

UNIDAS4EU Network Article

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What If the Missing Piece Was Never Another Service?

Five years after its creation, UNIDAS has evolved from a Portuguese territorial initiative into a recognised European Good Practice. Today, six cities are beginning a new journey: not to copy a model, but to understand how stronger institutional coordination can build better protection for survivors of domestic violence.



It was raining this morning in Felgueiras, in Northern Portugal. The 5th anniversary celebration meeting has opened with Manuel Albano,—identified as the bedrock of UNIDAS, a territorial coordination system. He began with the motto that launched the conversation: “Together, we are strong!” It would become the thread running through every discussion.

Building a system instead of another service

Since its founding, the UNIDAS model has grown from an experimental alliance of trust and competence, rooted in political will, co-creation, network building and process construction into a large community of practice.

Behind UNIDAS stands the Intermunicipal Community of Tâmega e Sousa (CIM-TS), bringing together eleven municipalities that chose to address domestic violence (DV) collectively, and not individually. Working alongside the Portuguese Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG) and more than forty partner organisations, CIM-TS gradually built a coordinated territorial system, shaping how to intervene for responding to gender-based violence (GBV), domestic violence (DV), and intimate partner violence (IPV). URBACT later recognised it as a Good Practice (GP) because it demonstrates that improving protection does not necessarily require creating new services, but organising existing ones.

As Albano recalled, UNIDAS started with a simple appraisal that everywhere in the municipalities that today make up CIM-TS, a survivor of DV could find herself repeating the same story from one institution to another, across police, social care, health and courts, faced delays, gaps in follow-up and unequal access to protection, especially acute in rural areas. Every answer was correct, but none was complete.

Survivors carried the burden of travel and institutional fragmentation which increased risk of violence and weakened continuity of care. Albano told the story as it is. “One institution opened the case. Another provided emergency support. A third offered legal advice. A fourth became involved weeks later. Et cetera. Information moved slowly. Decisions were taken separately. Professionals worked with commitment, but often without a shared framework. The survivor was the person connecting the system.”

The discussion shifted to a different question.

How could existing institutions

work together as one system?

Forces have been joined into CIM-TS and transformed domestic violence from an issue managed by individual organisations into a shared territorial responsibility. In every way, they mapped the survivor's journey, identified where communication failed and asked a simple question at every stage. Now, however, the answer did not emerge from a single project. It grew through dialogue, without difficulty and argument: who should do what, how, and when?

Strong opinions were expressed. Disagreements were not avoided. Out of these frank conversations, UNIDAS gradually took shape. Its innovation is almost invisible. No new institution was created. Police officers still investigate. Doctors still treat patients. Judges still apply the law. Municipal services still coordinate local support. Victim support organisations still accompany survivors. The difference lies between those institutions.

Each of them follows common procedures. They know who leads each stage of the response. Referral pathways are clear. Information reaches the right people at the right time. Coordination no longer depends solely on personal relationships. It is part of the system itself. For survivors, those institutional changes often continue to be invisible. Their impact does not.

No one foresaw what happened next. What started as a local attempt to reduce fragmentation gradually evolved into a governance model. Support grows more consistent. Delays decrease. Professionals know who takes the next step. Institutions stop operating as separate services and begin acting as one coordinated response. Innovation is not about creating new services. The issue is not even the absence of services. It is the absence of a system connecting them. DV is rarely a problem of missing services. Very often, it is a problem of disconnected ones.

UNIDAS comes from connecting the services that already exist into a coherent operational structure. As simple as this sounds: fragmented pathways therefore produce fragmented protection. That is how more services do not equal better protection. But structure creates protection. Likewise, formal coordination does not automatically create operational coordination. Naturally, a system that depends on individuals is not a system. On the flip side, system maturity determines protection capacity. That lesson explains why very different European cities decided to join the URBACT IV Transfer Network journey.

