

JOURNAL

PROJECT

A Place to Be-Come

📍 Seraing, Belgium

TOPIC

Urban poverty

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ANSALONI UIA EXPERT

Improving citizens' relationship with their environment to promote social inclusion, or the A Place To Be-Come's boldest ambition

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In this journal, UIA expert Francesca Ansaloni provides an account of difficulties, challenges and achievements of A Place To Be-Come's first year of implementation. APTBC is the UIA funded project through which the city of Seraing wants to strengthen its strategy towards a more consistent and inclusive urban planning capable of hold together urban development and social cohesion.

The A Place To Be-Come project tackles urban poverty in Seraing by addressing its multiple dimensions, the economic, social and environmental. In a context of economic crisis and today also health crisis, the project aims to focus on local resources, such as grassroots associations, social services, existing green areas and ongoing urban policies, in order to activate collaborative synergies and dynamics able to boost a collective process for the improvement of the relationship between citizens and their environment. The target neighbourhood is the most disadvantaged of the city and lacks quality public spaces where residents can build fulfilling relationships or feel encouraged to engage in civic life. The ambition of the project is to co-produce new spaces of encounter and engagement that help enhance cohesion and inclusion while meeting residents' needs and expectations.

Partnership

- [City of Seraing](#)
- Association pour le Redéploiement Economique du Bassin Sérésien ([Arebs](#))
- University of Liège, Urban and Environmental Engineering Research Unit ([LEMA](#))
- University of Liège, Psychology and Neuroscience of Cognition Research Unit ([PsyNCog](#))
- Centre Public d'Action Sociale ([CPAS](#)) Seraing
- [Natagora](#) asbl
- [Letsgocity](#)
- [Psykolab](#)

Executive summary

This first journal seeks to introduce the A Place To Be-Come project to the wider audience and explore how its implementation is addressing the many challenges that an innovative process necessarily meets and to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted its development.

Through A Place To Be-Come (from now on APTBC) project the city of Seraing wants to consolidate the strategy that, at the local and regional level, is directed towards the fight against precariousness, marginalisation and exclusion in urban deprived neighbourhoods. The APTBC's strategy is, as we will see, aptly integrated in the EU overall agenda against urban poverty, for its efforts to be [transdisciplinary](#), includes the multiple dimensions of urban exclusion, and adopts a participatory approach for its governance and implementation.

APTBC's scope is to create public spaces where citizens can improve their relationship with each other and with their environment. The target neighbourhood is the central area in Seraing, once the economic heart of the city and the region, closed between the wealthier residential hills and the Meuse River. This neighbourhood has followed the fate of the iron industry, thriving during the glories of the industrial revolution, and building steel plants, furnaces and housing for local workers; then witnessing to a relentless process of abandon and pauperisation when the crisis hit. Today the area is the most deprived of the city and the one with the most precarious and marginalised population. In this context, the urban authority, through its urban planning strategy and its master plan, has started a process of regeneration which includes renovating the main street, attracting new economic activities, and launching the programme for both the regeneration of an industrial heritage site in its very centre^[1] and the urban development of a vast former blast furnace in the same area, the HF6^[2] Local residents are targeted via a Social master plan which aims to support their life trajectories by taking action through the social and economic dimensions and the improvement of citizens' quality of life.

The APTBC project is meant to fit into this local multidimensional strategy and focus in particular in the quality and accessibility of public spaces, by bringing as added value a participatory approach that might help citizens become familiar with their environment (shared spaces and green areas) and with the ongoing regeneration process. In a nutshell, the project aims to:

- Transform the relationship between residents and their environment into a more positive and rewarding one;
- Encourage citizens' participation and civic engagement in the development and improvement of their neighbourhood;
- Ameliorate the attractiveness of green spaces in the central area;
- Generate new public spaces where residents can meet, exchange and ideate common projects;
- Make local services more accessible and closer to residents.

During the first year of implementation, APTBC, like all the other ongoing projects funded under the Urban Innovative Actions initiative, has faced 6 months of pandemic. In practice, for the first six months the partners could launch the process, learn how to collaborate and start those actions that were not hindered by the restrictions due to the crisis. Nonetheless, an urban and psychosocial diagnosis of the area has been successfully completed and has provided all the stakeholders with recommendations on how to adapt to local needs future initiatives for the improvement of green areas; 10 beneficiaries of social aid have been selected, their training in green areas management is ongoing and producing some visible impacts on the parks; the initial steps for the involvement of residents and grassroots associations in the area have been taken, even if without the necessary continuity because of COVID-19 restrictions; and procedures for the realisation of two community hubs and a day centre have been launched and are now in progress.

This journal will describe the implementation process and its challenges more in detail.

^[1] https://www.rtb.be/info/regions/liege/detail_gastronomia-a-seraing-environ-50-millions-d-investissement-et-9-salles-de-cinema?id=10431260

^[2] https://www.rtb.be/info/regions/liege/detail_suivez-en-direct-la-destruction-du-hf6-de-seraing-ce-vendredi-apres-midi?id=9482555

Urban poverty challenges in Seraing

Introducing Seraing

Seraing has played different roles in its region over time. Vibrant industrial site in the past, growing in population and economic resources. Today, with its 64 thousands inhabitants, having gone through multiple crisis, it faces big challenges linked to high levels of unemployment, vast abandoned brownfield and the poor state of its housing stock and its public spaces.

Since the arrival of industrial revolution, with the establishment of the first iron foundry by John Cockerill in 1817,

the city of Seraing has developed its factories and workers' dwellings along the Meuse river, while the residential areas expanded mostly in the hills. This urban development has marked the urban fabric of the lower part of the city, where steel and coal plants coexisted with residential neighbourhoods.

When the steel industry was thriving in the Liège area, during the 50s of the past century, Seraing was booming and welcoming large numbers of immigrants from Italy, Spain, Poland, Maroc, to meet the need for workforce... but since the beginning of its industrial boom, the economic and social dynamics of the city have been inextricably linked to the fate of steel and coal, so that **with the decline of the steel industry** since the mid-1970s the city of **Seraing had to face a slow but relentless downturn**. Those neighbourhoods, caught between the railway line and the river, once home to ironworkers, soon became refuge for a more disadvantaged population and faced an incremental economic and social decay, along with critical job loss.

Today the central neighbourhood is the most deprived of the city of Seraing, which in turn is among the most deprived urban areas in the province of Liège.

