapid post-communist urbanization brought growth, but also chaos. The influx of new residents turned farmland into dense neighborhoods, leaving the city short of green spaces and public gathering areas. Yet within this challenge lies opportunity.

Kamza's Integrated Action Plan reimagines the Tirana River corridor as a space of connection and wellbeing. The flagship project, a Multifunctional Park, combines nature, culture, and sports in one inclusive area that brings citizens together. By reclaiming underused land and embedding sustainability into every step, Kamza is shaping a city where public space becomes a driver of cohesion and civic pride — and a replicable model for future development.

THE BIGGEST CHANGE U.R. IMPACT BROUGHT TO MY CITY IS...

…the creation of a shared space where municipal officials and young people could openly discuss the challenges and opportunities of urban development, while strengthening a common understanding - across several departments - of integrated approaches to territorial and social planning.

THROUGH THE THEORY OF CHANGE, WE LEARNED...

…that a clear, step-by-step framework can guide social policies, helping municipal staff connect broad goals with practical actions, as demonstrated through the Integrated Action Plan.

SOCIAL IMPACT MEANS...

…putting people at the center of urban regeneration, ensuring that every infrastructure and development project in Kamza responds to the needs of a growing population.

AFTER U.R. IMPACT, WHAT REMAINS IS...

…the recognition that integrated development requires many municipal officials to master shared planning tools, and the conviction that young people must be actively involved in shaping decisions about the future of their territory.

Kamza

Our mission is to ensure that

rapid population growth in Kamza leads to sustainable development, by transforming neglected riverbank areas into inclusive, green public spaces.

We will do this through some activites:

- ● Administrative procedures to transfer the river coast property from central institutions to the municipality
- Feasibility study for the area of the intervention and needs analysis of the stakeholders
- Realization of the Architectural Plan, secure funding for the Multifunction Park
- ■ Development and implementation of a promotional plan for the city's new citizen-oriented area
- Creation and implementation of a Management Plan for the Multifunctional Park
- ★ Promotion of the new area to attract private sector investment

These efforts will lead to immediate results:

- ● Transfer of a specific area, consolidating administrative procedures for future transfers
- Feasibility study strengthened by inputs on citizens' needs and local priorities
- Launch the development of a new green and multifunctional hub
- ■ Increased visits to the city's new focal point
- Creation of a new attractive hub
- ★ Creation of a tax incentive package encouraging private investment in and around the Multifunctional Park

We will begin to see the following shifts happening:

- ● More municipal land dedicated to green, sustainable, and socially oriented policies
- Participatory urban development shaped by residents
- Creation of a multifunctional park with systemic involvement of citizens and stakeholders
- ■ Consolidation of a multifunctional park as a hub for social activities
- Supporting strategic policy for a polycentric urban model
- ★ Establish a new policy policy practice involving the private sector in hub development

When this happens, we'll see:

- ● Greater municipal responsibility in urban development policies
- New integrated approach to territorial development with citizen participation
- Stronger relationship between citizens and public administration
- ■ Stronger social capital, citizens' sense of belonging, and citizen–administration relations
- Greater trust of citizens and local stakeholders in public administration
- ★ Area development strengthening both social and economic capital
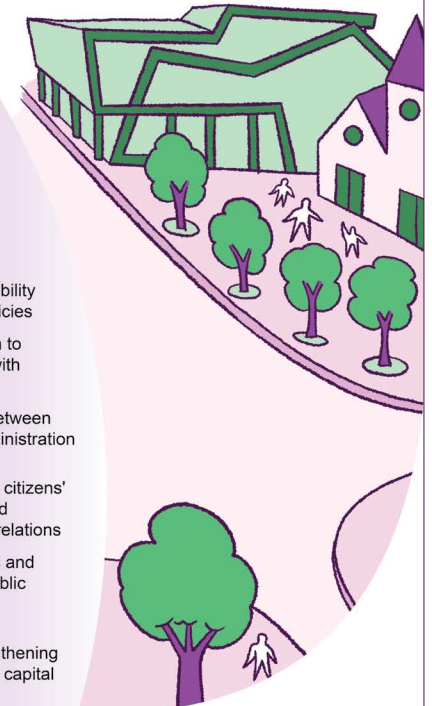
By 2030, Kamza will offer a greener, more inclusive urban environment, with regenerated riverside areas that promote biodiversity, recreation, and community well-being.
The city aims to lead by example in sustainable development through integrated planning and public space transformation.

