

JOURNAL

PROJECT

WISH MI - Wellbeing Integrated System of Milan

📍 Milan, Italy

TOPIC

Urban poverty

EDIT 28 JUNE 2022
BY EDDY ADAMS

Preparing to land: WISH-MI about to go live

See on UIA website



The second WISH-MI journal presents the state of play as the project prepares to go live. It draws upon material gathered during the expert visit to Milan and work with project partners in May 2022. The journal focuses on progress on the establishment of the community hubs and the digital platform. It also provides a snapshot of partners' assessment of the project so far, in relation to the 7 UIA challenges.

Executive Summary

WISH-MI is focused on improving the wellbeing of all children and young people in Milan. The concept of wellbeing comprises 5 domains and the project aims to transform the way the City of Milan engages with young people, and the service providers who work with them. WISH-MI aims to transform this set of relationships, facilitating service co-design between the key stakeholders. It also plans to empower children, young people and their carers to select and access the services they prioritise. The introduction of a voucher system will support this, enabling service-users to access facilities in two ways: physically through a network of community-based hubs and online via a digital platform that will operate as a marketplace.

The development of these WISH-MI components are now well advanced. Four of the physical hubs have been identified and NGOs have been appointed to manage each of them. The digital platform has been designed and the city is now onboarding service providers who will populate it. The launch of the voucher system, which operates a sliding scale to support those on lowest incomes, has met with an enthusiastic response with over 20,000 requests received when the offer closed in early June. WISH-MI is about to go live and after the long delays caused by the pandemic, and the late summer 2022 will therefore be a key moment for the initiative.

The pandemic also prevented an expert visit until May 2022. This journal draws upon the information gathered

over these two days, including the review of the UIA 7 innovation challenges conducted with the WISH-MI partners.

Project Update

Spring is the time of new beginnings. For WISH-MI the spring of 2022 has felt like a rebirth after the false starts and frustrations of these long pandemic months. Now, suddenly, things are moving. Not yet fast enough, but a momentum is building which provides confidence as this ambitious experiment goes live. Finally, there will be things to see on the ground, tangible evidence of progress, and an emerging platform that will provide services and reshape the relationship between the city of Milan, its young people and their families and carers.

WISHMI's overall objective is to improve the wellbeing of Milan's young people. Well-being has been defined across 5 pillars (Education +, Culture, Sport, Health and STEM - Science, Technology and Maths) as we described in the first journal. Milan's approach classifies children and young people into three age categories (0-6; 6-14; 15-18) to facilitate the grouping of services and facilities. The most visible aspects of the project are a digital platform where young people can access support and facilities using a voucher system and a network of physical hubs where facilities and youth services will be collocated.

An important goal is to raise levels of participation and use of services across the WISH-MI well-being portfolio, especially amongst the city's most disadvantaged young people. Alongside this, Milan aims to re-engineer its relationship with young people and their carers. This means transforming them from passive and reactive service users, to engaged agents assuming a more active role in the co-design and development of services.

This journal draws upon material generated with the project partners during an expert visit that took place in May 2022. This has been supplemented by online meetings with key WISH-MI stakeholders.



Implementing the physical hubs

WISH-MI will establish 7 physical service hubs. As we discussed in a [recent article](#), these will be established across a mix of city neighbourhoods. The plan is to have local third sector organisations host and manage these community-based spaces. Through them, and their established networks, WISH-MI can optimise the potential of their trusted local connections.

Through the spring of 2022 a call for tenders to host the first four of these hubs was issued by the City of Milan, This was successful and the first wave of host organisations has been identified for the neighbourhoods of Padova-Loreto, Comasina-Bruzzano, Baggio and Spaventa).the procurement procedure to contract the remaining three hub hosts (in Ponte Lambro, Acquabella and Spaventa) is now under way.

As the most visible elements of the WISH-MI project, these hubs are vital to the success of the overall approach. Therefore these host organisations assume a pivotal role, particularly in these early days as the concept finds its feet. Getting the selection right has therefore been an important priority for the City of Milan and its partners in the early months of 2022.

The hosts will play an important facilitation role in the co-design of each hub that is currently underway. They will work in close partnership with WISH-MI partners such as Action Aid, ABCittà and Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano which lead the project's participation activities. They will also provide a bridge between the neighbourhood and city- wide levels, linking with staff across different municipal departments and with NGOs across the city. The initial wave of hubs is expected to open in late summer 2022.