Some data can help picture the actual situation:

- The average income in Seraing in 2018 is lower than the average in Belgium and also in the Walloon Region: about 14.200€ average income per inhabitant in Seraing; about 17.600€ in Wallonia and 18.700€ in Belgium)[1] and it is the lowest in the arrondissement of Liège;
- The average income has grown less in Seraing than in the Liège province and in Belgium between 2012 and 2018 (8% in Seraing, about 12% in Liège province and about 13% in Belgium);
- The unemployment rate in 2018 for the population 15-64 years old is higher than the average in the region (21,2% in Seraing; 13,1% in Walloon region);[2]
- The share of recipients of financial assistance in relation to social security (RIS)[3] in 2019 is among the greatest in the country: 7,12% inhabitants recipients in Seraing; 3,35% in Wallonia and 1,82% in Belgium;[4]
- The number of recipients of integration income (RIS) in Seraing has grown of 41,9% since 2014 to the end of 2020;[5]
- In Seraing one-person households represent almost the half of all households (41,6%) and 15,7% is a single parent household.[6]

In the central neighbourhood targeted by the UIA project, in particular, the situation is more critical than the rest of the city. In 2019, for example, in the area which represents 10% of the population of Seraing, the recipients of unemployment benefits amounted to 25% of all the recipients of the municipality.[7]

According to the analysis of the partner PsyNCog of the University of Liège, the target area is also reported as being affected by anti-social behaviours and petty crimes, such as scuffles, vandalism, drug-related issues...and problems with waste disposal and littering in public space.[8]

Despite the overall difficult situation, the city of Seraing and its central neighbourhood have some assets which the UIA project aims to take a chance on. First, the city has engaged in a bold urban development programme since 2005 in view of boosting the redynamisation of local resources, both socio-economical and urban. Second, Seraing and especially its central area, is well connected to the nearby city of Liège and strategically located in the Walloon region thanks to good local transport networks. Moreover, its huge industrial heritage has the potential to be developed and transformed for economic, cultural and residential purposes. And finally, the neighbourhood hosts plenty of grassroots associations and a rich associative network that can be involved and activated in local projects.

[1] Source: <https://bestat.statbel.fgov.be/bestat/crosstable.xhtml?datasource=b394aa82-5045-4483-9e79-cd5344651791>

[2] Source: https://walstat.iweps.be/walstat-fiche-entite.php?entite_id=62096

[3] Integration income, in French "Revenu d'Intégration Sociale".

[4] <https://walstat.iweps.be/>

[5] CPAS data.

[6] <https://walstat.iweps.be/>

[7] Data provided by CPAS, social benefits provider in Seraing and partner of the project.

[8] Rapport diagnostic année 2020, B. Dardenne, T. Noël, Service de Psychologie Sociale (Université de Liège).

City's main challenges

The steel crisis left the city with about 200 hectares of brownfields and huge unemployment rates. In the last fifteen years, as a reaction to steel crisis, Seraing has embarked in a bold urban development programme called Master Plan with the aim to **promote a consistent global strategy capable of meeting the challenges of a post-industrial city**, boosting economic development and improving the quality of life for its residents and city users. The programme is meant to accommodate every urban action into a coherent whole and is organised in three main axes: urban development, mobility and green areas.^[1]

The regeneration of the central neighbourhood is pivotal in this strategy. Key actions of the regeneration process, which is ongoing, include the urban revitalisation of the main street through the transformation of abandoned industrial heritage sites into commercial buildings, the construction of new offices and the overall renovation of public spaces. Along with this action, a public initiative of housing renewal^[2] targets the central neighbourhood to make it more attractive through the purchase and refurbishment of abandoned and dilapidated housing units that are then returned to rental market at moderate prices.

As part of the Master Plan, the city has proposed a plan to bring greenery closer to each Seraing citizen called Master Park. In 2019 Seraing counted about 64 thousands inhabitants living in one third of its territory, the remainder being divided in productive areas and woodland. Despite the extension of woodland in the administrative area, the share of artificial lands is much higher than the regional average (42,1% in Seraing, 10,7% in the Walloon region) and it is unevenly distributed in the urban area leaving the central neighbourhood mainly artificial.^[3] Moreover, urban green areas are limited in number and surface and often poorly maintained, while large brownfields and uncared-for or abandoned plots can offer some opportunities for upgrading. For these reasons, the city of Seraing has launched an initiative to create a green network of parks at 10-minutes walking distance for everyone. Through this, some green areas will be improved while some new ones will be created. In this policy context both APTBC and the Interreg project [N-Power](#) aim to meet the challenge and contribute with their own strategies, as it will be discussed further.

An important plan to regenerate an abandoned brownfield in proximity of the city centre is also under consideration. This is a plan that aims to build a new neighbourhood where once a blast furnace called [HF6](#) occupied a 27 hectares site in close proximity to a dense urban environment. The main objectives are to facilitate the reconnection with the surrounding neighbourhoods while at the same time to assure a new offer of housing, services, businesses and amenities.

Master Plan's actions and HF6 development plan in particular present some challenges to the UIA project which should be taken into account for the potential impacts on the central neighbourhood in the medium-long term.

Both the regeneration of the central neighbourhood (including the renovation of the industrial heritage, private housing and public spaces) and the construction of a mixed neighbourhood nearby, participate to a strategy of attracting new inhabitants from the middle-class through a new offer of housing, jobs and amenities. While this might be an opportunity of social and economic redynamisation for the city as a whole, it can bring some risks of gentrification with it **if a focus on the most precarious and vulnerable parts of the population is not maintained all along the process**. It would mean, for example, to take advantage of the UIA project to observe ongoing processes at the urban level and provide the city with recommendations for future developments and trends. For the UIA project it would imply to pay close attention to whom its beneficiaries are and what inclusion means in practice in conditions of precariousness and poverty.



