

JOURNAL

PROJECT

WISH MI - Wellbeing
Integrated System of
Milan

📍 Milan, Italy

TOPIC

Urban poverty

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WISH-MI Journal #3

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This is the third WISH-MI journal and the first that has been produced since the full implementation of the project.

The journal provides a short description of WISH-MI, an update on recent developments and an analysis of the project's experience relating to the 7 UIA innovation challenges. This draws upon material generated by the partnership during a workshop held in May 2023.

Executive Summary

This third journal captures the state of play within WISH-MI as it enters its final phase. We can now see the entire repertoire charged with delivering Milan's ambitious wellbeing strategy.

All of the project's scheduled interventions are now live, the most recent of them only launched at the end of May 2023. The six neighbourhood hubs are in place across the city, offering new ways to engage with children and young people. They also provide spaces to co-design new services, inviting providers to forge new types of relationships with their service users. In some neighbourhoods, the arrival of the hubs has been heralded by the appearance of eye-catching murals, facilitated by Action Aid, and produced by established artists working with local youth groups.

Alongside the physical hubs, a new digital platform hosts the Milano 0.18 digital catalogue of available services. This complements the physical offer, providing a new way to improve awareness of and support access to a wide and growing range of activities across the WISH-MI spectrum of Culture, Sport, Health, School and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths).

An innovative voucher system encourages participation amongst individuals and families whilst a collective version provides a catalyst for the co-design of new services. Take up of these vouchers is already well-established with numbers rising steeply ahead of the new school year commencing September 2023.

May 2023 was a busy month for WISH-MI. It saw the launch of an ambitious programme of 'phygital' activities, using digital gaming psychology and tools to encourage civic participation and volunteering. It was also the month when one of the key project partners, the Catholic University of Milan, hosted an International Roundtable on Youth Participation.

This journal also reports on the results of the second WISH-MI workshop on the seven UIA Innovation Challenges,

after the initial one in May 2022. The results provide a candid assessment of the project's position, with some important insights into the key lessons emerging from this intensive experience.

By definition, innovation incurs risk. It requires experimentation and steps into the unknown, in this case fired by a commitment to improve the wellbeing for children and young people, and a recognition that business as usual will not yield the desired results. The WISH-MI journey has not been an easy one, however it has prompted significant steps forward and has created a new collaborative culture, both within the City Administration and amongst the key partners, that can continue to flourish. It has also established structures - and facilities - that need further time and support to be embedded and fully evaluated.

What WISH-MI is about

The WISH-MI project is about providing the best possible life-start for Milan's children and young people. Through a new wellbeing strategy for minors, the city wants to ensure that all children and families are aware of, and have access to, the wide range of services across the city. At the same time, through WISH-MI, the city is reshaping its approach to service design for children, young people and families. This represents a shift from a traditional, top-down model, to one where co-design with service-users is paramount.

WISH-MI is taking place at a time of tumultuous socioeconomic change in Milan. Although the largest urban economy in Italy, the city has wide and growing inequalities with a Gini coefficient of 53.2% compared to a national rate of 38.2%. Almost one third (30%) of its residents live below the poverty line.

