

JOURNAL

PROJECT

CAPACITyES - Children Against Poverty Awake the CITy Education System

📍 Bergamo, Italy

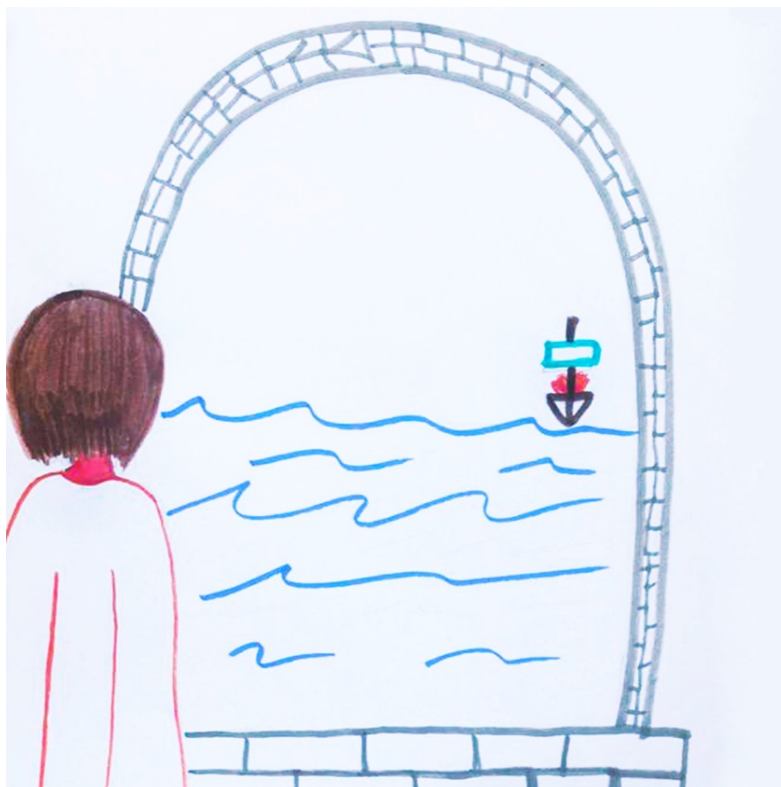
TOPIC

Urban poverty

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EXPERT

CAPACITYES Journal 1: get an update on Bergamo's project

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The CAPACITyES project focuses on the fight against urban poverty. The added value of this approach lies in the fact that the project puts on the table different ingredients to find the right balance and combination, to address the problems induced by poverty in disadvantaged families. Most of these families are foreigners and are part of the latest migratory waves that have affected Europe. Furthermore, the project works together with children making them protagonists of the urban regeneration process and through it involves them in an inter-cultural dialogue.

Executive summary

Urban poverty is one the most crucial problem affecting Italian cities, particularly since the economic crisis of 2008 resulting in a drastic reduction of resources. Bergamo, with its 121,000 inhabitants, is not excluded from this situation, showing an average of 11,4% of families living in poverty condition, a percentage that skyrockets to 57% when considering foreigner families.

From this scenario comes CAPACITyES project which addresses urban poverty mainly focusing on children educational poverty.

The challenge is to disrupt the mechanisms underlying urban poverty and the resulting inequalities through an innovative approach focused on children perspective. Studies indeed show that children are the most vulnerable age group when considering the at-risk-of-poverty-and-social-exclusion rate. CAPACITyES will work on the children helping to break the cycle of poverty tackling disadvantage in early years in order to reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion in the future.

The CAPACITyES project intends to address urban educational poverty in a multiple perspective, taking into account different dimensions: housing, education, art, sport and culture, through active participation and inclusion of the citizens.

The interconnected solutions are as follow:

- A Co-Housing facility for families with children with personal and shared spaces to live in. Their presence will be temporary and aimed at supporting them in dealing with housing difficulties, staying on the labor market and exercising full autonomy;
- a creative HubForKids that will be focused on improving children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills, proposing artistic, sport, music and cultural activities, and performances targeted for different age groups. Children will also benefit from scholarships, as an economic help;
- site specific Artistic Installations to be located inside the Co-Housing building, the HubforKids and in different city spots becoming a single huge site-specific installation aimed at connecting the centre and the suburbs, by facilitating their cross-contamination.