Credits © Arebs

[1] City of Seraing website <https://www.seraing.be/le-master-plan/>

[2] <https://www.seraing.be/le-master-plan/le-projet-primo-renovation-de-lhabitat/>

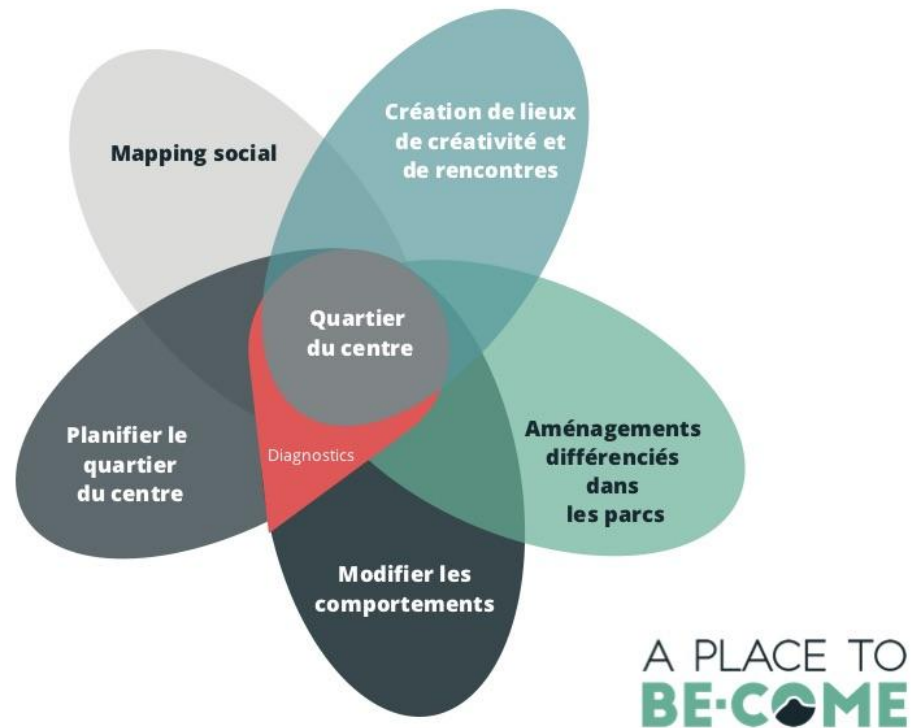
[3] https://walstat.iweps.be/walstat-catalogue.php?niveau_agre=A&indicateur_id=215700&ordre=0&periode=01/01/2020&niveau_agre=C&sel_niveau_catalogue=T

How APTBC contributes

A Place to Be-Come project adopts a multidimensional perspective combining area-based and people-based approach to urban poverty, as recommended by the EU Agenda, [1] in an effort to improve living conditions in the centre of Seraing. The project is based on a strategy aiming to foster social bonds both at the neighbourhood level and with/through the administration of the city as a trigger for participation and citizens' empowerment. The idea is that every citizen might be able to take advantage of urban development and for this to happen improvements at urban level must go hand in hand with improvements at social and economic levels. [2]

Consequently, the project is conceived as a process that tackles urban poverty from three angles: urban, economic and social. Within this framework, the main actions aim to contribute to build better relationships between citizens and their urban environment, create new jobs and promote social cohesion and citizens' participation. [3] In particular, these actions include:

- **Nature based education and training** for a target group: trainees will get a qualification in the field of green areas maintenance and all along their contract they will be contributing to improve three local parks' layout. At the end of their contracts they will get the job seeker status, which they could not access before their enrolment in the project;
- Encouraging the use and attachment to public spaces (in particular public parks in the area) through the **development of soft skills**. [4] In other words, through the adoption of tailored and specific nudges or the identification of the most appropriate solutions which can promote desired behaviour towards green areas;
- The development of a **participatory planning process** able to promote civic engagement and the creation of new spaces of relation and togetherness, in particular two **community hubs** that will be strategically located in the area. Moreover, the ambition is to help citizens become more familiar with urban planning and improve their capacity to express their views on the becoming of their city;
- The design and construction of a new day centre to welcome people experiencing homelessness and problems associated with poverty and marginalisation: the current localisation and layout of the **day centre** do not respond to users' needs and local residents' expectations, so a new location has been identified strategically in close proximity with the future HF6 urban development.



Credits © Arebs

Five keywords have been identified to illustrate [\[1\]](#) how the project want to make the central area more inclusive: 1) **Reclaiming one own neighbourhood**, that is encouraging residents to see their neighbourhood with new eyes, especially its public spaces, and change the way they relate with them into a rewarding and healthy relationship; 2) **Planning with citizens**, in a city where participation is still underdeveloped and where precarious life conditions fix different priorities, the project wishes to generate new collective dynamics; 3) **Making the city greener**, through the improvement of existing parks, promoting positive behaviour toward them and sowing the seeds of a new awareness about the importance of taking care of green areas; 4) **Creating new spaces of hospitality**, that is public spaces where every citizen can feel welcomed and can enhance her own capacity to engage in the construction of the public good; 5) **Facilitating access to services for everyone**, by creating a network of public spaces (green areas, community hubs, public services such as the day centre...) more accessible and friendly.

[\[1\]](#) As presented in the first newsletter of the project issued in November 2020.

[\[1\]](#) Urban Agenda for the EU, Partnership Urban Poverty (2017)

[\[2\]](#) Application Form UIA A Place to Be-Come

[\[3\]](#) Hernandez, A., Gat, M., Bigot, M. & Geffroy, D. (2020) La qualité de vie environnementale de Seraing perçue par les acteurs de la ville : une étude qualitative de trois espaces verts de Seraing Centre. Psykolab. Lyon, France.

[\[4\]](#) "Compétences psychosociales, in French (see Hernandez, op. cit.). In this framework the concept is referred to as people's positive attitudes towards their environment.

Fighting poverty, in context

Urban poverty in the European Agenda

Urban poverty is a priority area for the EU Agenda and APTBC in particular can be associated with the specific priority that refers to the "Regeneration of Urban Deprived Areas and Neighbourhoods", for it conceptualises urban poverty as both a spatial phenomenon manifesting in the central neighbourhood of Seraing and a social phenomenon linked to people living in the city and experiencing precarious and disadvantaged conditions. The action plan (AP) of the EU Agenda for this specific priority recommends to adopt a multi-level approach, a mixed place-based and people based vision and to address the multiple dimensions of urban poverty through integrated strategies.[\[1\]](#)

Four dimensions are to be taken into account to tackle urban poverty, according to the AP:

- **Urban regeneration**, which refers to improving the attractiveness of targeted neighbourhoods through interventions on public spaces, facilities, services and economic development;
- **Social cohesion**, which is about interventions that focus on vulnerable people and individuals (such as marginal groups, unemployed individuals, single parent households...) to tackle health, education, employment and integration issues;
- **Inclusive economic development**, which aims to boost economic internal dynamics and integrate them into local economic processes;
- **Environment/energy**, which refers to climate change challenges, urban resilience practices and energy efficiency.

