

JOURNAL

PROJECT

CAPACITYES - Children
Against Poverty Awake
the CITY Education
System

📍 Bergamo, Italy

TOPIC

Urban poverty

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Journal 3 - The cohousing experience in Borgo Palazzo: Ready to go!

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The Capacities project revolves around three central initiatives that reflect the regenerative path in Bergamo, with a particular focus on the Borgo Palazzo area. These initiatives include: 1) The redevelopment of the hospital pavilion, 2) The creation of the Hub4Kids, 3) The functional, community and spatial reconnection brought about by the mural project.

Each of these three actions reinforces the three strong identities of the Capacities project: tackling housing poverty, promoting an inclusive and intergenerational process to address urban poverty, and fostering inclusion through creativity.

In this third Journal, we focus on the co-housing experience set to launch in the former hospital pavilion.

Executive summary

Urban poverty has become one of the most pressing issue 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 immune to 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 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 labour 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-communication.

The project aims to achieve the following results:

- Sustainable temporary cohousing 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
- ISMU - Foundation for Initiatives and Studies on multi ethnicity - private organisation
- CSI - Italian Sporting Center of Bergamo - private organisation
- PURELAB - private enterprise

The reasons for locating the cohousing experience in Borgo Palazzo

With the CAPACITYES project the city of Bergamo addresses the issue of urban poverty, specifically considering the lack of housing supply, educational poverty of children and spatial segregation. The solution is an integrated approach focusing on the child-centred perspective with a temporary cohousing facility for families with juveniles and a new children's centre.

The project attempts to achieve its objectives by:

1. Implementing an integrated and complex strategy acting on several thematic levels (inclusion, participation, fight against urban poverty, temporary uses, involvement of children and artists),
2. Activating several redevelopment zones (the Borgo Palazzo pavilion, Cascina Serassi, the streets, or rather some of the walls, of Borgo Palazzo),
3. Bringing together the various local actors in a dialogue with local institutions, but also with the superordinate ones, defining a rich and interactive governance scheme, thus generating not only financial sustainability, but also socio-cultural and environmental sustainability.

In this third Journal, we focus on the redevelopment of the former hospital pavilion, a building abandoned for years, which will constitute the first nucleus of a cohousing experience for families in critical conditions and extreme poverty. This project, which addresses the housing problem of the poorest classes, is located within an early twentieth-century structure that began as a centre for health services, consisting of several buildings. European cities contain many types of neighbourhoods that resemble the hospital structure located in Borgo Palazzo. Structures from the early 20th century, with large pavilions that either still cover the same functions, sometimes in regenerated buildings, others in buildings 'made resilient' by the many repairs made over the years to make them acceptable, or abandoned, as was the case with this regenerated building in Bergamo. The Municipality of Bergamo is looking at these types of buildings and the Borgo Palazzo district with a view to initiating an urban regeneration process that takes into account the value of re-use and re-functionalisation. The co-housing action begun in Borgo Palazzo aims to implement a new functional mixite that can enrich the way Bergamo's city and civic fabric functions. The Borgo Palazzo neighbourhood is the most populous in the city and one of the most multi-ethnic (9.7% of residents come from Africa, Asia, Central and South America), and, together with Boccaleone and Celadina, is the focus of the CAPACITYES project. Borgo Palazzo is at the centre of a regeneration process involving [the settlement, green and infrastructure system](#). This process, supported by the actions launched by the CAPACITYES project, is an opportunity for families, children and the entire community. Indeed, the aim is to experiment with innovative solutions for urban and social regeneration within the city. Not a simple recovery of buildings and areas, but a path to create and strengthen relationships, social inclusion, new perspectives for the city that is changing and sowing the seeds of the city to come. Important interventions, in a district that alone accounts for about 8% of Bergamo's population, with about 5,000 households. It is a regenerative process that seeks to respond to the pressing needs of urban poverty by bringing into play not only a physical heritage (abandoned areas or buildings), but also knowledge and practices ([think of the participatory process implemented for CAPACITYES](#)), a political message of creating a local society that aims to integrate and

include those in difficulty through an approach that does not only seek to solve the immediate problem (having a house), and finally initiate a process of training and insertion into the world of work and local socio-cultural contexts. Working on abandonment through regenerative processes brings new life to European cities, but above all introduces the value of 'reuse'. A value that keeps cities compact and makes them adaptable to new socio-cultural and economic contexts, a degree of flexibility that increases both local resilience and promotes forms of sustainable development. Over the years different functions have developed in this structure, each building has had, or still has, its own history. The building in which the cohousing experience will soon begin was in a state of neglect; for years it was a women's hospital dealing with and treating mental illness.