The project aims to achieve the following results:

- Sustainable temporary co-housing solutions, mitigating the situation of fragility and segregation of parts of the families waiting for social housing;
- Empowerment and social inclusion through participative and active involvement of beneficiaries;
- Enhanced vulnerable families future income capacity and job opportunities through courses and professional training;
- New recreational spaces dedicated to children and young people, where different cultural, sports, musical and artistic offers can be lever to their full exercise of the right to culture;
- Reshaped urban landscape of selected deprived areas using art for a new idea of relationship with public space.

The project partnership is made up of these territorial actors:

- Municipality of Bergamo
- Social Cooperative RUAH - cooperative
- Social Cooperative Patronato San Vincenzo - cooperative
- Generations FA Cooperative - cooperative
- Professional Training Association PSV
- BEST Institut - private training centre
- ISMU - Foundation for Initiatives and Studies on multi ethnicity - private organisation
- CSI - Italian Sporting Center of Bergamo - private organisation
- PURELAB - private enterprise

Fighting urban poverty by focusing on the needs and visions of children.

The state of play

The city of Bergamo is developing the CAPACITyES project in one of the most difficult moments in its long history. Bergamo had the great misfortune of being among the first cities in Europe to have been affected by the effects of COVID 19, when all over Europe it was not yet understood what was really happening and that it was the beginning of a serious pandemic. The consequences of this unfortunate event are known to all and will forever leave an indelible mark in the history of this city. However, despite these serious events, the project has never had a real stop and is slowly becoming an important reference for all those involved in its realization, especially for those to whom it is addressed. This project puts the fight against urban poverty at the center of its actions. The added value of this approach lies in the fact that the project puts on the table different ingredients to find the right balance, the right combination, to address the problems induced by poverty in disadvantaged families. Specifically, the lines of action involve:

- sustainable access to a home,
- guaranteed non-formal education for children,
- overcoming the marginalization and spatial segregation of some communities,
- the improvement of urban landscapes linked to these regenerative actions implemented.

The CAPACITyES project, at first glance, appears as a classic urban regeneration project, well thought out and well-structured from the point of view of an integrated approach at the urban scale. Going into the details of the planned actions, many innovative elements are discovered. The first one, and perhaps not so evident, is to generate a solution to meet the needs of a transitional phase that characterizes the life path of many poor families. Accessing a social home, in the current context of low investment in housing-oriented policies, can take a long time. The CAPACITyES project works on this temporal space to allow some families to find a transitional housing condition, a solution managed by a local public urban policy that assists families in this waiting phase. A waiting phase that is not solved simply by assigning a house for a limited period, but a wait that becomes

- an opportunity for experimentation,
- integration of the target families in the local context (mostly families linked to recent migratory waves),
- training and mutual knowledge and

- enhancement of diversity.

The second point of innovation lies in the interpretation of the cohousing experiences proposed by the Bergamo project. Cohousing historically arises from the will of aggregation of some families who aspire to a model of living that puts in common the provision of some services and that establishes an equal relationship, in the decision-making aspects. It is a choice strongly involving the members of a local community that look for a life path less isolated and more based on participation and sharing:

“There are leadership roles, but not leaders in cohousing”([Scotthanson, K. & C., 2005](#)).

The Bergamo experience does not arise from a spontaneous aggregation of families, but from a local policy that defines an operational context in which families in conditions of poverty and hardship find an answer to their difficult situation of multiple deprivation through a temporary cohousing path that, at the same time:

- It allows target families to be provided with material and cognitive tools for faster insertion within the local social, cultural and productive context.
- It allows the redevelopment and re-functionalization of public buildings that have found themselves abandoned over time and without specific functions.

The approach to cohousing in this project is set on conditions that are far from the usual practices which tend to be based on spontaneous community led aggregations. This different approach opens the field to an experimental practice that can open new horizons in terms of management and creation of policies in favor of cohousing.