Mértola (PT)

Keeping Heritage Alive through People

The historical beauty of Mértola tells a story spanning centuries, but also one of fragility. Population decline, climate vulnerability, and the insecurity of historical structures and real estate speculation threaten the continuity of local life. Tourism brings energy, but also pressure, making balance essential.

Mértola's approach combines heritage preservation, urban regeneration, and social sustainability. By restoring important landmarks, requalifying the riverfront, creating new cultural attractions and programs to attract talent, promoting sustainable tourism, strengthening the supply of affordable housing and quality public services for all, and engaging the community in a participatory way, the city protects its cultural DNA while creating new opportunities. The goal is not to freeze Mértola in time, but to keep it socially and culturally dynamic, resilient, inclusive, and rooted in the people who call it home.

THE BIGGEST CHANGE U.R. IMPACT BROUGHT TO MY CITY IS...

...the realization of the vital importance of the social dimension in urban regeneration, placing people and the well-being of the community at the center of decisions about the future of the historic center.

THROUGH THE THEORY OF CHANGE, WE LEARNED...

...how to clearly define the path between urban regeneration actions and the desired social outcomes, identifying the resources, stages, and impacts necessary to transform the historic center into a more vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable space.

SOCIAL IMPACT MEANS...

...ensuring that the regeneration of the historic center values the heritage without losing the people, strengthening the community, the economy, the environment and the local quality of life.

AFTER U.R. IMPACT, WHAT REMAINS IS...

...a more aware and engaged community, a strengthened network of partners, and a new way of thinking about urban regeneration - centered on people, cooperation, and the sustainability of living heritage. There will also be a commitment to putting the integrated action plan into action through the implementation and monitoring of the proposed activities.

Mértola

Our mission is to ensure that

Mértola old town preserves its heritage while tackling aging, depopulation, climate risk and gentrification through sustainable, participatory urban regeneration.
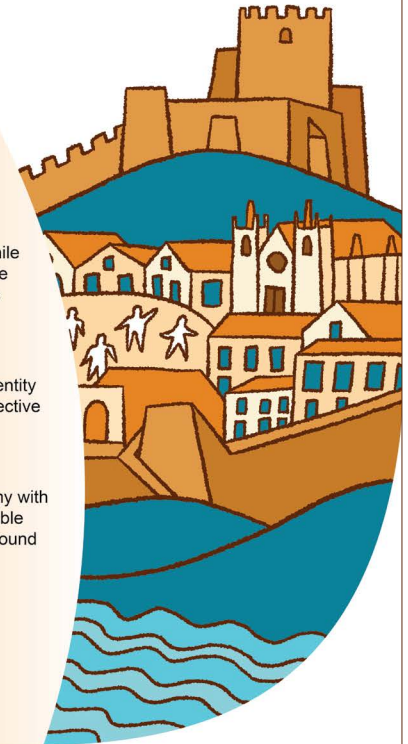
We will do this through some activites:

- ● Update the Heritage Safeguarding and Urban Regeneration Plan
- Promote building/housing rehabilitation support
- Provide housing and quality services to the community
- ■ Foster community collaboration
- Monitoring urban regeneration social impact
- ★ Supporting new small businesses, creativity and innovation, promotion sustainable tourism
- ▲ Promote nature-based solutions for public areas and climate resilience
- Preserve and monitor heritage structures

These efforts will lead to immediate results:

- ● New Heritage Safeguarding and Urban Renegenation Plan
- Grant Program for Historic Center Building Conservation and Rehabilitation
- Affordable Housing units for rent
- Water network, fiber optic, and delivery service upgrades
- ■ World Café community Sessions and Night at the Market Events
- Social impact Reports
- ★ New Roman Museum and Hammam & Tea House openings
- Coworking Mértola and Flow4Science & Art Program
- Biosphere Tourism Destination Certification
- ▲ Biodiverse, cool and friendly riverside and public spaces
- Conservation of the Mértola city walls and River Tower