Recruiting local contractors with the right profile has been a challenge for the City of Milan's procurement team. As Emanuela Piccolo, the WISH-MI project manager explained:

"We were looking for a special combination of things. First, NGOs located in the neighbourhoods with a good reputation within the local community. Second, those organisations had to have a track record in service co-design and community participation. Third, they had to be robust and have strong governance structures. That's a big ask, but we're optimistic about the agencies we have selected."

The Digital Platform

To complement these physical hubs, young people, together with families and carers, will be able to access online services via a new digital platform. This platform is central to the city's plans to create a marketplace for services and facilities aimed at young people and their families. The ability to see, browse and select their own services is in marked contrast to the established model where the municipality decided who had access to what.

The platform is therefore the foundation for the proposed service transformation where young people and their carers will be more empowered. This means making their own decisions about the facilities they access as well as being directly involved in their co-design. At the heart of this is also an aspiration to ensure that all young people and their carers are aware of their entitlement to services and have the ability to access them. This is a major shift for a city like Milan as the one-stop shop model enabled by the digital space moves away from the fragmented departmental offer that is the norm in Milan and most cities.

There are three main aspects to this digital platform work that is in the final stages of development. First, the creation of the platform itself, the digital framework that will provide the shop window and marketplace connecting users and services. Second, populating the framework with the available services, a considerable undertaking in a metropolitan city of Milan's scale. Third, the development of a [voucher system](#) designed to enable users to identify and select the services they want. Children and families on the lowest incomes will be eligible for the highest value vouchers. The objective here is to raise awareness of entitlement and stimulate service take up from the city's most marginalised and disadvantaged communities.

The Onboarding of service providers to the platform is a massive task. It is expected that something like 100 of them will have a presence on the platform by the time it goes live. This work has been hampered by the pandemic and its after effects, and work continues to identify and recruit service providers through dedicated outreach and engagement activity. Speaking with Franca Locati, who coordinates the project communication for the municipality, several lessons have already been drawn from this aspect of the project:

"We are now focusing our efforts on communication and on devising effective strategies to bring on board the greatest numbers of the most outstanding service providers across Milan. We must be able to convey the importance of being part of the city's rising wellbeing community"

On a more positive note, the call for digital vouchers has met with an enormous response. By the time the call closed on 7th June more than 20,000 requests had been received. Each of the vouchers will have an assumed value of between €100 and €400 depending on the household level of income. It is expected that the value of services linked to this demand will be in the region of €2 million.

The processing of applications will take place through June and July, meaning that families will be able to draw down services from the middle of that month. Ensuring that providers are able to meet this demand when it starts is now an important focal point for the project. The credibility of the project is closely tied to the initial wave of user experience. Word of mouth within the first wave of communities will be a key factor in helping - or hindering - take up and use of the platform.

Challenges

The expert visit in April 2022 provided a first opportunity for the expert to meet face to face with local partners. The two days provided an opportunity to review progress to date and to discuss the overall project, as well as next steps, with the WISH-MI team. The organisations which contributed to these exchanges were as follows:

- City of Milan
- Politecnico di Milano
- Catholic University of Milan
- Action Aid
- ABCittà

The expert visit was also a useful moment to explore partners' thoughts in relation to the UIA innovation challenges. These were established at the start of the initiative and have been applied to each of the 86 innovation projects funded in this programming period. During an interactive session partners discussed their assessment of the project against each of the seven challenges.



The diagram at the end of this section provides an average score across each of the 7 challenges. Participants were asked to score the project's current position in relation to each challenge on a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 is the top score.

Challenge 1: Leadership

Leadership is routinely identified as a key component of effective innovation projects. Here, project stakeholders were asked to consider this challenge from two aspects. First, the high level strategic leadership provided by the City of Milan. Second, the day to day leadership and management of the project.

The average score for this challenge was 3. On the one hand, the City of Milan was acknowledged for its level of ambition and the way in which senior Directors within the city are championing and driving the project. On the other hand, key changes in management personnel and limited capacity within the city authority had slowed progress and limited the scope for deeper collaboration with partners.

The expert view: The WISH-MI project represents a very new way of working for the city authority. Firstly, as we discuss below, it is predicated on effective cross-departmental collaboration, which is not the established municipal culture. Secondly, WISH-MI has a distributed structure that requires the City Authority to delegate control to other city agencies, particularly in the voluntary sector.

There is strong high level support within City of Milan to support this change agenda. Without this, WISH-MI cannot succeed. However, the must be translated into practical leadership on the ground, which requires capacity and resources. Partly due to the pandemic, this has proven to be a pressure point for the city authority.

Going forward, more focus is required here. Building new working relationships and implementing these types of service changes requires intensive and regular input from skilled and dedicated senior staff, properly resourced and supported.