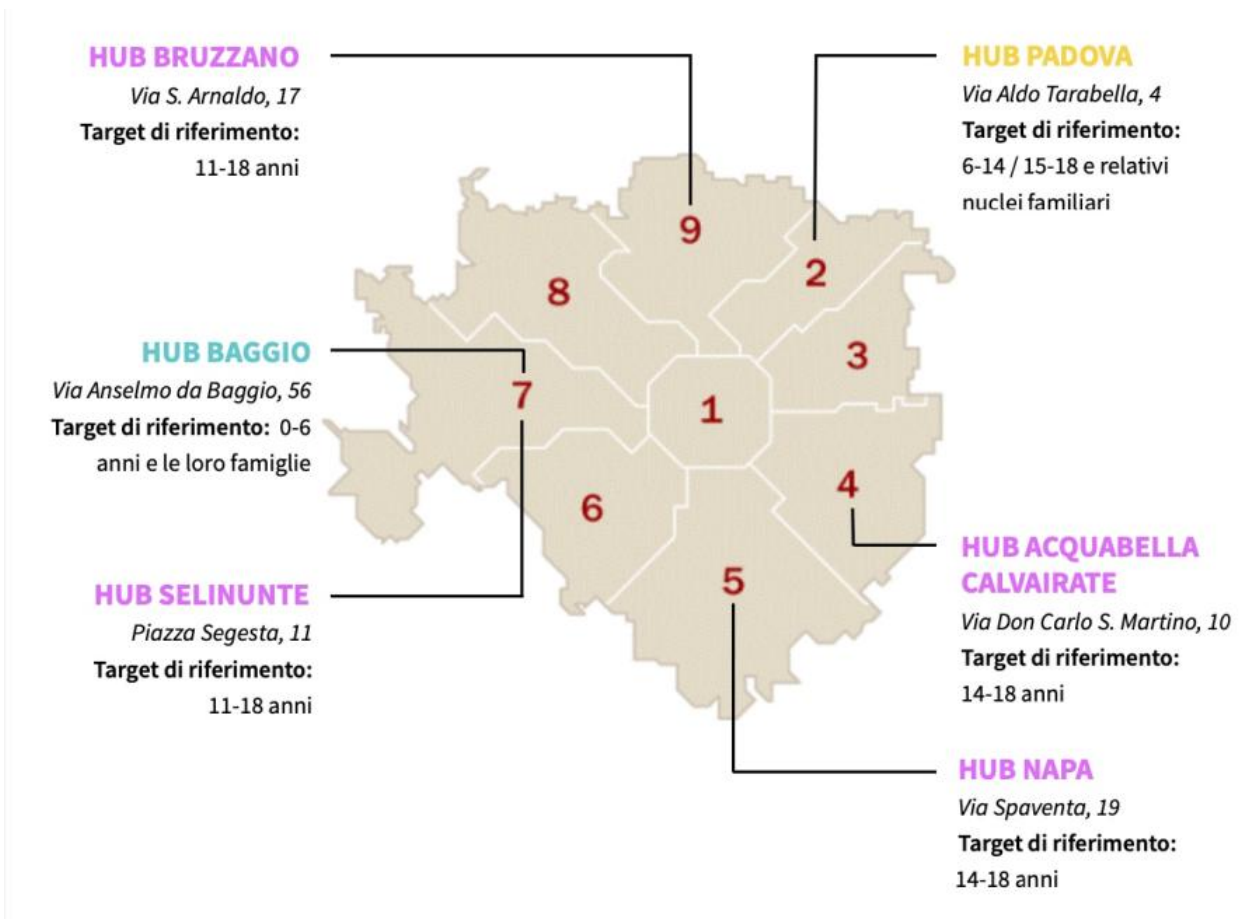
230,000 minors live in the city, with one in ten living in absolute poverty. As the profile of Milan's households changes, a growing number of these are in single parent households (11% of the city total) and from migrant backgrounds, as the city's population diversifies. Many live in priority neighbourhoods characterised by high levels of deprivation. City data has mapped a withdrawal pattern amongst white Italian families in these neighbourhoods, resulting in a segregated school system. Consequently, many of these local schools (56 identified by the City Education Department) are struggling, reflected in much higher dropout rates amongst students (more than double the city average of 10.6%).

In the face of this, WISH-MI set out to widen access to educational and wider opportunities for all children and young people. The ambition has been to straddle the public, private and NGO sector as well as to span all of the relevant policy domains. Well-being has been defined across 5 pillars (Education +, Culture, Sport, Health and STEM - Science, Technology and Maths).

Project Update

The 0-18 hubs

Within the community, the WISH-MI hubs are the most visible part of the entire project. After a long zigzag journey, the full set of 6 hubs is open and engaging with the city's children and young people. Each of them has a specific target age range, from the categories created by the city (0-6, 6-14, 14-18) as well as a range of activities. The range is informed by the age band of the service users, their requests and the specialisms of the host organisations



The buildings themselves also play a part. For example, the Cassina Ana building in Bruzzano, a sprawling 19th century edifice that feels like an old farmhouse, has a music and recording studio. This is because the host agency (Fondazione Aquilone) has strong experience in this, and because the facility - set in its own leafy grounds - has ample space. Funding through the WISH-MI collective vouchers has also enabled hub hosts to design new services in response to user demand, which supports the project aspiration to encourage and support new service co-design.

As the hubs have rolled out, WISH-MI partners have captured the imagination of surrounding communities through collaboration between artists and local youth. [Action Aid](#), a core WISH-MI partner have co-ordinated this inspiring set of activities, using the creative process as a means of attracting and engaging young people. At the same time, the beautiful results create a sense of pride, not only amongst the young participants involved, but also in the wider community.