The redevelopment of the building also becomes a driver for a regeneration process involving the entire Borgo Palazzo area. The Borgo Palazzo neighborhood has many abandoned commercial and industrial buildings that could be reconverted into spaces to host craft workshops, social functions such as neighborhood housing and social housing. The same area, where the pavilion is located, has hosted functions related to health care for years, but it could undergo a functional reconversion towards a model that contemplates a mix of functions. In this sense, the CAPACITyES project is a catalyst for a regenerative process that goes beyond its punctual interventions and defines a broader context in which to found new urban regeneration actions. The building will house 12 family dwellings with a series of shared spaces - kitchen and operating dining room, multifunctional meeting room, laundry room, bricolage room - and urban gardens outside.

The initial intention was to house, from summer 2022, families with children, who find it difficult to remain in the private housing market. These families will be installed in the building, but the project will formally start in early 2023. In fact, this period we are living through, characterised by [the 3Cs \(Covid, Conflict, Crisis\), has done nothing but cause delays in construction due to non-availability of material and inflation processes.](#)

Families will soon be the protagonists of an innovative collaborative living project, flanked by training courses that will enable them to obtain skills that can be used in socialising, cohousing and on the labour market.





The participatory process held in Bergamo with the target families, despite the period still related to the COVID pandemic (Summer 2020).

Localising the experience in this building means not only providing an answer to a pressing and urgent demand for housing, but also reactivating a strategic area of the city of Bergamo through temporary uses linked to training, job placement and inclusion. The regeneration of this district is based on a hybrid community, multicultural and attentive to intergenerational dialogue. [Cohousing not only as a shelter, but as a generator of a new sustainable community that will substantiate the future steps of the regenerative process of the Borgo Palazzo area.](#)

What obstacles were faced in regenerating the Borgo Palazzo hospital pavilion

[The Municipality of Bergamo, as leader and proposer of the project, and the CAPACityES partnership](#) faced different and various issues. Recently [on February the 4th](#), the families were able to move into the upgraded building prepared for cohousing. Obviously, this is to be regarded as very good news, but at the same time it opens the field to new challenges to be faced, which at this stage are somewhat expected, but not perfectly configurable in terms of the details, timing and how they will arise. The ten families, selected in February 2020, have come to the end of [a journey that did not only involve finding a housing solution](#) but also a process of training and integration into the social, cultural and productive context of the neighbourhood, and more generally into the everyday life of the city of Bergamo. The families are thrilled to finally take possession of their new homes, especially after dealing with various pandemic-induced problems such as increased prices and lack of materials on the market, which caused some stress and strain on the partnership-beneficiary dialogue. These moments were always well managed by the Main Urban Authority, which never let its guard down and managed [any externalities](#) promptly and in a coordinated manner with the partners.



Co-housing, it's on: CAPACITYES families are moving into the new flats built in the former women's observatory in via Borgo Palazzo.

The completion of the 'physical' construction site, which included the redevelopment of the former hospital pavilion, marks the beginning of what might be the most crucial phase of CAPACITYES: establishing and operating the 'human' construction site to achieve positive results. This human construction site is characterised by a rich diversity. The real challenge of the CAPACITYES project, in fact, is to work together, to harmonise differences, [thanks to forms of active participation and with the help of neighbourhood social networks, in order to foster the involvement of citizens, and especially the neighbourhood, and improve social cohesion.](#) This experiment in cohousing is the end result of a lengthy co-design process during which the points of view of the children and their families were fundamental. It is worth noting that the space, where the ten families will reside, was developed based their needs, giving it a unique and personalized touch.



The photo [promoting the initiative 'Solidarity Neighbours'](#) who will share the journey with the families living in the regenerated pavilion

Getting to this point has undoubtedly meant running an obstacle course, many of which have been compounded by the fact that the degree [of unpredictability of externalities](#) has been very high over the past three years. Each new obstacle has provoked and configured additional challenges. Let us focus on the challenges that have arisen since the beginning of the rehabilitation process of this hospital pavilion in Borgo Palazzo, which had been in a state of neglect for years.