Challenge 2: Public Procurement

Public procurement also scored a 3 with partners, overall, although a few were less generous in their assessment. There has been some frustration at the length of time it has taken the city authority to prepare and launch the calls relating to key aspects of the project. Again, this has been partly due to the pandemic but the pressure on key staff resources has also been a factor. The complexity of the calls themselves, for example relating to the procurement of NGOs to manage the local hubs, has been an additional factor.

The expert view: At various points in the past months, bottlenecks in the procurement process have threatened to derail the project. Timescales which were already tight due to covid-related delays, were exacerbated by systemic challenges that seem, for the moment, to be resolved. In fact, most of the key contracts have either now been assigned or are out to tender, so this pressure point should have passed.

Challenge 3: Cross Departmental working

Partners scored the project with an average of 4, suggesting a high degree of satisfaction at this stage. The City of Milan has a well established departmental culture which is highly efficient, aligned to agreed targets and budgets. This, however, can be an inhibiting factor where a transversal approach across departmental silos is required. WISH-MI is such a project, requiring collaboration across health, recreation, culture and education.

The Expert view: Partners acknowledge the scale of ambition reflected in WISH-MI, in relation to cross-departmental collaboration. The active involvement in the project steering group of senior Directors across departments (Welfare and Health, Education, Work, Youth and Sport, International Relations and the Mayor's Cabinet) represents a major step forward, and there is some excitement of the precedent this might create for the entire municipal culture within the city.

Challenge 4: The participative approach

Direct engagement with citizens - particularly with families and children - is at the heart of the WISH-MI concept. The goal is to design and establish co-design processes with these target groups which, as we have already noted, would reframe the relationship between the city authority and its residents.

This was another challenge where partners scored themselves at 3. All agreed that this strand of WISH-MI activity has progressed less slowly than expected. The pandemic was acknowledged as being the key factor behind this. Through the initial two years of the projects there was limited scope to directly engage in the target neighbourhoods. Although the project conducted micro-outreach activity during this period, it was on a modest scale, complemented by online activity which again had its limitations.

There is now a window to make up for lost time and partners are keen to push ahead with this in the coming months.

The Expert view: This is another challenge where partners, despite frustrations and modest progress, continue to give the benefit of the doubt to the project on the basis that the coming six to nine months will provide a defining moment. The partners responsible for this work package, alongside the local NGOs will have a key role to play.

Challenge 5: Monitoring and Evaluation

Progress on the monitoring and evaluation of WISH-MI has been rather slow to get off the ground. The main reasons for this have been pressure on City of Milan staff time and in particular the procedural issues related to procuring the services of an independent evaluator. As a result, partners scored this challenge at level 2, and apart from City of Milan staff, they felt rather distant from this work.

The monitoring and evaluation contract will be awarded in the upcoming weeks so there should now be tangible

progress in the near future, combined with increased levels of awareness amongst partners.

The Expert view: Although it is reassuring to hear that the contract has been let, the Monitoring and Evaluation of the project remains a significant challenge. WISH-MI is a complex systemic experiment which presents its own distinctive challenges to the evaluators. Although measuring participation should be relatively easy, the more important work of calibrating impact and lasting change will require real technical acumen - and the establishment of realistic available indicators.

At this stage this UIA challenge carries a red flag.

Challenge 6: Communication with target beneficiaries

This challenge split our partnership group. While around half scored 3 and 4, the other half of the team awarded 1s and 2s. Those who were more positive referred to the intensive work that has been undertaken to design and develop the [visual identity](#). Those with a less positive perspective shared their frustration at the slow rate of progress and stated that outside the small group of people directly involved with WISH-MI, its profile remains low. Certainly, there was little or no public awareness, although this may have changed in the wake of the promotion of the vouchers which, as we have seen, generated a good response.