In the Comasina neighbourhood, [Mr Thoms](#) led a team of local youth to create a five-block high mural, [‘Master the Force’](#), designed to reflect their aspirations for the community. The result contains a mix of city references (the dragon, a historic symbol of the Visconti family, the Milan Duomo etc) with the more personal expressions of the young creatives, like playing with friends, wearing masks, families and communities.

In November 2022 the opening of the hub in Spaventa was heralded by another street art collaboration between the artist [La Fille Bertha](#) and a team of young people, again co-ordinated by Action Aid. The resulting mural [‘Paladins of Dreams’](#) taps into young people’s images of their city and their place within it. A vibrant celebration of young people’s energy, hope and imagination, this wonderful piece of street art is a welcome addition to a tough neighbourhood, where locals often have little to celebrate. If the hubs are the visible tip of the WISH-MI iceberg, then these inspiring artworks are the flags flying proudly on top.



Image courtesy of Tommaso Berra at Collateral

A huge effort has gone into getting these hubs off the ground. It is now important that they be given space and resources to become established nodal points in the city's new network of mechanisms designed to improve service access, and to contribute to the goal of enhanced youth wellbeing.

The digital platform

We reported in December 2022 that 2023 would be the acid test year for the WISH-MI digital platform. Complementing the physical hubs, this is another key component in Milan's efforts to transform the way in which young people and families access available services that promote wellbeing.

Again, intensive activity has been required to build an effective digital platform that is accessible for a mixed user group which will range from sophisticated digital consumers to new arrivals with limited Italian and poor access to the Internet. Again, these early operational months provide an important testing ground and a valuable window to gather intelligence and feedback on the user experience.

Of course, no matter how sophisticated the platform, it will not gain public traction unless it has relevant high quality content. Earlier articles ([link](#)) have followed this part of the journey as the WISH-MI team has designed a template, issued a call, evaluated responses and generated a digital catalogue of service providers. This represents a major mindset shift for many providers, used to using their own promotional and recruitment channels. And this front end stage has again generated much valuable knowledge. For example, engaging the private sector has been - and remains - a significant challenge.

Like the hubs, the evolution of the digital catalogue - and the entire digital adventure - remains work in progress. The Milano 0.18 Catalogue of qualified service providers is an important step towards innovating and streamlining the bureaucratic procedures typically involved, and ultimately creating a more integrated and agile urban community for the promotion of 0-18 wellbeing.

In another area where user data provides precious insights into the user experience, and ways to improve it, some important points to note are that:

- Over 100 service providers are now represented in the digital catalogue
- Almost 350 activities are on offer, a number that is growing weekly
- There is a balanced spread across the WISH-MI domains
- The service mix is in neighbourhoods, city-wide and online

The voucher system

Much has already been written about the WISH-MI voucher system ([link](#)). This third piece of the WISH-MI infrastructure is the one that most closely embodies the aspiration to empower children, young people and families in the city. On the one hand, through the individual vouchers, we transform the transnational relationship between service providers and service users. The transformation is away from 'we know best, this is what you need, take it or leave it' to one where the end-user has the power and choice not only to decide what they want and need, but also to shape new service provision. This represents a major culture shift that won't happen overnight, but the vouchers, especially when targeted at priority families and young people, provide a strong incentive to engage and a license to empower, often for people with little agency in their lives.

On the other hand, the collective vouchers provide a creative mechanism to encourage changed behaviour amongst service providers. Those most comfortable listening to clients and providing space for service co-design will be rewarded, those who do not get it will not. The early signs are that some providers have quickly got the message, while others have been slower to take it on board. It has also indicated that amongst them are providers who sense the change in mood music, but who lack the skills and experience in co-design. Again, this is helpful to know, providing opportunities for capacity building activity and even peer to peer collaboration, in an environment often characterised by cut-throat competition.

In terms of headline messages from the data, from our current vantage point in June 2023, we can see that:

- Over 1,000 households have activated individual vouchers
- Over 5,000 activities have been accessed via the voucher system
- Numbers are rising rapidly ahead of the new academic year starting September 2023
- The latest snapshot (May 2023) shows that sport has been the most popular domain (1,339 users), followed by Health (570), Education + (475), Culture (418) and STEM (63)

Launch of the micro services

The final, and most recently implemented, piece in the WISH-MI mosaic has been the launch of a platform to promote civic action and volunteering amongst children and young people in Milan. Designed to coincide with the annual 'Giornata del Gioco' (Day of play) at the end of May 2023, the idea is to utilise digital gaming psychology and tools to encourage young people to explore their city and do good for their communities.