Finally, a moment that strongly characterizes the Bergamo project and the participatory space reserved for children. The CAPACITYES project addresses urban poverty, mainly focusing on children educational poverty. In fact, the neighbourhoods chosen for the project (21.500 habitants) are characterized by a massive existence of social housing and by one of the highest ratios of foreign population. The 20% of total residents in these areas are underage (ca 4300 children). Half of the children attending school in these areas are foreigner and their families have poverty and housing problems. The challenge is to change the way the city of Bergamo plans and transforms the urban spaces in these neighbourhoods. The objective is to realize attractive urban spaces thanks to visual art, innovative urban furniture co-designed with kids. This will happen combining art, culture and creativity with children's active participation in the designing of innovative solutions to urban renewal and in the creation of the HubForKids.

The policy context

The CAPACITYES project addresses issues related to the phenomena of urban poverty by focusing its activities on two main projects:

1. The realization of a cohousing experience,
2. the creation of a Hub for Kids.

These two key projects, in their simplicity but also originality, open up to various local challenges that currently affect the city of Bergamo, but common in many other European cities, namely:

- The challenge of finding a home at an affordable price, especially for the less well-off.
- The question of promoting social inclusion actions, especially for foreigners who have arrived with the latest migratory waves.
- The problem of providing adequate training to members of poor families in order to access the work available on a local scale.
- The need to reconcile work time with time dedicated to family needs.
- The re-qualification and re-functionalisation of vacant spaces.
- The re-contextualization of marginalised areas to look for sustainable new balances in the city fabric.

A third key-action, which is linking the two projects and visually tracking the regenerative action promoted in the city, is constituted by the artistic installations. These installations connect and evidence the major places where the regenerative actions take place and they are inspired by the work done with the children.

The CAPACITYES project has all the methodological elements to manage such a complex situation, which opens up to various challenges and problems. In fact, it is structured around an integrated approach that wants to harmonize some structural dimensions of urban life, but which also represent constitutive domains for good planning of an effective, sustainable, and efficient urban regeneration action, i.e.:

- The cultural dimension
- the economic dimension,
- the social dimension,
- the environmental dimension.

The CAPACITyES project is transversal to different policy contexts. At a minimum, it intercepts the domain of urban planning policies, urban welfare policies and social assistance, training and educational policies (professional training, but also compulsory schooling) and finally it is fully included in the context of policies aimed at combating urban poverty. In this first issue of the Journal, we will focus on this latter policy context. The CAPACITyES project is part of an overly complex territorial governance as regards the planning and implementation of measures aimed at responding to those critical situations induced by poverty.

The context of policies aimed at urban poverty are articulated in Italy from the local level (municipalities and specific territorial areas - *ambiti territoriali*) which have implementation tasks and a detailed knowledge of the needs and targets, to the regional and national governance levels (which allocate local, regional and national funds plus the EU indirect funds. The regional and the national levels define the principles of use of the available financial resources through strategies and methodological indications). It is to underline that every region has the own approach to combat Urban Poverty.

In the Region Lombardia the *ambiti territoriali* adopt planning acts in implementation of the regional planning indications. A three-year plan of action is established for each *ambito territoriale*. These plans are financed through the share of the Poverty Fund, with the possibility of integrating this programming with the EU available resources (national and regional mainstreaming funds) relating to national operational programs (PON) and regional (POR) addressing the thematic objective of fighting poverty and promoting social inclusion.

The context of social cohesion policies promoted by the Lombardy Region, in the perspective of the use of the European Social Fund 2014-2020, helps the type of actions envisaged by the CAPACITyES project. [The POR axis II](#), in fact, intends to strengthen the opportunities for social and jobs related integration of citizens in difficulty and those belonging to disadvantaged groups. It looks at active inclusion paths aimed at improving the employability of very disadvantaged people, the disabled and the population at risk of poverty and extreme marginality. Finally, the recommended methodology is to work with a view to synergy and active inclusion. In this sense, the CAPACITyES project finds a backing in the mainstreaming policies promoted by EU, at least for the current programming period.

Some of the specific objectives of this POR (Regional Operational Plan, ROP) are extremely in tune with the operational choices proposed by the CAPACITyES project. The social fund aims, precisely in its specific actions, to combat poverty and social exclusion by focusing on social innovation practices, giving space to third sector subjects, understood as real "social managers" of public housing. A third sector which, just as envisaged in the project promoted by the Municipality of Bergamo, is a valid support of public entities through a continuous presence in the field, and which is able to promote the processes of social inclusion of new residents, enhancing their personal skills, and strengthening the neighbourly relations.