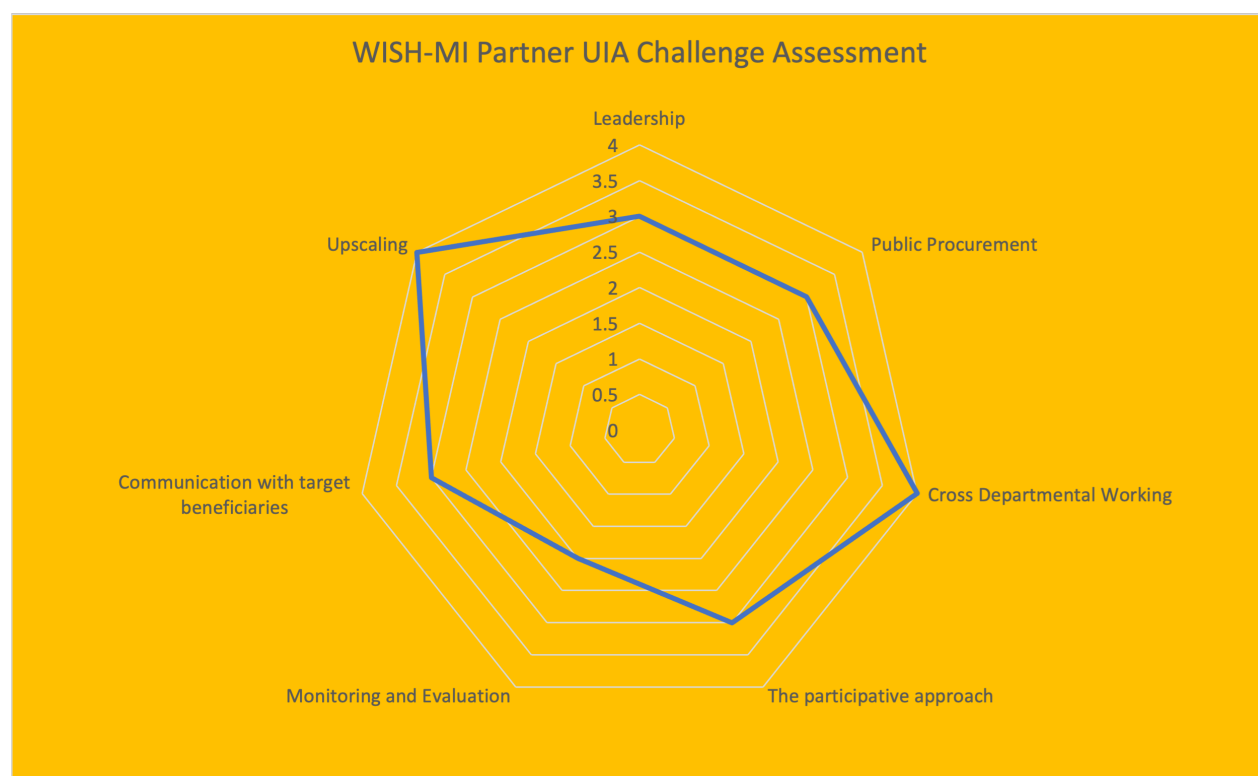
The fact that the project has no social media identity was also identified as a weakness relating to the need for a clear project narrative and two-way communication channel with the public.

The expert view: Timing is a key factor in effective communication. It is true that the project has lacked a strong co-ordinated communications campaign to date. However, there has been limited progress and content to share until now. Also, such campaigns need to evolve and peak at the right moment, with the risk that 'going too early' will dilute interest when the key moment arrives and the project is fully up and running.

Challenge 7: Upscaling

Partners were more positive and optimistic around the challenge of upscaling. In the WISH-MI case, partners reflected on the potential to extend the project beyond its initial territorial scale. As we have noted, the plan is to roll out 7 local hubs in a two-stage process. There is significant interest - alongside hope - that the concept can be scaled up across the entire city in future. This optimism is reflected in the partners' score, which averaged a 4.

The Expert view: There is real potential to scale up this neighbourhood hub satellite model to a greater level in Milan, provided the initial pilot is successful. The digital framework will extend the reach of WISH-MI beyond those initial 7 neighbourhoods from once it is operational. This means that the brand and functionality of the project should already be familiar to citizens across the city, which might provide momentum behind any future plans to extend.



Lessons Learned

Several lessons are captured in the section focused on the UIA challenges. Beyond these, a number of general take-aways were evident from the expert visit and the exchange with WISH-MI partners in May. Briefly, these were that:

- Co-design requires additional time and resources. Culture change on this scale doesn't happen overnight and the pandemic has added an additional layer of complexity. WISH-MI now has to accelerate to make up for lost time
- Trusted connections are being built - but they remain fragile and require close nurturing. Partners are fully committed to this new innovative model but ongoing commitment is required to maintain momentum.
- Communication is key - both internal and external. As WISH-MI goes public its profile must rise whilst the level of communication amongst partners needs to move to yet another level.

Conclusions

The summer of 2022 is the final phase of what can be seen as a prolonged planning and development period. This will be the space for final preparations, testing and content creation ahead of the opening of the initial neighbourhood hubs and the launch of the digital platform. The acid test for WISH-MI is therefore fast approaching.

Another expert visit is scheduled for the autumn which will offer a chance to reconnect with partners and to report on the next progress steps.

Urban poverty

See on UIA website