Each one of these four dimensions has a place within APTBC project, with regard to both the approach and the operational strategy. The environmental dimension is addressed not specifically in respect with energy efficiency, but with a strong focus on enhancing citizens' access to green spaces with a view to a greener city and healthier life conditions for all.

The EU Agenda highlights a multiplicity of cross-cutting issues that need to be included in the overall strategy against urban poverty. Among them, many are addressed by the APTBC project and are relevant for the overall initiative to be effective: 1) an integrated diagnosis of urban deprived areas which is based on a comprehensive understanding of the urban, social, environmental and economic characteristics of targeted neighbourhoods and citizens' real needs; 2) a participatory process which fosters the inclusiveness of all the inhabitants and the most vulnerable in particular with a focus on empowerment; 3) a focus on the accessibility and quality of public services to meet inhabitants' needs.

[1] Urban Agenda for the EU, Urban Poverty Partnership, Final Action Plan (2018)

https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/system/files/ged/action_plan_urban_poverty.pdf

The Belgian and Walloon context

After the economic crisis, at the end of the 2000s all European countries have faced an increase in inequalities. In this context, Belgium developed a plan to fight poverty, at the federal and regional level. The Walloon Region proposed its first plan against poverty in 2015, understanding poverty from the standpoint of the access to the resources needed to lead a decent life.[1]

More recently, the fight against urban poverty and for a better inclusion of vulnerable citizens goes through the enhancement of the accessibility to human rights. Processes that provide every citizen with equal opportunities and access to the same rights are covered by the notion of social cohesion, which is considered as a means towards a distributed condition of wellbeing.[2] In this sense, in Belgium "specific urban poverty policies do not exist".[3] However, if we look at Belgian poverty-related policies and we distinguish between a preponderant area-based strategy and a people-based approach, we can identify two main groups of policies.

The **social cohesion strategy**, which is inspired by the adoption of this concept by the EU Commission and the Council of Europe at the beginning of 2000s, insists on the idea of building a better society where everyone has the same opportunities to flourish. This is not intended in contrast with the fight against poverty, rather as adding a new dimension which is more holistic and comprehensive and meant for every citizen in need.[4] What is changing is the relative angle from which poverty is analysed: not from an absolute point of view but in relation with the condition of the society as a whole. In this framework, it is not only the individual condition which counts but the place of the individual within his or her community, with an emphasis on solidarity and community building. In the Walloon Region, each municipality elaborates its own Social Cohesion plan following the regional programme established every five years. Seraing has adopted its own Social Cohesion plan for the period 2020-2025 and its vision is to build a more inclusive urban community by forging ties among citizens: a challenge that the APTBC project has taken up.

On the other hand, a **more integrated approach for urban areas** is conceived to make cities more attractive by addressing a multiplicity of issues ranging from the quality of life, public spaces, green areas, economic development, housing and smart city.[5] Seraing has joined the platform of Walloon Cities which brings together those cities that has adopted (or are going to) a "Perspective de Développement Urbain" (PDU), a measure of strategic governance that designates two main goals which are, first, the strengthening of attractiveness and, second, the enhancement of social cohesion.[6] These objectives should be achieved through a strategic modus operandi including for example the engagement of all the stakeholders into the definition of urban projects, working through transdisciplinarity, promoting collective learning and capitalisation of knowledge.

[1] <http://luttepauvrete.wallonie.be/>

[2] <http://cohesion sociale.wallonie.be/content/definitions-cohesion-sociale>

[3] P.J. De Graeve, F. Fournier, D.P. Decoster, I. Pannecoucke, W. Lahaye, R. Van Rossem, Recherche Pauvreté Urbaine (2017)

[4] Direction de la Cohésion Sociale (DiCS) et Institut Wallon de l’Evaluation, de la Prospective et de la Statistique (IWEPS), Rapport sur la Cohésion Sociale en Wallonie (2019)

[5] http://lampspw.wallonie.be/dgo4/site_amenagement/site/politiquedelaville

[6] <https://www.plateforme-villes-wallonie.be/>

Local initiatives

In 2014 the city of Seraing decided to elaborate a Social Masterplan (*Master plan social*) as a complement to the urban masterplan that was adopted almost ten years earlier, based on the acknowledgement of a complex social context and the need to implement a holistic vision. Seraing’s Social master plan is designed around the concept of “life trajectories”, which include each aspect of someone’s life into a whole thus to produce comprehensive policy strategies, able to hold together all the trajectories. In practice, this means that a special effort is to be put on the integration of every institutional action so that the economic, the social, the urban, the educational, the environmental can be connected and reinforce each other toward the same goal. The APTBC project adopts this perspective, nevertheless it cannot count on concrete initiatives since the Social master plan has remained mainly on paper and is still lacking an operational dimension.

Many synergies can be built with the cited Interreg project “N-Power”, which shares with APTBC the overall goal, some locations of implementation (one park in the central neighbourhood) and some partners (Arebs, Lema). N-Power, like APTBC, focus on empowerment as leverage for improving quality of life in Seraing and increasing social integration of vulnerable groups.

Up-to-date

APTBC officially started on September 2019 and it is expected to end by August 2022. 2020 has not been an easy year for urban projects, not to mention those projects for which the engagement of citizens is a key strategy and co-production is an implementation methodology.

If we consider the first year of the project globally, many activities have been delayed due to the pandemic that has severely hit Europe since the end of February 2020, and Belgium from mid-March. In particular, as we will see more in detail in the next section, **project’s actions requiring people’s involvement have been affected the most** and have suffered from changed priorities within the local administration. Nonetheless, **many activities have been accomplished in time or with limited delay**, thanks to adaptation and search for new solutions.

During the first months, all the tools meant for coordinating the project, sharing information and encouraging collaboration between partners were organised and internal communication was set up, with some difficulties linked to a different level of engagement from partners. The kick-off event that would launch the project was held in November 2019 with partners and some officials from the municipality. Digital platforms were set up in order to allow each partner to communicate quickly with the others, to share progresses, proposals, obstacles, ideas, and guarantee that everybody could follow the status of the project. The good functioning of these platforms, which are used by all the partners - with the exception of local officials who are less comfortable with them - has proved very useful when the pandemic forced partners to work remotely and face-to-face meetings were cancelled.

While internal communication was arranged to be as smooth as possible, **external communication proceeded more slowly**. The event that would have publicly presented the project to the city was cancelled twice, the first time in April and the second time in October 2020, as a result of Covid-19 related restrictions.