The programming for 2021-2027 is still ongoing, but in general terms, valid as a principle for all European regions:

- at least 25% of ESF funding should be allocated to measures that promote social inclusion and benefit those most in need;
- at least 2% of the ESF resources should be allocated to combat material deprivation;

In this sense, the CAPACITyES project has all the contextual elements related to EU policies to begin to open a dialogue in support of the innovative actions initiated through this experience of UIA funding.

Even the national context, based on operational programs to combat poverty: the PON Inclusion, co-financed by the European Social Fund, and the Operational Program FEAD, co-financed by the European Fund for Aid to the Most Deprived, aim to develop models of active inclusion such as those envisaged by the project CAPACITyES.

The perspective

It goes without saying that the development of this project is closely linked to the evolution of the COVID-induced pandemic. The impossibility of giving continuity to the meetings in person is inevitably causing some changes in the performance of the activities and their timing. In this project, the moments of participation are fundamental phases. They are key steps for the sustainability of the made choices and the related projects that will be implemented. It is worth remembering that the workshops with children could only be held in the summer, and that, with the start of the school year, these activities inevitably entered a stalemate. The children in this project are not only the target of a local policy, however innovative, which aims to strengthen the education and assistance system for less fortunate minors. In the conception of the CAPACITyES project there is an active role of children as generators of ideas and designers for the transformation of public spaces, those spaces they inhabit and in which they are forming as people. A project that includes children as a generation, all the schools in Bergamo are involved. Beyond the area-based approach that focus the actions on specific neighbourhoods, the

discourse of educational investment on children concerns the whole city in this project. This fundamental educational component of the project, which determines much of its originality, began to slow down in the autumn phase. Schools at this time of severe crisis have other priorities, they struggle to ensure continuity of ordinary teaching in a context that changes rules and behaviours within a few days. It is therefore difficult to involve children in the project with continuity. However, as also highlighted in the 2nd web article, the project partnership is reacting very well and has promptly found measures to move the project forward. These measures have proved very valid because:

- they managed to make the most of the work they managed to do in the summer with the children,
- they managed to give continuity to the dialogue with families through a careful and creative use of technologies to support communication.

Regarding the first point, the drawings and proposals already developed by children are currently elaborated and developed for the realization of the murals. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, these murals will constitute "Ariadne's thread" among the symbolic places of the local regenerative process: Following the children messages in public spaces to identify their contribution to the redevelopment of places. Professional artists are building on the ideas and sketches proposed by the children and are defining operational planning to begin to achieve the urban transformation goals set in the CAPACITYES project.

Open challenges for the Capacityes project

Dialogue with the Target Families

One open challenge in the CAPACITYES project is to keep the target families close to the development of the co-housing process. To live in cohousing is normally the result of a choice operated by the families. In this case the choice is operated by the MUA and the target families look at the cohousing as to an opportunity to get a good temporary shelter, but they are not completely aware that there is a lot to share in this kind of housing solution. We talk about poor families with multiple problems and deprivations, moreover, it is not to under evaluate the different cultural backgrounds of the involved family groups: what is normal behaviour for a specific cultural background can be not easy acceptable for another one. It is anyway to highlight the good will shown by all families to share common spaces, and to look for solutions that can fit the different cultural backgrounds. This is particularly evident when it is linked to recreational activities, or to find spaces for children to play together.



Meeting held in person with the target families in the summer outdoors in safe conditions.

[The first participatory co-design sessions with families that were able to be held in person](#) had a very positive response. The target families were enthusiastic about the projects and their participation was very active; The onset of the second wave of the pandemic has prevented meetings from being held in person. The project team did not stand still and immediately invented alternative ways to fill the lack of physical interaction until the

moment in which activities can be started again with the target families as protagonists.

The rethinking of the intervention to cope with the new health emergency was based on maintaining a dual nature of the action (virtual and real), individual contact with cultural mediators (which was always in person, therefore a real link for both families and the project partners), was useful for the partnership to know the progress of the situation of the [families involved in the project](#). On the other hand, the organization of a series of video calls helped families to understand the progress of the project in a technical and bureaucratic sense, but also to collaborate with the partnership through co-design meetings, thus keeping the creative side of the Project.