A diverse and attractive range of activities have been packaged under this part of the initiative, badged as micro-activities. Sensibly, the access platform for these has been embedded in the City of Milan's existing online [volunteering platform](#), providing economies of scale but also potential synergies between the two. [Summary](#) of the completed activities has been produced, and analysis of the overall package of interventions is under way.

A recent article ([link](#)) provided further details on the range of activities on offer, but also complimented the city on taking this risky step into territory not often associated with public authorities. Milan's willingness to do so, reflects an important part of the WISH-MI philosophy: unless we take risks and reinvent the way we engage with young people, we are destined for the same results and outcomes. Through their 'phygital' venture, the project is also channeling the spirit of Urban Innovative Actions, experimenting and taking a step into the unknown to tackle a long-standing urban challenge.

The International Round Table

In May 2023 The Catholic University of Milan, on behalf of the WISH-MI partnership, organized a major international Round Table event focused on youth participation. This coincided with the day when young representatives from the university's TeenVoice Milano group, met with senior politicians in the city.

The Round Table focused on effective approaches to youth participation and brought in perspectives and expert voices from Austria, Portugal and Scotland, as well as Milan itself. The keynote speaker was Alexandra Beweis who shared the many achievements of the Vienna [Children and Youth Strategy](#), with which Milan is creating a close working relationship. Manfred Zentner from Krems University, Austria, complemented this input with wider reflections on the youth participation in Europe. Alongside this, Carlos Sousa Santos, set out the Braga experience as former European Youth Capital, making the case for embedding youth participation in a wider framework of social innovation and urban governance.

The event represented an important milestone for Milan and for the WISH-MI partners. These international connections provide scope for future network activity and mutual learning.

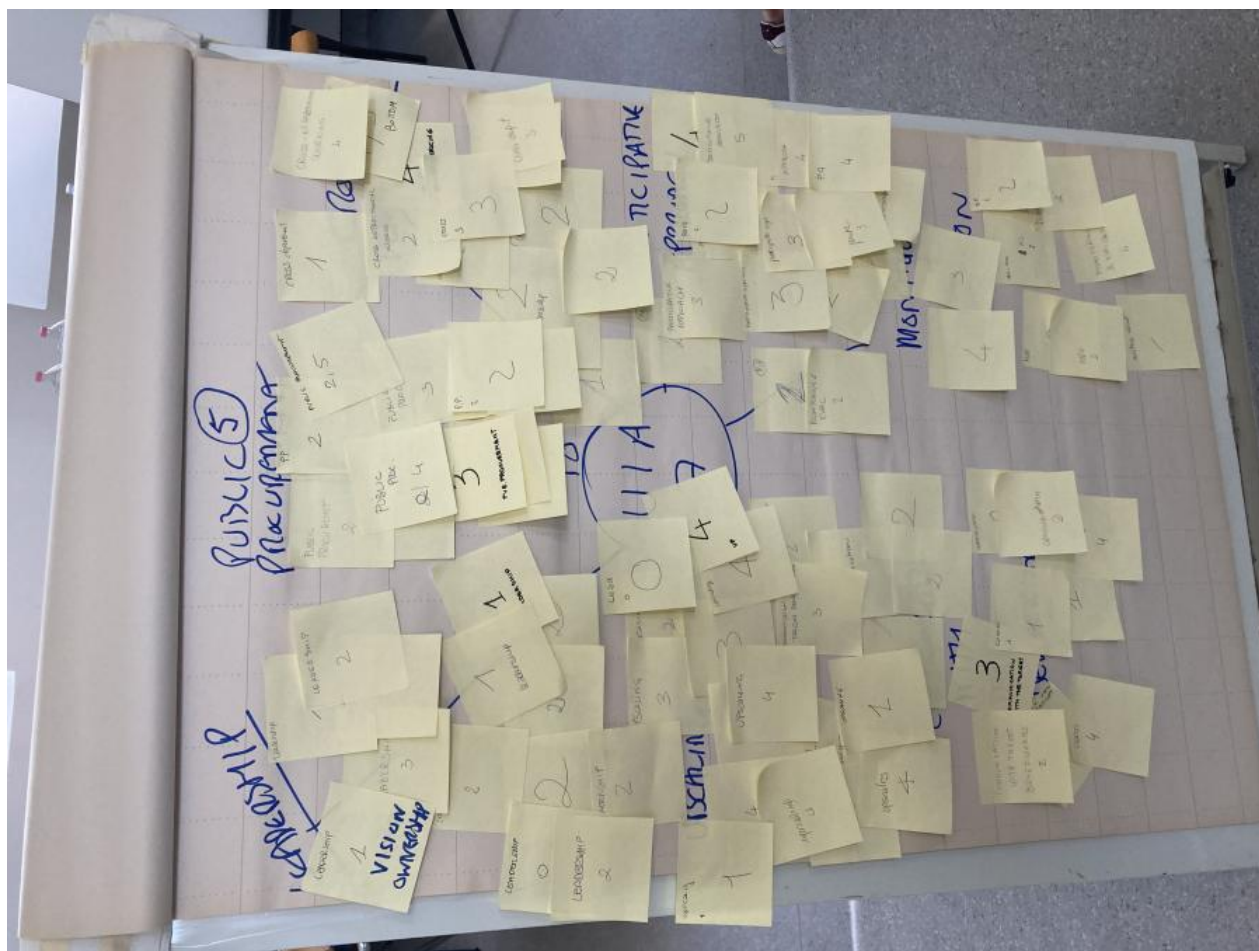
Performance against the UIA Innovation Challenges