For the sake of simplicity, the challenges and the obstacles to their resolution can be grouped into the following typology:

- Challenges **related to ensuring respect for equal opportunities and fair choices** (e.g. determining the selection of families to participate in this innovative housing experiment).
- Challenges related to the relational context present in the Borgo Palazzo neighbourhood, but also in the neighbouring areas, thus linked to a **fair involvement of stakeholders and local communities**.
- **Technical-participative challenges:** cohousing is not a conventional form of housing, traditional top-down design techniques cannot be applied in these cases.
- Challenges related to the **maintenance and activities to be carried out in the common spaces, but also related to the financial sustainability** of the building once it is fully operational, hence management challenges.
- Challenges related to **the spatial contextualisation of this project**, around the building, in the Borgo Palazzo structure, which was created as a hospital or health-oriented service centre, there are other buildings that do not have residential functions.



The pavilion in 2020, during the redevelopment in 2022 and at the time of the inauguration

Challenge table-level of risk

Challenge

Observation

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Leadership for implementation

Challenge level



Undoubtedly, in these years of CAPACITyES, the MUA has shown that it knows how to manage project resources wisely and how to make the most of them, but above all, that it always monitors the different paths related to the objectives to be achieved. Furthermore, the dialogue with project partners and stakeholders interested in the project was always kept alive through ad hoc events and initiatives. The added value of this experience was in knowing how to manage the many unforeseeable externalities, from the pandemic to the effects of inflation linked to the consequences of the war in Ukraine. In this sense, the entire partnership was always able to find alternatives to emergency situations, even if this meant extending the project's timeframe.

Public procurement

Challenge level



Two projects are practically completed, the third in the pipeline. No particular problems have arisen with any public procurement. The only thing is that it has to be said that the MUA has moved in the realm of the established and known, no process innovations have been attempted in the way of writing, proposing and managing public procurements, however, an effective approach to managing procurements has certainly been implemented. A relevant point: the CAPACITyES tenders were the first to be held 'online': in fact, the opening of the economic bids had to take place in public session. This practice is not usual in the Italian context, and has constituted a relevant moment of innovation in public procedures, which should be preserved even outside emergency moments. However, the tenders took place between March and April 2020, so the public session was unimaginable due to COVID, so a system had to be re-imagined that would allow citizens to participate and thus safeguard the principles of transparency and publicity. To do this, the session was of course transformed into an online call, and today this seems obvious, but it took a lot of effort on the part of the municipality, which was not equipped and had to study the legislative, informed security and technical dictates.

Integrated cross-departmental working

Challenge level



From this point of view, there is room for improvement, but undoubtedly in the case of the urban regeneration initiated through the CAPACITyES project, one can say that one can find many elements that characterise a place-based approach. It will have to be seen in the future how the actors of vertical governance will be able to interact with the concrete results produced by this experience and whether the dialogue between the MUA and the superordinate levels of governance will be able to give continuity and sustainability to this innovative pathway and bring this experience into contact with the mainstreaming funds of the EU social cohesion policies. In CAPACITyES the aspect of horizontal governance was also well developed, both in terms of having had a transversal dialogue between the different competences of the local partners, through the different participative moments, but also in the interdepartmental collaboration that took place in the projects. In fact, they had to hold together the design indications that came from the target groups, children and families in primis, the technical design by the architects, the services developed by the associations, and the timing of the calls for proposals coordinated by the MUA. The dialogue between different sectors of the municipality was a key element in achieving the expected results of the CAPACITyES project.

Adopting a participative approach

Challenge level ●

There has been 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 during the pandemic phase and immediately in person when it was possible again. Clearly, there was a transition phase in order to re-establish real and in-person participation in the neighbourhood with the local stakeholders, but there is no doubt that the resumption of this dialogue through conventional means gave considerable creative impetus to the ongoing processes and helped to better identify and select the problems and, consequently, to prioritise even solutions with a high degree of sustainability, as they were locally rooted in a neighbourhood-scale process. Both the families, in the case of the cohousing project, and the children, in the case of the Hub4Kids project, were mobilised even at times when it was difficult to operate in person, but the project could not progress differently. Families were convened in open, safe spaces to define the first steps and create a sense of community, they were interviewed to understand their housing needs in the face of cultural diversity. When the opportunities for in-person meetings were reopened, problem identification activities were alternated with capacity building activities, i.e. learning trades and acquiring knowledge to be independent in the local productive and social context. The children took part in creative workshops, mainly drawing and painting, which in the first phase helped them to define the design of the murals, while in the second phase their participation helped them to determine how to redevelop the building for the Hub4Kids and to understand which functions to consider.