The diagnosis of the relationship between the inhabitants and local green areas from a psychosocial perspective began during the autumn 2019 when the questionnaire was tested by the partner PsyN&Cog on the field to be then adjusted for its later dissemination. This first test allowed PsyN&Cog to administer a final questionnaire on the field through door-to-door activities, at grassroots associations’ local sections and during the weekly local market, between February and mid-March 2020, when the pandemic broke out and they had to interrupt their

activity in person and go online. In the meantime, the other two partners in charge of contributing to the overall diagnosis of the area, Lema and Psykolab, started collecting their data regarding the characters of urban development in Seraing for Lema and qualitative data on the relationship between inhabitants and their local environment for Psykolab. In particular, Psykolab conducted several interviews with local stakeholders, grassroots associations and inhabitants. When the pandemic prevented them from going to the field (Psykolab being based in Lyon, France), they worked with a local partner, the CPAS, which carried out observation in situ and collected first-hand data in green areas.

Starting from September 2020, Lema could implement the qualitative and participative part of the diagnosis by conducting four exploratory walks with a variety of participants, with the support of local associations. During these walks it was possible to gain a better knowledge of residents' needs and feelings about their environment. All collected data, treated with both qualitative and quantitative methods, were then analysed by each partner and finally brought together into a common framework in order to provide the rest of the project team, and the municipality, with coherent recommendations and proposals for appropriate solutions to improve the parks and make them more attractive to local residents. This activity was also made possible thanks to the social mapping that CPAS was carrying out, with the support of the Prevention Department and Arebs, to identify grassroots associations, assess their needs and their willingness for taking part to the project.

Nature-based trainings were launched in February 2020, first through the selection and then the training of 10 residents on green areas management. About 400 CPAS beneficiaries residing in the project area (people who receive social aid from CPAS but are not entitled for unemployment benefits) were convened, about 200 showed up and 70 people took part to a visit to the three local parks. Of these, 15 were selected after an individual interview and enrolled in a 2 weeks traineeship on the field. At the end of the traineeship period, 10 people were hired and when their contract expires (the traineeship will continue during 2021) they will be able to apply for job with a new qualification while being again entitled to unemployment benefit. Their [work](#), which consists in learning by doing with the support of the partner Natagora, is double-headed: on the one side it improves the aesthetics of the three parks by designing their layout and then implementing it; on the other side, it involves them directly in the project through their participation to other activities. For example, although participatory actions were suspended, they occupied and refurbished a space that is meant to be a temporary community hub (called *La Ruche à Projets*), while waiting for the two buildings to be completed.

Traineeships for municipal officials were also planned but are still in wait and have been rescheduled for spring 2021.

The planning of all the activities requiring citizens' involvement has been completely disrupted by the pandemic. From Lema's urban planning seminars, to Natagora's public workshops and events, to the launch of the temporary community hub (*La Ruche à Projets*): every action which should boost a participative dynamic in the area is still on hold.

To date, two investments are under development: for the day centre and one the two community hubs the designers have been selected. For the other community hub a new solution is still being examined, because the building that was identified as the most appropriate location ended being unavailable for cost reasons.

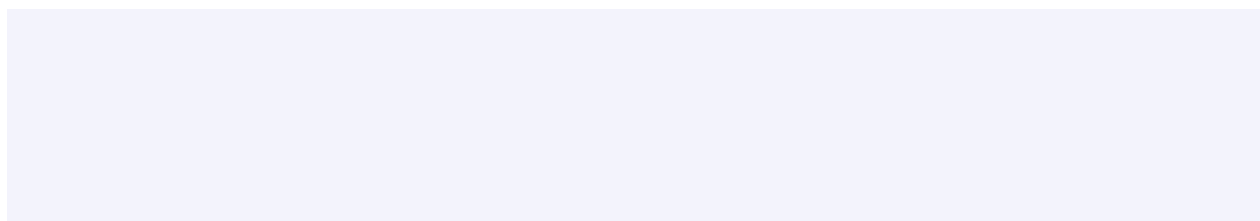
How this can impact on the project will be further discussed in the next chapters.

Implementation challenges

Challenges are part of an innovative process and cannot be eluded. The UIA initiative has identified 7 main challenges that are expected to impact, at different levels, every funded project. However, the COVID-19 pandemic during has been adding complexity and constraints to how urban authorities could manage and implement their urban projects. In this case, the pandemic will not be considered as an additional challenge, but as transversal to already set challenges.

Challenge

Observation



Leadership

Challenge level



The project is managed by Arebs (Agence pour le Réploiement Economique du Bassin Sérésien), a municipal agency that was created in the mid-1980s to provide Seraing's administration with a flexible instrument to respond quickly to the ongoing economic crisis and the need for new leverages for development. In the last thirty years Arebs has developed many projects through different funding sources on behalf of the municipality. APTBC has been conceived within Arebs and approved by the municipality of Seraing, so not many issues were expected and this challenge was judged as low at the beginning of our evaluation. During the first year, however, some problems have emerged.

Two leaderships needed. In terms of leadership both Arebs and the urban authority play a crucial role in the project. Arebs, which is in charge of APTBC's management, functions as an independent organism. This appears to be somehow problematic when it comes to leadership in relation to the urban authority. Leadership within Arebs being assured, this ensures for example the integration of APTBC to the city's urban development strategy (Master plan, master park, Social master plan) and ongoing projects such as N-Power. Still, it does not necessarily impact on municipality's operational and substantial political support towards the project. After one year of implementation, APTBC is still little known when not disregarded by many municipal departments and lacks full endorsement. Within the municipality, at the political level, the UIA project is officially validated, as an interview with the Chief of Office of the Mayor confirmed, but its implementation is partly disjointed from municipality's objectives and priorities. This results in practice in deadlocks and delays, but it especially undermines the emergence of the project as a coherent whole that needs the contribution of many different departments within Seraing's administration and thus a wide political support from the city council and executive board.

Emerging lessons

The key for a sustainable project. For the sustainability of the project in the long term, a strong and motivated leadership is pivotal. If now this challenge seems just to be source of delays, in the medium but especially the long term the risk is higher and has to deal with the capacity and willingness of the urban authority to take over the good practices of the project and, most of all, to play an active role in the transformation of city's practices toward innovation.