Process and overview

UIA established seven challenges related to the implementation of innovation projects. These apply across all 86 UIA projects, providing a consistent framework against which we can track each project's journey.

This innovation challenge matrix has provided the structure for two workshops held with WISH-MI partners to date. The first of these was held in May 2022, with the scores shared in Journal 1. The second was held in May 2023. In each case, the process consisted of a participative session joined by all project partners. Using sticky notes, participants were invited to score the WISH-MI project against each of the innovation challenges on a scale of 0-5 where 5 is the highest score. These were placed on a wall-mounted matrix and once all the content had been posted, there was an extensive moderated discussion on the scoring, to understand why partners had given their scores, and to find an aggregate figure for each of the challenges.

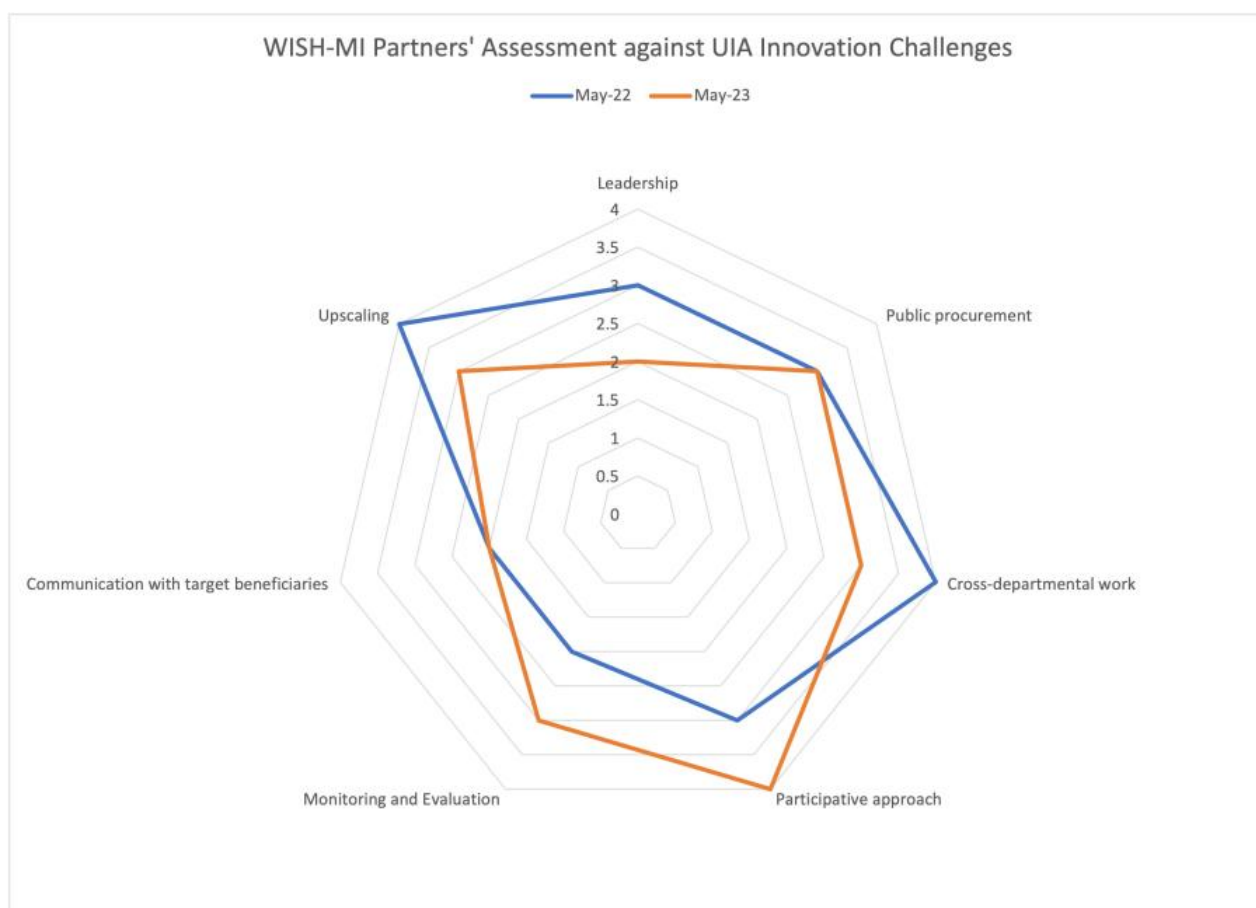
A photograph of the eventual chart is shown below