The feedback from the families involved is very positive. The families are very satisfied to know that the project has not stopped. For some of the selected households, the economic situation worsened during this pandemic period. In this sense, the work of mediators is fundamental as they allow families to be directed towards associations that can help them in a particularly difficult working and living situation, to ensure that their situation does not worsen further.

Being able to keep the families linked to the CAPACITYES project and also active and with a proactive spirit constitutes one of the most complex open challenges to manage in the project at this time. It is easy to understand how the pandemic has negatively affected family situations already affected by multiple deprivation. In this sense, the project partnership is working excellently in keeping this first group of families united and committed to the project.

Finally, attention was paid at this stage to activities aimed at facilitating the integration, in order to get a job, of unemployed family members, especially women. Most jobs require at least a middle school certificate. The idea behind the initiative is to understand the qualifications of women, support them in enrolling in training courses to get them to obtain the middle school diploma or put them in contact with institutions that can recognize the qualifications obtained abroad. For women without this level of education, middle school courses were made available to help them make up for school shortcomings.

The re-qualification and re-functionalization of the buildings

The regeneration process induced by the CAPACITYES project involves the redevelopment of two buildings, one for the experimentation of the co-housing path where the selected families can settle, and another building for the construction of the Hub for Kids. Both buildings require a profound re-contextualization and re-functionalization, but they also have all the characteristics to successfully fulfill their new roles.

These two buildings represent the tangible impact of the projects on the city fabric. At the same time, it is to consider all the side effects induced on the civic fabric by the introduction both of a residential function and the new services for the children in the hub. The refurbishment and the re-insertion of these vacant places into the "productive" tissue of the city is a delicate step that has to be done taking into consideration all the stakeholders playing a role at the scale of the selected neighbourhoods. In this case the challenge is structured around the opening of a dialogue with the local communities to make them owner of the transformative process linked to the UIA initiative.



The building to be refurbished in order to host the co-housing experience

With regard to the building to be used for co-housing services, the technical-economic feasibility documents have already been received from the MUA and the steps that will lead to the drafting of the final project are beginning to be defined. In addition, meetings were organized with the owners of the surroundings and with the technical offices of all the adjacent buildings, a dialogue began regarding what will be included in the building, how the design of the spaces and buildings will be managed and how it will be integrated with the needs of the complex in which the building is located (the other buildings of this complex are not currently used for residential purposes). This dialogue initiated by the project partnership allowed the designers to start thinking about a series of important issues, such as the location of the entrances, the parking lots, the organisation of the public spaces, the management of the project (both in the period of the UIA funding and after). In other words, all those details, facilities and amenities that determine the good result of a regenerative process on an urban scale.