We will begin to see the following shifts happening:

- ● Historic Center regenerated with heritage conservation, innovation, and improved housing and public services for vulnerable residents
- ■ Stronger community fabric with civic participation
- Improved understanding of urban regeneration's impact and better policy alignment
- ★ More opportunities for small businesses, reduction of tourism seasonality
- Mitigating demographic decline
- Increased visibility of Mértola as a cultural and sustainable tourism destination
- ▲ Greater environmental quality, biodiversity and climate adaptation
- Increased security and monitoring

When this happens, we'll see:

- ● A sustainable, thriving Historic Center, preserving heritage while enhancing overall quality of life and supporting demographic renewal
- ■ A stronger participatory community with cultural identity and civic engagement, effective evaluation and tailored urban planning
- ★ A revitalized local economy with new businesses, sustainable jobs, and balanced year-round sustainable tourism
- ▲ Safer and more resilivient environment benefiting residents and visitors

By 2030, Mértola's historic center will be a model of sustainable regeneration, where cultural heritage and modern living coexist. Through inclusive, community-led planning, it will become a resilient, accessible, and vibrant place for residents and visitors alike.

Murcia (ES)
Bridging the City's Divide

Murcia's geography has long mirrored its inequalities: railway tracks and the Segura River physically divided north and south, isolating communities and limiting access. But today, a once-barrier is becoming an opportunity for connection.

Through the South Connection project, the city is reclaiming over 200,000 square meters of former railway land to create new parks, public spaces, and a mobility hub that links neighborhoods instead of separating them. Twenty-five new spaces are planned by 2027, all co-designed with residents through initiatives like the Itinerant South Connection Exhibition. Murcia's Theory of Change focuses on rebuilding not just infrastructure, but a sense of shared belonging — bridging both sides of the city in every sense.

THE BIGGEST CHANGE U.R. IMPACT BROUGHT TO MY CITY IS...

...a reminder that sometimes plain statistics are not enough to truly understand if we are working in the right direction, and measuring subjective factors, even though it can be time consuming, is necessary and worth it in the long run to make sure our projects are being developed with residents and local communities's true feelings and ideas in mind.

THROUGH THE THEORY OF CHANGE, WE LEARNED...

...how to clarify a timeframe, responsibilities, deliverables, and what outcomes and impacts were expected from each, a key part of the process.

SOCIAL IMPACT MEANS...

...healing the centuries-long north–south divide by restoring access, dignity and opportunity through citizen-led decisions and shared space.

AFTER U.R. IMPACT, WHAT REMAINS IS...

...on one hand, over 200,000 m² of reclaimed public realm, a transport hub and greener corridors; on the other hand, and arguably more important, a standing participatory and monitoring framework that defends the value of citizen participation at its core and throughout project development.

Murcia

AREAS OF INTERVENTION

- Aesthetics & Green Transformation
- Transport & Mobility
- Culture & Leisure
- Citizen participation

Our mission is to ensure that

Murcia overcomes its historic urban divide by reconnecting neighborhoods, improving access, and promoting equitable urban regeneration.

We will do this through some activites:

- Plant 5,000 native shrubs with automated irrigation
- Install intelligent and sensored lighting on green paths
- Build two 1km pathways linking South Connection areas
- Regulated intersection for road, pedestrian & cyclist traffic
- Relocate the bus station
- Organise an itinerant South Connection Exhibition
- Restore Torreagüera halt as a sports & cultural facility
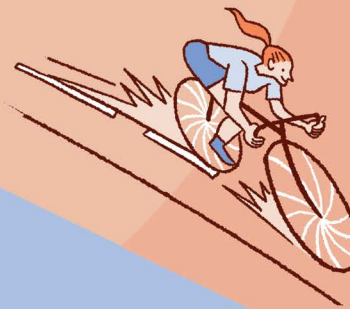- Local Mixed Employment and Training Program & collective participation in local improvements

These efforts will lead to immediate results:

- 5,000 shrubs planted with smart irrigation
- Green infrastructure installed
- New intersection with traffic lights, crosswalks & bike lanes
- Transportation hub in a safer, concetrated location
- A visual exhibition on the urban regeneration project, shown monthly in each affected neighborhood
- Renovated building equipped for sports & cultural programming
- Implementation of local enhancement projects and participatory workshops
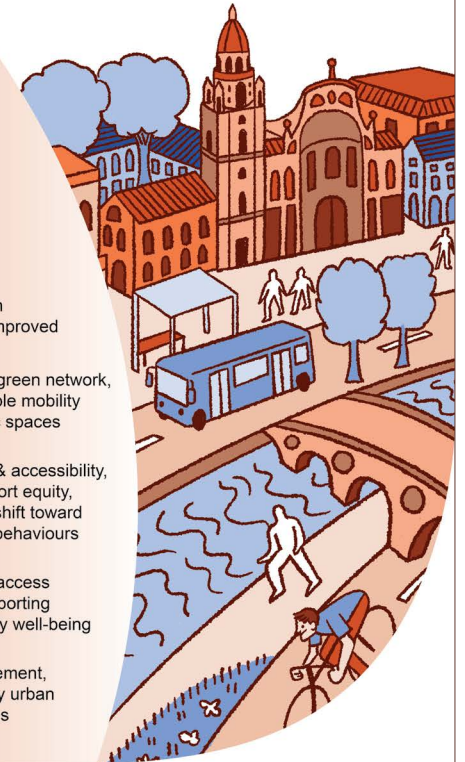
We will begin to see the following shifts happening:

- Increased biodiversity & lower maintenance
- Safer, more usable public spaces that encourage daily recreation & commuting
- Increased green mobility & faster commutes
- Improved connectivity on a local, regional and national level
- More informed citizens & active participation in city place-making
- Expanded access to recreational & cultural activities for residents
- Skill development for participants & visible upgrades to public areas
- Increased citizen involvement & shared ownership of urban improvements

When this happens, we'll see:

- More equality between neighourhoods and improved citizen wellbeing
- A connected urban green network, promoting sustainable mobility and inclusive public spaces
- Improved mobility & accessibility, with greater transport equity, less traffic risks & shift toward sustainable travel behaviours
- Expanded cultural access & participation, supporting long-term community well-being
- Stronger civic engagement, with more participatory urban development processes

By 2030, Murcia will be a more connected and equitable city, bridging the divide between north and south. Through inclusive planning and civic participation, South Connection will foster vibrant, accessible communities with equal opportunities and a better quality of life for all.
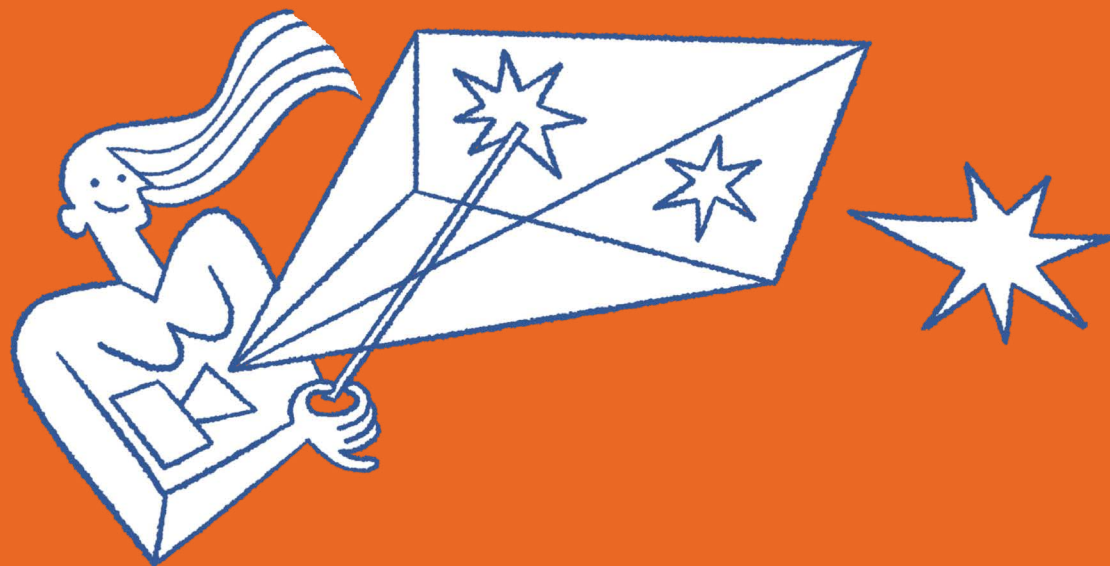
"

The question is not whether your part of the world is going to change. The question is how.