The image shows that there was consensus in some areas and disparity in others. Specifically, the scoring ranged as follows:

- Leadership: 0 to 3
- Public Procurement: 1 to 3
- Cross-departmental working: 1 to 4
- Participative approach: 2 to 5
- Monitoring and Evaluation: 2 to 4
- Communication with target beneficiaries and users: 1 to 4
- Upscaling: 1 to 4

Based on the data inputs, an average score was produced for each challenge, using the same approach used in May 2022. The resulting scores from both sessions can be seen in the figure below.



Source: Expert's data from WISH-MI Partner workshops

In terms of headlines, this image shows that in two of the challenge areas (Public procurement and Communication with target beneficiaries) the scores remained the same. In another two domains (The Participative Approach and Monitoring and Evaluation) partners felt that there had been some improvement. In the remaining three challenge areas (Leadership, Cross-departmental work and Upscaling) partners felt less positive than they had done one year ago.

Further details, and some interpretation on the scoring, is set out below.

1. Leadership

Feedback on the leadership challenge indicated an absence of senior leadership championing the project since the departure of the initial project lead in the spring of 2021. Non-municipal partners stressed the valuable day to day leadership coming from the City of Milan team, and the effort they have made to sustain the project. However, it was at the strategic level that a leadership vacuum was identified, resulting in a short-termism and hand to mouth culture which had limited the project's implementation - and potential sustainability.

In practice, other partners - such as the Catholic University of Milan, which hosts the Children and Young People's Guarantor - have assumed a proactive role, helping to drive aspects of the project such as the Teen-Voice Milano project and the efforts around building transnational connections.

Expert's comment:

A number of factors help explain the rather low scores around leadership. First, it's important to note that the project was initially led by a highly capable senior staff member with strategic vision and a strong commitment to the project. His departure, without direct replacement, has left a gap that the project has not managed to fill. This absence of a vocal champion within the city's senior management team has doubtless affected the project - and the partnership experience.

A number of significant external factors - most notably COVID and the Ukrainian refugee crisis - have also been significant, in terms of stretching human resources and distracting the attention of other key municipal managers beyond the project. However, it is still important to note that senior managers within both the Education, Welfare and Health departments have collaborated effectively - and continue to do so - encouraged by the WISH-MI

structure. This is reflected in partners' positive comments around the day to day management of the project.

2. Public Procurement

The scores for this challenge remained the same in both workshops, at an average of 3. Partners are largely resigned to a slow bureaucratic procedure that is hard to turn around. However, key lessons have been learned through the WISH-MI experience and the experimentation with the collective vouchers has generated some optimism around ways to fund the co-design and delivery of new services in different ways.

Expert's comment:

The WISH-MI experience under this challenge has bumped into a question often raised in public innovation circles. How can we attract innovative service providers, often unfamiliar - or reluctant to engage with - the public procurement system, and deter low quality providers who win contracts through their knowledge of how the system works?

WISH-MI has thrown up some key lessons. For example, it is insufficient to post a call on the municipal website and expect a flood of innovative proposals. Reaching new innovative providers requires a strong communication effort, aligned to a proactive approach to nurturing new relationships. Alongside this, continually looking to simplify and streamline procedures is helpful in demystifying the procurement experience, especially for new and smaller suppliers.