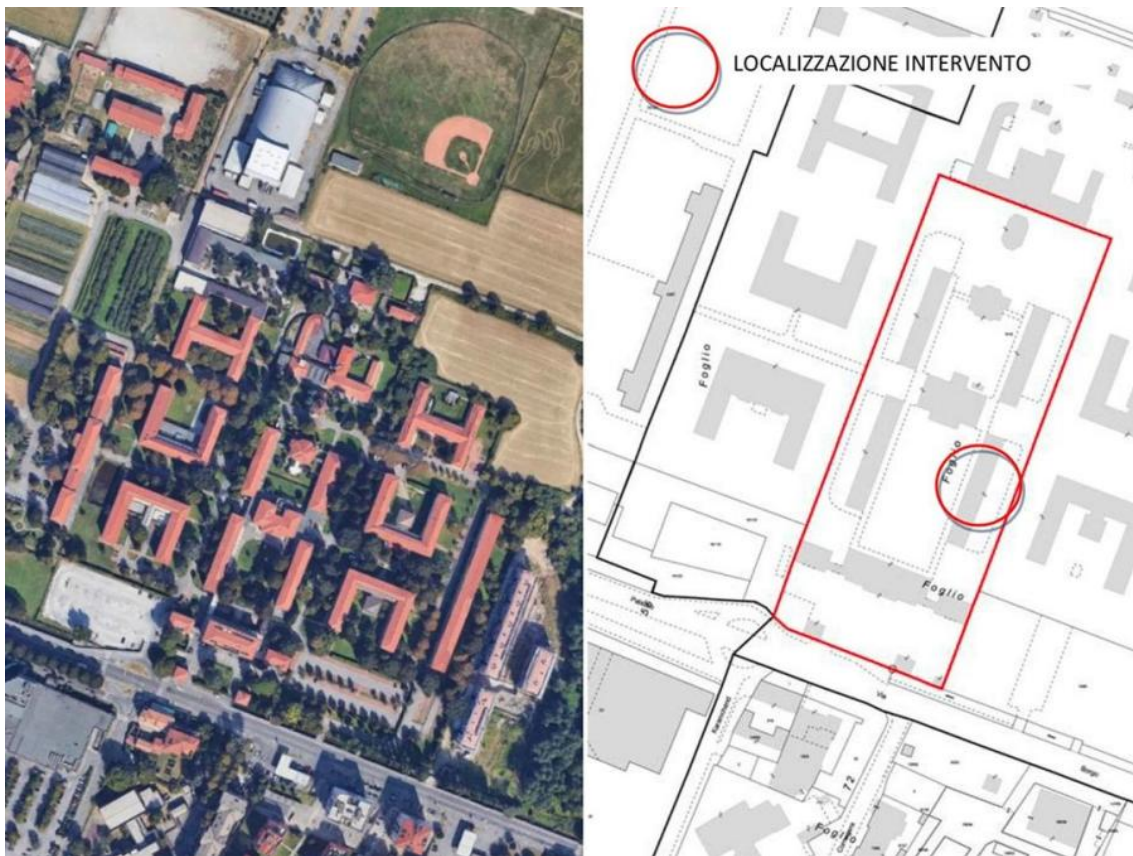


The abandoned farmhouse that will be renovated to host the Hub for Kids functions

As for the Hub for Kids, a nineteenth-century farmhouse will be renovated. A design team is working on the design of this structure. After a very limited first meeting, the designers made themselves available to meet also the partners of the CAPACITYES project most interested in the co-design of the structure, [as well as the stakeholders and entities dedicated to the themes of childhood and educational services](#). The CAPACITYES partnership is waiting for a first project draft to be shared in participatory planning meetings. The services to be placed in the hub will be divided according to the age groups that will be involved. In this second case, the challenges are more related to really provide the right services and solutions for the children (this hub will host functions and services for an age group ranging from 0 to 18 years) and to guarantee easy and safe accessibility to the Hub.

Contextualization at the neighbourhood scale

The inclusion of new functions related to the implementation of both the co-housing experiment and the creation of the Hub for Kids impacts on the neighbourhoods invested by the urban regeneration process initiated by the CAPACITYES project. This impact especially targets the current housing and services balances present at neighbourhood scale. The project includes a series of meetings with local residents' organizations and other forms of association to discuss it with all those stakeholders that play an active role in the neighbourhoods. This aspect of the project, currently, is still in a less developed state. This is not depending on political or managerial decision-making measures, but it is due to the fact that the current rules in force, determined by the state of emergency triggered by the pandemic, do not allow the organization of participatory meetings on a neighborhood scale.



The urban context of the Borgo Palazzo district in which the innovative experience of co-housing is located

The involvement of the residents has to be better structured at the beginning of this second year of the project. It is important to share with the local community the consequences of different nature (cultural, socio-economic, environmental) induced by the transformations produced by the process of urban regeneration. In fact, from the comparison with the local community, suggestions may emerge with which it is possible to improve the planned projects, but above all NIMBY effects can be avoided.



The urban context of Cascina Serassi where the Hub for Kids will be located

Sharing the CAPACITYES project at the level of the involved neighbourhoods is definitively a fundamental step to be organized and well-structured in the next months of the project. In this regard, it is essential to use all available