Six cities for One challenge

That moment captured a simple reality shared by UNIDAS4EU, the Network bringing together six European territories Bétera (Spain), Budapest 12 (Hungary), Drama (Greece), Kyiv (Ukraine), Meylan (France) and Vicenza (Italy), determined to explore how stronger institutional coordination can improve local responses to DV, and ultimately, determined to adapt, test, and build their own versions of the UNIDAS model.

If the six cities are places of great inequality and tumultuous change, they are also hives of innovation. Each of them has already invested in specialised services, professionals and local responses. Each improvement matters. Despite this, no city starts from the same institutional reality, hence the transfer cannot follow a single path. Yet survivors experience the system disparately.

How do institutions move from cooperation to coordination? How do personal relationships become institutional practice? How do cities maintain collaboration when staff switch, governments change and priorities shift? Over the last six months, those questions marked the beginning of the network.

The UNIDAS transfer analysis identified five core non-negotiable elements: formal cross-institutional coordination structure, defined and shared case-management pathway, structured multi-agency operational mechanism, clear political mandate, and legal basis for secure data sharing. Drawn from the Network Transferability Study (NTS), the conclusions looked at the institutional maturity, governance arrangements and transfer potential of each partner city.

Although all cities recognised the same challenge, each joined the network for a divergent reason. Bétera recognised familiar challenges in coordinating municipal and regional services. Budapest District XII wanted to move beyond informal cooperation towards a more structured institutional pathway. Drama saw an opportunity to consolidate a growing local response. Kyiv is strengthening coordination while operating under the realities of war. Meylan wanted to compare its multi-level governance model with other European

experiences. And, Vicenza brought an already mature coordination system while looking for fresh perspectives that could further strengthen its own practice.

Following the NTS and the first UNIDAS4EU meeting in Portugal, partner cities are now entering the next phase of the transfer. Through thematic meetings, peer-learning activities, URBACT Local Groups, and locally designed Transfer Plans, each city will identify which elements of the GP can be translated into its own context. The objective is not to replicate its model, but to translate its principles into practical local solutions. The transfer will move from observation to comparison, adaptation, local testing and continuous learning across the network.

During the anniversary event, Sami Nevala, Policy Coordinator at the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (EU FRA), reminded participants that in-depth results on GBV survey shows the same story: the comparative network lesson is that transfer is not one-size-fits-all. "Awareness is not enough. Institutions and safe spaces are needed" he affirmed. Within UNIDAS4EU, differences between cities to combat DV are not marginal variations. Structural distinctions, actually, shape transfer capacity itself.

Manuel Albano smiled when the discussion turned to transfer. "Every city will find its own way," he said. "What matters is that institutions learn to work together."

What success will look like?

Concretely, each city will test ideas, challenge assumptions and adapt the model to its own legal framework, governance structure and local priorities. Some cities may strengthen referral pathways. Others may improve governance, case management and shared monitoring. Some may formalise partnerships that already exist. Others may create entirely new ways for institutions to work together. Transfer succeeds when ideas evolve to fit local realities.

But, the NTS's stark finding is that transfer depends on system maturity. Without structural coordination, increasing resources does not improve outcomes. Transfer is about building the minimum system conditions that make coordination work. The central message is that more services do not solve fragmentation. Without coordination, survivors are at risk and systems fail to protect.

By the end of the project mid 2028, success will not be measured by how closely partners resemble the Tâmega e Sousa model. It will be measured by something far more meaningful. Have institutions learned to work together more effectively? Has coordination become part of everyday practice? Has the response become easier to navigate for survivors? As of today, in several cities, coordination is partial, informal and depends on individuals.

UNIDAS kicked off with eleven municipalities asking how existing institutions could work together more effectively. Today, six European territories are asking the same question. Do the GP core elements actually function for each city? Acknowledging that functionality matters more than formal existence, the answers will not all be the same.

That is exactly what makes the journey worth following.

As participants left the meeting room in Felgueiras, nobody was asking whether UNIDAS could be copied. The real question had become how each partner city would make it its own.