Edward T. McMahon

"

Afterword

From Impact to Legacy

By Maria Laura Mitra

Project officer at URBACT Secretariat

With a background in community psychology, she's interested in social impact evaluation, urban regeneration, community-led change, grassroots practices and participatory processes.
In her role at URBACT, she helps cities grow in their capacity to co-create inclusive and sustainable urban policies.

The discourse around social impact at the EU level has evolved significantly over the past decade, reflecting a growing commitment to inclusive, participatory, and evidence-based policymaking. Social impact is no longer seen as a secondary concern but is becoming central to how the EU designs, funds, and evaluates its initiatives, especially in urban regeneration, cohesion policy, and social innovation.

While there is no single, unified EU Framework on Social Impact Assessment, this shift is embedded in a series of interlinked frameworks and agendas: from the push that the New Leipzig Charter gave to the vision of "just cities" and the role given to evaluation frameworks that capture social cohesion, equity, and participation, to the tools that the New European Bauhaus has tried to provide cities, with a structured way to assess their performance across promoting sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusion, encouraging a more holistic and human-centred approach to impact. This marks a significant evolution: social impact thinking is no longer confined to

pilot projects or community-led initiatives, but it has permeated the architecture of structural funds themselves. The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), as key instruments of the 2021–2027 Cohesion Policy, place strong emphasis on sustainable urban development and social inclusion. These funds encourage cities to embed social impact into their strategies, ensuring that urban regeneration projects not only deliver physical improvements but also actively reduce disparities, foster inclusion, and enhance overall quality of life.

In this context, what's the impact footprint that U.R. Impact is leaving at URBACT?

The network has acted as a trailblazer in bringing the topic of social impact assessment at the centre of cities' attentions: while EU agendas evolve to include increasingly more the social dimension in urban regeneration, and academia questions the way in which social impact measurement could be articulated, the network has grounded these

reflections in the lived realities of cities. It has brought the "city perspective" in reframing urban re-generation not as a technical fix, but as a relational process that centres people, places and purposes.

Cities need to be part of the conversation on building a new mindset, where social impact assessment is embedded as part of their urban strategies and can pivot away from the traditional, purely economic metrics. There's a need to focus on the more intangible and evolving outcomes, on the lived dimensions of change, measuring not only what's built in a city, but what a city is becoming and for whom.

At the end of its journey, U.R. IMPACT is launching both a challenge and invitation to future URBACT networks and cities all over Europe: use evaluation as a tool for their real-time learning, as a mirror to reflect on their choices and adapt to emerging needs of their local contexts, to ensure alignment with the values and goals of their communities, to invite stakeholders in building together the

evaluation process. The tools and methodologies developed by the network are open, flexible, and ready to be adapted. We encourage cities, practi-tioners, and researchers to use them, evolve them, and contribute to a growing ecosystem of socially impactful urban transformations.

U.R.IMPACT

Prioritising Social Impact in Urban Regeneration

U.R. Impact is a project co-funded by the URBACT IV European program of which the Municipality of Cinisello Balsamo is the lead partner.

The goal is to create an Integrated Action Plan that provides an evaluation of the social impact of urban regeneration programs on the territory.

The Plan will be realized and implemented with an integrated approach, which will involve the cooperation and participation of several local actors (stakeholders). Stakeholders will be involved to contribute to the definition of what can be considered indicators of positive social impact of urban regeneration projects, modeled on the different territories of the partnership.

By prioritizing social impact, with a focus on community involvement, urban regeneration actions are rethought by placing citizens and their social, economic and environmental wellbeing at the center of the processes. It also allows for an increased sense of belonging and civic participation.

Project duration:
from 01/06/2023 to 31/12/2025

Discover more at:
urbact.eu/networks/ur-impact
@ur_impact.urbact

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