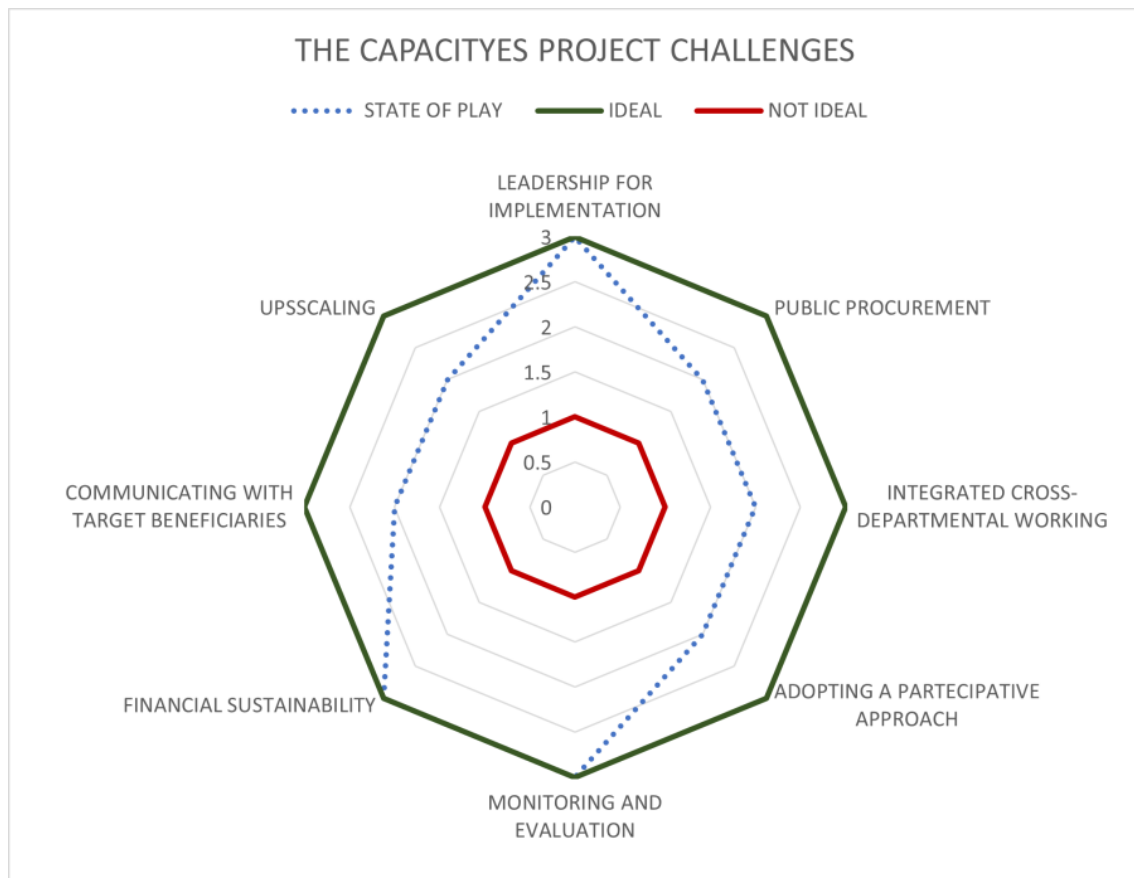
resources, including online resources that can be set in motion to make the meetings more interactive and reach the majority of interested actors. In any case, a transition solution is being implemented, in fact, the MUA is trying to involve all those key players at the local scale who may have interests in the regenerative actions and can therefore temporarily provide indications on key issues to consider at neighbourhood scale until it will be possible to implement a broader participatory planning process.

The matrix of challenges

The following matrix synthetically reports the key challenges faced in the CAPACITYES project.