Although the design and implementation of the voucher system has been challenging, it offers potential opportunities in a number of respects. Most obviously, it can help reach marginalized young people and families, through incentives. But it has also created a mechanism that can encourage dialogue between service commissioners and providers as well as supporting a co-design process with service users. In the context of Milan this is an exciting breakthrough with real potential.

3. Cross-departmental Work

This is one of the challenge areas where the partnership score has decreased since May 2022. In the workshop session, partners from outside the municipality were quick to applaud the efforts made by those most directly involved in the project. But there was a clear view that this cross-departmental collaboration was largely confined to the middle management and officer functions, but not reflected in the higher echelons of the city administration.

There was also a strong sense that communication across departments - and indeed across the city- related to the project, could have been more effective, which might have supported work across the various departmental silos.

Expert's comment:

Given WISH-MI's focus on aligning policy interventions under a single aligned wellbeing banner, this feedback is disappointing. It was also somewhat unexpected, after the positive comments generated in the initial session one year ago. What is behind this change of opinion?

In the intervening year, the commitment to tackle this challenge has been diluted through lack of capacity and the absence of strong strategic leadership within the project. At the outset, with the initial leadership model in place, there were high levels of optimism about the possibilities ahead. Although the collaborative engine room at the middle-management level remains in place, it has been severely stretched due to resource issues.

However, while this is true, it is also possible that external partners do not fully appreciate the significance of the progress made within the city administration by the production of an integrated strategic plan that informs the work of several departments. This marks a step change in addressing silo-based activity.

The low external visibility on these developments, subtle but potentially important, has been exacerbated by the fact that internal developments within the administration have perhaps not been sufficient promotion within the wider partnership. For example, the campaign to recruit and train 100 0.18 ambassadors across all municipal departments is potentially game-changing but has been quite low key to date in its communications.

4. The participative approach

The participative approach is one of the challenge areas where we can see a higher score in May 2023. One year ago, partners remained in a post-COVID situation where outreach activity had been stymied and there were significant obstacles to delivering participatory approaches.

Now the picture looks different. Through a diffuse range of activities WISH-MI is now supporting a number of different ways to promote higher levels of participation with service providers and end-users.

On the key question of participation with young people, the Teen-Voice Milano activities led by the Catholic University of Milan, are an innovative development. Partly inspired by the relationship WISH-MI has built with other cities (in particular, Vienna) the University has recruited a group of young people to provide a voice on behalf of the city's young people. This is currently focused on adolescents, who are often more difficult to engage. An important milestone for this took place on 26th May when the group had an official meeting with senior politicians in the city.

Alongside this, the full roll-out of the hubs - described earlier in this journal - has provided an opportunity for young people to shape the services offered on their doorsteps. Another important step, not only in terms of widening the dialogue, but also promoting the visibility of the WISH-MI initiative in the priority neighbourhoods.

The invitation to service providers to co-design new provision supported by the collective voucher model has also provided a different kind of participative avenue. As a process, this remains in its infancy, and there are questions about the extent of youth intervention in the design of these services. However, it is there in different shapes and forms and with continued support and encouragement it can further develop.,

Expert's comment:

The increase in scores here is probably due to the fact that in May 2022 not all partners had insight into the pipeline of planned activities - or were perhaps sceptical that these would emerge. Such developments take time, but in retrospect there may be important lessons about keeping all of the partners on board to at least a minimum level.

The changes triggered by the collective vouchers are interesting and encouraging. However, they represent the vanguard of a culture shift that cannot take place overnight and that will need much reinforcement and support if it is to bed in. It may also need some level of capacity building, and measures to showcase and share good practice, as a source of inspiration to the city's service providers,

5. Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and Evaluation received one of the lowest scores in May 2022. At that point, there was no detailed monitoring and evaluation framework and no tangible procurement process under way to appoint external evaluators.

The achievement of these tasks, undertaken in late 2022 and early 2023, is due to the considerable efforts of the officers within the WISH-MI team who prepared and managed the contractual procedures. Consequently, a team is now in place, working to a clear framework set out in the call for tenders.

Expert's comment:

A variety of factors - all previously mentioned - conspired to prevent the Monitoring and Evaluation contract being let until spring 2023. This is far from ideal, as it means the appointed team comes in just at the point where the project is starting to focus on its final stages. A cumulative evaluation, running concurrently with the project, would have been more effective, however it is still good to see that arrangements are now in place.