A project which brings together. APTBC is a complex project because it aspires to address at once and through an integrated approach the many different dimensions that may contribute to enhancing wellbeing and quality of life in an urban deprived context. For its ambitions to be fulfilled, strong political legitimisation is needed. In the latest months, some partners have searched for bilateral meetings with each of the deputies of the city executive board who could have a role in any aspect of the project. This work needs time to bear fruit but it can prove a good strategy to pursue. In the meantime, once caught up to backlog and with the project gaining in visibility, improvements at this regard can be seen as well and facilitate political takeover.

Public Procurement

Challenge level



The city is placed under regional guardianship like other Walloon cities that are in a deficit situation. Being under regional guardianship implies that the Regional Aid Centre for Municipalities (CRAC)[\[1\]](#) may grant cities with credits on condition of adopting a Management Plan (Plan de Gestion), which contains all the measures that the local authority must adhere to reach a balanced budget. Such measures concern staff management, use of funding, and also public procurement when it exceeds

established thresholds.

Procurements need a specification before going public and the validation of either the city council or the executive board, according to the type of procedure (open or negotiated) and the contract value. When a public procurement must be validated by the city council, the procedure can end up being one month longer than in the case of validation by the executive. Moreover, when the total amount of the procurement exceeds pre-determined thresholds, the case must be sent to the regional authority in charge to check it and validate it. The regional authority has 30 to 45 days to respond. Meanwhile the enterprise awarded with the contract can be informed but must wait 15 days after validation is issued to start the construction. This means about two months of delay for being under guardianship.

APTBC includes three main investments those procedures require time to be executed and validated.

1. The day centre, for which a designer has been identified through an open call for projects. This is the more advanced investment because the city owns the land. Public procurement could be launched as soon as an extensive inquiry was completed to identify needs and priorities and building specifications could be elaborated (0.6 Million euros).
2. The *Maison du Peuple* (community hub n.1) is a building previously owned by Eriges, the organism in charge of urban development on behalf of the city of Seraing and now passed over to the city. Its ground floor will host one of the two community hubs once renovated.
3. For the second community hub a private building was chosen for its central and visible location and its vacancy. Unfortunately, no agreement was found for its sale between the landlord and the urban authority. This circumstance has left the project without a building where to develop its second community hub. To date, new solutions are being examined.

The total sum devoted to renovate the two community hubs amounts to 0.63 Million euros.



Credits © Arebs

Emerging lessons

Making the case for co-designing. One of APTBC ambition was to be able to co-design each of the building, the day centre and the two community hubs. In order to do that, a participatory dynamics should have been put in place much earlier than the launch of public procurement. Co-designing is an activity which requires time to be prepared, organised and implemented, especially in difficult contexts. It would have been a challenge even in normal times, because three years are a short time to 1) have citizens from a deprived neighbourhood involved in a participatory process; 2) implement the participatory process; 3) launch public procurement on the basis of the results of the two previous phases; 4) proceed with construction works; 5) pursue the participatory process within the new service/equipment, to be sure it

produces the expected impacts. These are not normal times and the pandemic has jeopardised this sequence of actions so that the participatory process had to be limited in ambition (like in the case of the day centre) or was impossible to carry out. A good solution would be in this case to opt for a very flexible layout for the two community hubs, making it possible to adapt the space for different purposes and to be modified according to any necessity.

Careful with delays. The main challenge here is linked to the period of time which is needed after completion of the buildings for people to become familiar with the places and for make them a centre where a community can gather and share projects. For this to happen, it will be crucial to boost around the temporary community hub (La Ruche à projets) a collective dynamics that in the future could migrate to different places.

[1] Centre regional d'Aide aux Communes <https://crac.wallonie.be/le-centre>

Organisational
arrangements within
the urban authority

Challenge level ●

As discussed in relation to leadership, urban authority is not in charge of APTBC project management. Its role in the implementation process is nonetheless crucial because APTBC actions must proceed in synergy with actions which are carried out by offices and departments within the municipality.

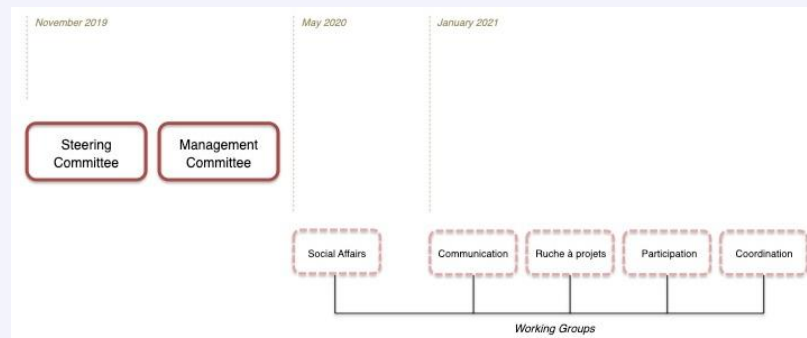
In APTBC project there are two levels of governance that must work smoothly for actions to be carried out effectively and timely. The first level is at the core of partners' team, it is led by Arebs and has its own functioning. The second level is within the urban authority and in particular some departments and services those operational support is more relevant for the project, such as Public Works, Public Procurement, Environment, Urban Planning, Social Affairs, Communication. In order to encourage the integration of these two levels, three experts have been hired by the project to work within the Department of Public Works, Social Affairs and CPAS.

Towards better coordination and cooperation within the partnership. When the project was launched, the decision-making process was structured mainly around two groups of actors meeting at a different pace and pursuing different goals: a steering committee meeting twice per years to analyse progress and discuss strategic directions; a management committee meeting every four months to share operational progress per work package, discuss obstacles and emerging issues and find common solutions. A sub-group of actors meets more regularly to follow up progress and assure the coordination of specific activities involving CPAS beneficiaries or linked to investments, such as the resettlement and construction of the day shelter and social mapping. This decision-making model was recognised by partners as partially inadequate to facilitate coordination and help create a more creative and participative working environment. Following a series of workshops aimed to identify responses to those demands, partners have set up and initiated several **working groups** that are autonomously carried out according to each group's needs and goals.

- A communication working group, whose ambition is to re-examine collectively the most appropriate communication strategy towards different external groups of actors, from city officials, to local associations, to inhabitants.
- A working group for the temporary creative station ("Ruche à projets"), to set up the space as the place of co-working and co-creation for partners and other local actors, including citizens.
- A citizens' participation working group, to identify the best strategy to boost a participative process after months of interruption due to Covid-19 restrictions and limbo.
- An internal coordination working group, to try to improve cross-departmental collaboration and reach a wider consensus about project's objectives and approach.