Monitoring and evaluation

Challenge level ●

The CAPACITYES project included an in itinere monitoring carried out by the MUA together with local scale stakeholders and project partners. This monitoring was carried out together with the stakeholders of the local community, so it helped, step by step, to decide what was best prioritised in the CAPACITYES key projects. An active monitoring that allowed in real time to see if certain solutions could work or had to be reshaped, in this way, the monitoring process was also a way of learning by doing. Through this participative monitoring, partners and stakeholders had the opportunity to discuss both the questions to be prioritised, when they referred to the needs of the local communities and when they represented the needs of the projects. The comparison on indicators was more a direct confrontation between the MUA and the partner in charge of carrying out the monitoring. The projects, both those that are practically completed or inaugurated, as well as there Hub4Kids, which is in the process of being arrived at and handed over, were discussed step by step, from the design phases to implementation. Above all, there is a clear idea of the activities to be carried out in the redeveloped spaces and project ideas on how to give continuity and financial stability to them. Finally, also from the point of view of the target users, this continuous monitoring has served, in the case of the cohousing, to keep the identified families united and close to the project. While, in the case of the HUB, to promote activities with children and adolescents even when it was realised that, due to the oft-mentioned externalities, there would be delays in the delivery of the planned spaces for them.



The financial sustainability of CAPACITyES will very much depend on the ability to open a proactive dialogue with the MUA's superordinate bodies that manage funds in mainstreaming social cohesion policies. However, as far as the cohousing project is concerned, a business model already exists at the local scale. In fact, hosted families contribute to the cost of utilities, in a perspective of financial education and have been trained to improve their competitive capacities on the local market: this is not a purely social assistance project, but an empowerment of the families themselves. Financial support, of a public nature, post-project, would allow a smoother transition of this experiment towards the rules that govern living in market economies. The next few months will be crucial to understand to what extent the training given to families is sufficient to make them completely independent in managing housing costs.

What responses were given to the main challenges encountered

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the challenges were of a various types, many of which were already anticipated at the preparation stage, others, as in the case of most urban regeneration pathways based on innovative and complex urban policies, emerged as externalities. The CAPACITyES project demonstrated early on the remarkable resilience of the project partnership, its ability to react quickly and to propose alternatives in response to changes.

In particular, the lead partner, the Main Urban Authority, always held the reins of the project in its hands and was always able to redirect it in response to changes. This capacity is, and has been so far, based on:

The presence of a reliable relational network, not only the project partners, but also the wider group of stakeholders revolving around the various initiatives.

- The existence of a valuable and **well-structured territorial capital**, both in the Municipality of Bergamo and in the areas of intervention is evident.
- The capacity of this network, of the various associations involved, of the technical Delivery Partners, who have always demonstrated that they have **the necessary knowledge to face challenges and propose solutions**, alternatives, ideas to overcome or circumvent the various obstacles.
- **The continuous dialogue** that the Main Urban Authority was able to maintain each and every problem that arose, never losing sight of the aspects that deviated from the planned path, but always being present to point out the responsibilities of the different roles with respect to tasks, target users, but also operational design aspects (especially in the technical design phase of the interventions).

These capacities, which include

- previous urban and territorial knowledge,
- economic and intellectual resources,
- the ability to maintain short networks at the local level, and
- the ability to project local problems into opportunities generated by long networks (national or international),

have resulted in two of the three projects forming the backbone of the CAPACITyES project being completed, while the third is currently being implemented. With a foundation in a well-established, horizontally-governed

actor context, this initiative effectively leverages the potential benefits of innovation. This context, its intrinsic structuring, but above all its ability to cooperate continuously, has made it possible not only to realise the objectives the project has set itself, but also to brilliantly overcome the obstacles posed by a decidedly not easy period. The ability to structure an open dialogue with local stakeholders was therefore a fundamental card in Bergamo to implement those ideas that would have had a more difficult life if implemented through ordinary programming paths; in this the UIA tool made the difference in opening up an alternative playing field for the partners and actors involved.



Local newspapers highlight the inauguration of the Cohousing project in Borgo Palazzo

We could group these capabilities into three concepts:

- **Careful management** of participatory processes, both neighbourhood and inter-institutional.
- **Continued focus** on project management and ongoing monitoring activities.
- **Openness towards sustainable development** based on the principle of local rooting, i.e. identifying problems and solutions at the neighbourhood scale, where they are realised in daily life, through the implementation of a permanent dialogue based on workshops and continuous support actions, both formal and informal to the final beneficiaries of the project, but even with all others involved local actors.

With these reflections, the second Journal of CAPACITIES concludes; the next issue will be dedicated to the implementation process of the Hub4Kids, which will be completed and made operational in the coming weeks.

Communication and social channels

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

WEBSITE: <https://www.capacities.it/>

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

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

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



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