CHALLENGE	LEVEL OF RISK	DESCRIPTION
1. Leadership for implementation	LOW	The municipality of Bergamo, in its role as MUA, has so far proved to hold the project firmly in hand. The presence of a well-trained team dedicated to the project is a guarantee of continuous attention to the work plan and its implementation in the manner and on schedule. The crisis situations induced by the pandemic have also demonstrated the ability of the MUA to propose alternative solutions and to be able to resist and respond to unexpected changes.
2. Public procurement	MEDIUM	Some important tasks, such as that of identifying the company that will be responsible for redeveloping the building dedicated to cohousing, have already been assigned. The formal procedures to redevelop the building in which the Hub for Kids will take place are also proceeding well. The administrative machinery of the municipality of Bergamo is well calibrated on public procurement, at this time there are no obvious problems in the management of these administrative aspects.
3. Integrated cross-departmental working	MEDIUM	Many meetings that could strengthen horizontal integration work have been postponed or held online due to pandemic-induced restrictions. Despite these impediments, there is a good dialogue between the different sectors involved in the project. Good dialogue between management, technical directors in charge of the re-design of the structures and the partners who communicate with the target groups. The attitude of the construction company that will have to carry out the physical restructuring works is also good.
4. Adopting a participative approach	MEDIUM	There is a strong will on the part of the project partnership to keep the level of participation high using all the means offered by technology to overcome the impossibility of in-person meetings, but some aspects of the participatory processes are suffering the backlash linked to the impact of the restrictions imposed from the pandemic. In particular, the aspect linked to the relationship between new realised projects and the impact on the residents in the neighbourhoods who will receive new functions and a change in the civic and city fabric. There are still unresolved criticisms on this point.
5. Monitoring and evaluation	LOW	The CAPACITYES project is very attentive to the monitoring path of the ongoing actions. The monitoring tables of the second period by the MUA have been completed and sent to the experts to be re-elaborated in an integrated document that will help the compilation of the first report. This aspect of the project is well organized and does not present any critical issues at present.
6. Financial Sustainability	LOW	The territorial, policy and also political context is very favourable at the moment to the initiatives carried out by the CAPACITYES project. It is realistic to think at this moment that the project can open many development paths that can intercept both additional local funds and those linked to EU mainstreaming policies (structural funds linked to EU cohesion policies). The project can build a lot on the experiences being tested thanks to UIA funding and become a benchmark both at local (regional and national), but also at European level.
7. Communicating with target beneficiaries	MEDIUM	The dialogue with the target beneficiaries was carried out by all possible means. During the summer, in-person safety workshops were held both with the target families included in the cohousing program, and with the children involved in the participatory process for the regeneration of the quarters and the creation of the Hub for Kids. It is worth highlighting the ability of the MUA to change strategy in order to stay in contact with the beneficiaries whenever new restrictions imposed by the pandemic were faced. Excellent use of technology to make up for not being able to meet in person, but also great help offered by cultural mediators.

8. Upscaling	MED IU M	The focus actions of the CAPACITYES PROJECT have a relevant potential of being replicated. Implementation and communication activities are in progress such as the dialogue with overlaid governance tiers. Regeneration activities based on co-housing experimentations and children feedback on participatory planning have great potential to locally rooting successful projects at neighbourhood scale. It is too early to identify the set of characteristics of this challenge in the present phase of the CAPACITYES project. It will depend on the capacity to develop more in depth the participatory planning process both in terms of horizontal and vertical governance.
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State of play of the challenges

municipality an urban district having corporate status and powers of self-governmentMore (Definitions, Synonyms, Translation)

Conclusions

The first year of the project highlighted the strong commitment by the MUA and the rest of the partnership towards the innovative actions promoted by the CAPACITYES project.

It is a project that from the very beginning has highlighted its resilient design feature. The management team is coping well with the restrictions due to the current health situation. In this regard, the demonstrated ability to want and know how to use all available resources, including online resources, is considerable. The project has worked to make the meetings with the target beneficiaries (families in financial difficulty looking for a first social home and children in co-design and co-creation processes) very interactive. Several positive signs have so far characterized the progress of this project:

- The dialogue with the target families was well structured from the very beginning, it is important to maintain continuity, to keep the dialogue alive until the moment in which workshops and meetings in person can be held again.
- The communication of the actions taken was always punctual and well calibrated.
- Good progress overall on all implementation WPs.

It is crucial that this participatory attitude is maintained, which is structuring a project built around different territorial actors. These stakeholders must continue to be included, despite all the difficulties experienced, and prevent the project from getting lost in strictly technical or bureaucratic aspects.

Good results also achieved through the work on art installations, in this sense the capitalization made on the work done with children in person in the summer is truly excellent.

In this second year, the CAPACITYES project will have to try above all to reach those local actors who have been

less involved and aim to reinsert with determination all those aspects of planning and creation that involve children, as they largely determine the innovative aspects embedded in this innovative action.

Communication and social channels

Follow the transformations of the project in real time on the dedicated website <https://www.capacityes.it/>) and on the following social channels:

FACEBOOK: <https://www.facebook.com/capacityesbergamo/>

TWITTER: <https://twitter.com/CapacityesBG>

INSTAGRAM: <https://www.instagram.com/capacityesbergamo/?hl=en>

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