These recent arrangements have been motivated by both a need for more relevant and productive exchanges at the first level of governance, that is among the main partners, and an urgency for creating links that are still missing at this stage of the project with the other level of governance. The urban authority has been involved only to a limited extent in the decision-making process, and mainly through the department of Social Affairs. This new organisation seeks to instigate radical changes

within this governance structure by encouraging cross-departmental encounters and transdisciplinary work.



Credits © Author

Emerging lessons

An **effective teamwork** is nothing that can be taken for granted, not even among partners that are supposed to share the same working philosophy, not to mention among actors coming from very dissimilar working settings and with priorities that are not always overlapping. In the case of APTBC, the challenge is double: on the one side, two different models of governance need to communicate and find modes to cooperate; on the other side, within each model the decision-making process must be rendered more intelligible and smooth.

Integration is a goal that requires time and effort to be reached. At the beginning of the project, the different work packages communicated but each partner was mostly focused on its own actions and priorities. With a lot of engagement from everyone and through a direct investment on the field, each action of APTBC started to become the result of a real co-production. Today, this process is in place and is being relentlessly adjusted by partners.

Participative approach
for co-implementation

Challenge level



“The global challenge for this project is to be able to work in synergy with municipal offices, social services, grassroots associations and to involve the inhabitants into our action” (Florence Detalle, Arebs, interview August 2020).

The participative approach is at the heart of APTBC, for its ambition to encourage a participative process to emerge and co-produce improvements in the quality of life for the inhabitants of the central neighbourhood. This dimension concerns not only the target group of project’s action but every actor involved in the project, who must be engaged according to tailored strategies.

Municipal offices: as explained with regard to the previous challenge, municipal offices are not by default connected to the project. Their participation and motivation needs to be built. So far, some offices are more involved than others depending on how much the project has progressed in their field, the pandemic has impacted their activities or modified priorities, and bilateral or multilateral relations have been effective. Thus, for example, the department of Social Affairs has integrated APTBC’s activities, while with the department of Public Works contacts have been limited and a structural partnership has not been set up yet.

Social services: A fruitful collaboration has been developed between the day centre’s management and APTBC’s team, to analyse users’ expectations and work on the future centre’s needs. This has allowed the team to make rapid progress in this direction so that there is no delay with public procurement for the design of the new day centre.

Grassroots associations: The local network of association is rich and vibrant, especially in the central neighbourhood of Seraing. This advantage is countered by a sort of disenchantment that the APTBC team has perceived among associations’ staff in relation to municipal-led projects. Moreover, “In Seraing a culture of civic participation is missing. Citizens are not used to play an active role in their city’s

development, in the improvement of their public spaces. They are more used to take what the urban authority decides to offer via municipal services. They are customers, we would like to make them partners” (Mohamed El-Boujjoufi, Lema, interview August 2020). Throughout the year the APTBC team has conducted an extensive outreach activity which has proved essential for presenting the project to local associations (even at a time when a wide communication on the project was not yet in place), for collecting demands and wishes, assessing their needs and paving the way for future collaboration. The results to date are the participation of 4 associations and about 70 of their members to the exploratory walks organised by Lema as part of their participative initiative. Other actions included in the overall participative process have not been implemented due to Covid-19 restrictions and are still pending. It is expected that they will resume as soon as lockdowns end or as soon as the weather allow them to be held outdoors.

Residents: During the first year, establishing a contact with the inhabitants has been difficult. Not only because of distrust or disregard, but also because the pandemic has precluded or postponed many planned activities, a real integration of project’s actions has been delayed to materialise, as well as a coherent and hard-hitting communication about the project. Nonetheless, residents have “entered” the project through the interviews of the diagnosis, by taking part to exploratory walks and visiting and leaving their comments in “La Ruche à projet” during the local event “Fieris Féeries”,^[1] as engaged trainees for the nature-based training.



Credits © Lema

Emerging lessons

When the target group needs to be visualised. As many partners have observed, the target group to whom the project is addressed can easily become unfocused, unless a continuous process of focusing and adjustment is realised. The idea of going via grassroots associations and social services is reasonable with respect to the local context. When the participative initiatives resume, a system of crosschecking and collective debate among all the actors can prevent APTBC from failing the target.

The common good. Public life in Seraing is still lacking forms of participation and community engagement. This means that neither the government nor citizens have the attitude or the habit to work together to produce the common good. To overcome this barrier, a regular and persistent work will need to be made to build relationships and trust among civil society. It is capital that this work is consistent within and across all the work packages and each action of the project, so that APTBC is perceived as a coherent process even in its complexity. This challenge is to be addressed together with a strong communication strategy, which will be discussed further.

^[1] Fieris Féeries is local parade organised by the Cultural centre in Seraing involving residents and associations to create a street event capable of assembling up to

12.000 people from the whole province in 2017 (<https://www.fierisfeeries.be/>). In 2020 the event was kept humble in the form of a walk through smaller events.

Monitoring and evaluation

Challenge level



Monitoring and evaluation is a planned activity throughout the project life and it involves different partners and different data set from CPAS (social data); primary data collected from direct observation by Psykolab; primary data collected by PsyNCog through a survey; primary data from the mobile application developed by Letsgocity; secondary data from the police. Data from each source were collected during the first year to carry out the diagnosis and the activity of outreach by each partner with the exception of Letsgocity which mobile application is being implemented. The intention is to collect other data throughout the project and once every action has reached its completion within the third year. Activity of monitoring and evaluation will be carried out by all the partners but supervised by PsyNCog from the University of Liège, which has a particular expertise in data processing and quantitative methodologies.

This activity is not relevant at the moment and related challenges will be analysed further in future outputs.

Emerging lessons

Integration is the hardest thing. It is a good solution to have one partner in charge of the supervision of the monitoring and evaluation process. Nonetheless, a particular effort should be put on a collective initiative with an emphasis on regarding project's progress from a comprehensive perspective. Given the ambitious goal of integrating all APTBC actions toward the common goal of improving citizens' relationship with their environment and with each other, integration should be adopted as the strategic approach with regard to monitoring as well, in order to highlight advancements or possible failures in the process of combining impacts.