One of the challenges to any Monitoring and Evaluation approach is the ambitious scope and scale of WISH-MI. The city has adopted a pragmatic approach to this, by confining the M&E work to specific aspects of the project. Significantly, this will lack the longitudinal dimension required to demonstrate impact over time for the young beneficiaries. Once the evaluation report is completed we will revisit this, reviewing what has been produced and drawing key lessons from the overall experience.

6. Communication with beneficiaries

The challenge of communicating with target beneficiaries and users remains largely unresolved as WISH-MI enters its final phase. This is reflected in the consistently low scores generated by partners in both of these workshops. This challenge scored only 2 from 5, the lowest when we conflate the scores both sessions.

Partners acknowledge that the challenge is complex and difficult, given the profile of the target beneficiaries. They also accept that recent developments - most notably the launch of the microsite - have been too recent to fully evaluate at this point. However, consistent points were raised in the two workshop sessions, for example relating to the low profile on social media and communication channels used by children and young people.

Expert's comment:

Overall, there had been an absence of a strong strategic approach to this challenge. The diversity of the target group - for example the different age cohorts - presents challenges, although these were understood from the start. And although this is not easy, other cities - most notably Vienna - have shown what can be achieved through the effective use of intermediaries and targeted messaging, complemented by good tools and capacity building support.

This does not detract the excellent work led by the Politecnico di Milano to create a shared visual identity for Milano 0.18. The team involved has adopted an innovative approach to this task, covered in an earlier article, and they have generated some creative and playful tools to involve children and young people. This includes a [digital space](#) where users can generate their own unique version of the Milano 0.18 logo.

7. Upscaling

Upscaling is another area where partner scores have dropped from 2022. The original idea was that WISH-MI would provide a sandpit for experimentation and for prototyping concepts that could be scaled up within the administration and across the city. There is now less confidence within the partnership that this will be the case.

In fact, the May 2023 workshop opened up concerns about the sustainability and viability of the WISH-MI ecosystem. Although several components are likely to continue, none of them are secured and the original expectations to upscale - for example across more neighbourhoods - seem unlikely to materialise at this point, and rests with senior decision makers.

On a more positive note, and indirectly related to upscaling, the WISH-MI concept has attracted the attention of other cities, tackling the same issues as Milan. So although the project has a questionable future - in its entirety - within the city, there are possibilities to cascade and transfer it - or parts of it - more widely.

Expert's comment:

This final challenge reveals the interconnected nature of the seven challenges. None of them stand alone, and the root causes of the difficulties around upscaling, come back to difficulties identified elsewhere. The lack of a strong consistent leadership voice at the senior table is one. Related to that have been the difficulties embedding cross-departmental working at deeper levels. Without these, WISH-MI remains rather vulnerable. As upscaling often requires an innovation to have taken systemic root, it is not surprising to hear that this element is contested and unclear at this stage.

Conclusions

There has been a flurry of WISH-MI activity during the first six months of 2023. This means that by the end of May, with the launch of the volunteering site and related phygital activities, all of the proposed interventions are launched. It is therefore only from this point that we can really begin to view the new wellbeing ecosystem envisioned by WISH-MI, as being fully in place.

Taken as a whole, the WISH-MI package reflects Milan's ambition not just to revise their service offer for children and young people, but more fundamentally, to rewire its relationships and processes to encourage a different service development model characterised by co-design.

An overriding lesson from WISH-MI is that co-design takes time, as does this scale of transformation. The COVID pandemic robbed the city of this irreplaceable resource when its impact placed huge pressure on the public administration, while the virus itself drew physical outreach and participative work to a halt. Arriving at a critical moment for the project, when the front line neighbourhood outreach should have been conducted, WISH-MI has struggled to recover from this key gap in their work sequence. Although there have been encouraging steps around participative processes in recent months - as we have seen - these come late in the day. It is hard not to conclude that the damage done to the project in those early COVID months has been irreversible.

The WISH-MI partners have had to adopt an agile attitude since the original plan and phasing were knocked out of place. Within the administration, and under considerable pressure, the core team has worked hard to hold things together and to maintain momentum. This internal collaboration has been supported by a shared strategy and cross-departmental activity to support it.

Beyond this, the wider partnership has come together to improvise and find ways around the various challenges described in the previous section. As a consequence, one of the byproducts has been a stronger collaborative culture between the municipal team and the other partners - most notably with NGO providers and with the two universities, both of which have brought considerable energy and vision to the project. It is to be hoped that these trusted connections form the basis of a new set of working relationships that will continue to collaborate in the interest of children and young people in the city.

Urban poverty

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