Communication with target beneficiaries and users

Challenge level



Communication is the responsibility of Arebs but has to be validated at the city level and to be consistent with the municipal communication strategy. This step may represent a clog for the correct development of the activity because the communication department of the city has not a communication strategy to which the project can adhere. In practical terms, this means that communication for APTBC must follow two steps before reaching the audience: an autonomous path of validation within the project and then another passage through the communication office at the urban authority. This longer decision-making process, together with the fact that the position of communication officer remained vacant for three months, have deferred many relevant activities that started resuming when a new officer took up the position, in June 2020.

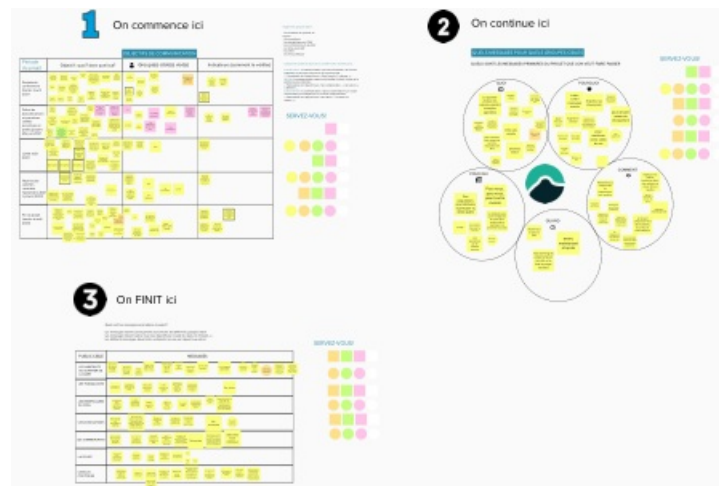
The kick-off event had to be cancelled twice because of response measures to covid-19 - such as physical distancing - once in April and the other one in October 2020. The team is now reasoning on finding another solution to substitute the event, now obsolete, with another form of communication which can be adjusted to current progress. To date, project's flyers have been distributed, a monthly newsletter was launched in November 2020, the Facebook page is updated regularly and the local event "Fieris Féeries" was the opportunity to present informally APTBC to passers-by. As part of the project, a mobile application is also being developed by Letsgocity with the aim to become complementary to other communication activities and draw citizens' attention to what APTBC is doing in their neighbourhood, so to motivate their engagement and make them think

"it's good what is happening in my city and I would like to be part of it"
(Pierre Labalue, Letsgocity, interview September 2020).

Catching up delays. Thanks to the precious work that has been conducted with local grassroots associations by Arebs, Lema and PsyNCog, the lack of a

comprehensive approach to communication has been partly counterbalanced. Openings and closures due to the pandemic have conversely broken a delicate process of relationship building, which now needs work and perseverance but can still be restored. With regard to communication with the urban authority, regular exchanges between the communication officer, the APTBC team and officers within the city department have been organised to speed up the decision-making process and build mutual trust.

A new collective strategy under study. Fine-tuning a communication strategy has met above-cited obstacles during the first year. Furthermore, within APTBC team it has becoming more and more evident that a collective work on communication was desirable not only to make the project more intelligible to external partners, but also to agree upon what potential beneficiaries and users APTBC is intended for. For this reason, a new strategy is now being co-designed by the team through a series of internal workshops on external communication that identify the target groups, the goals and messages to convey, a global planning and indicators through which to monitor every action.



Credits © Arebs

Emerging lessons

Communication as a reflexive action. The collective work that is being carried out to produce a shared and common communication strategy will prove relevant also with regard to the community hub and its possible future users. The sooner this plan is implemented, the best it will work for the overall participative initiative.

Upscaling

Challenge level



Scaling up for this project has some strengths. 1) buildings that will be built and renovated under the project will be handed over to the city; 2) of these buildings, one will be managed by the day centre's current management that has been so far involved in the definition of the future building's design; 3) municipal workers will be trained to take care and maintain green spaces after the end of the project; 4) a guide will be realised to provide recommendations for future urban developments (such as the HF6).

Nonetheless, there are some risks that need to be taken into account in the following months.

Scaling up needs support and motivation from every actor As discussed earlier, participation and engagement is a major challenge for APTBC, also with regard to the urban authority but with the exception of internal partners. This can jeopardise impacts in the long term, once the project comes to an end. The management team is well aware of this risk and it is working toward its mitigation through communication and lobbying.

Emerging lessons

Be careful with whom development is for. Seraing's urban projects have as common goal to make the city, and the central area in particular, more attractive. Its ambition is to attract more investments, new economic activities and new residents. As it is by now well-known, investments in a deprived urban area can bring along a process, more or less encouraged, of substitution of the resident population. This process is not unavoidable but it needs some caution if we want to deter it. Since gentrification does not happen in one day but it is a phased process, partners should pay attention to what is going on in housing and commercial sectors during the lifetime of APTBC, in order to be able to capture evidences of a gentrification process. At the same time, the work that is being done about the identification of the target groups among current residents of the central area and/or CPAS beneficiaries is important in this respect.

Who's going to take care of green areas in the end? This challenge needs to be anticipated because in present circumstances, with the urban authority under the regional guardianship, new municipal employees cannot be hired. This means that, for example, the number of municipal workers who manage green areas today will not increase at the end of the project. Moreover, they will stop receiving help from workers hired under APTBC. Some solution or mitigation should be studied at this stage of the project.

Closing remarks

APTBC is an ambitious project for at least two reasons: first, its scope is large - to fight exclusion and marginalisation through a multidimensional approach in the central deprived neighbourhood of a city struggling with social and economic troubles; second, it engages with structural difficulties that might hinder its achievements, such as Seresians' so far reduced participation in civic life and urban authority's budgetary constraints. In this sense, the project's biggest challenges emerge as consequences of these hindrances. Nonetheless, during the first year it was possible on the one side to activate many of the planned activities; on the other side, for the partners to learn how to adjust their working methods, experiment new ways of co-producing and connect with the field.

The nature-based trainings with a group of residents have started and are giving the first results, despite some delays. The urban and psychosocial diagnosis of the area have been realised and provided tailored recommendations on future action. Some activities involving grassroots associations and inhabitants were carried out, but the participatory initiative is still on hold due to the COVID-19 context with which the project had to deal.

In the next months APTBC will pursue trainings and it is expected to take every step in order to launch the participatory dynamic which is needed to pave the way for the transformation of Seraing's public spaces: successful community hubs, attractive and lively green areas, welcoming and accessible social services.

Urban poverty

See on UIA website

