

Theme 1 - Project & Partnership Management

As social distancing and isolation were one of the first measures taken to counter the spread of COVID-19, the first challenge to collaborative projects was a need to rethink and reorganise their forms of communication and gatherings with and between partners and colleagues. The question they faced was, 'how do we keep alive the daily and periodic human interaction and communication that generate new knowledge, ideas, and innovation?'

Challenges - Project & Partnership Management

#1 Meetings & interactions with partners and colleagues

As social distancing and isolation were one of the first measures taken to counter the spread of COVID-19, the first challenge to collaborative projects was a need to rethink and reorganise their forms of communication and gatherings with and between partners and colleagues. The question they faced was, 'how do we keep alive the daily and periodic human interaction and communication that generate new knowledge, ideas, and innovation?'

Technology already offered some basic tools for remote working which were increasingly being adopted in international professional contexts. Yet, remote working was the exception, sometimes the innovation, and rarely was it the norm.

Based on the survey questionnaire returns for this study, we found that that projects had to identify new ways to:

- Reorganise meeting formats, frequency, and platform (digital/physical/hybrid). Hence, from an operational point of view they had to:
 - Redesign physical collaborative meetings for online delivery and ensure their effectiveness in reaching the predefined objectives.
 - Design online sessions in a way that ensured the commitment and active involvement/participation of all partners (i.e., keeping the participants engaged and their levels of attention high).
 - Overcome the lack of technical skills in the use of tools that were relatively new/unfamiliar to most and fill any hardware gaps (e.g., partners/employees not owning a laptop).
- Overcome access limitations / restrictions to workplaces, fieldwork, and target groups. This implies the need to develop special safety measures, organise ad-hoc workspaces to enable in-presence meetings, and restructure plans/guidelines for site visits and fieldwork.
- Manage the working group on a personal and emotional level to develop a collaborative environment for distant interaction/communication. Projects reported how crucial it was to ensure mutual trust and commitment and to build momentum, especially when a lack of in-person encounters (and therefore face to face mediation opportunities) could increase the risk of conflicts among individuals/partners.

#2 Collaborative work and progress monitoring

The second crucial challenge concerned the ways projects could initiate the design of, deploy, and implement a framework to organise, distribute, carry out, and ultimately monitor the progress of tasks and activities almost completely remotely – and in unprecedented (from home, etc.) – settings. In operational terms, this entailed:

- Devising new ways to coordinate and manage project workflow remotely.
- Triggering / accelerating a transition towards digitalisation, which implied a need to identify and introduce new tools suitable to project needs.
- Developing the skills needed to use the new digital tools and the ability to adopt new working methodologies within organisations.
- Understanding how to introduce more flexible and adaptive approaches and methodologies within already established and rather strict/resistant to change organisational settings, especially (but not exclusively) in the public sector.

#3 Scarcity of essential resources (staff, products, equipment)

Another category of challenges that projects had to cope with was the sudden scarcity of essential resources needed to carry out project activities. These were:

- Limited availability of project staff who had to prioritise and/or return to core activities within their organisation.
 - Postponed or cancelled delivery of essential equipment or products due to delays and blockages in the supply chain at global level, which lengthened the implementation time of project activities and investments.
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#4 Achieving initial project goals & overcoming blockages

Finally, and partly due to the above-mentioned challenges, a crucial challenge for projects was how to achieve the original project goals and overcome emerging and unexpected blockages. More precisely, projects were required to deal with:

- An unprecedented level of uncertainty and last-minute cancellations/changes of plan.
 - The management of interdependencies between project activities and of their cascading effects on the different stages of implementation.
 - The need to reorganise the work programme on-the-go, ensure time management and task prioritisation taking into account new needs and possibilities.
 - The redefinition of project outputs/outcomes in relation to what the circumstances would allow, while staying faithful to the original objectives.
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Responses - Project & Partnership Management

#1 The everyday office becomes a distributed and hybrid workplace

With the transition to remote working and the dispersion of co-workers to different locations, projects had to rapidly identify ways to recreate, as far as possible, three key dimensions of traditional office life: 1) interaction & communication between colleagues; 2) how documents are archived, shared, and edited by multiple contributors; and 3) how partners and co-workers could physically meet to carry-out field work.

Based on UIA projects' direct experience we identified **9 good practices**, from which we can draw a number of key insights and recommendations, which could be implemented in any city.

Most of the technologies, practices, and methods presented below were already available prior to the COVID-19 crisis. With the pandemic, however, UIA cities had to adapt very quickly to ensure the implementation of their projects. They therefore tested the suitability and effectiveness of a number of methods and tools and these have, as a result, become standard practice for several EU cities and project managers. This experience has demonstrated the relevance of such practices not only during the pandemic, but also for increasing city resilience in general in case of future crises.

1. Ensuring the effectiveness of online meetings.

- More productive discussions and better results are achieved when meetings are frequent, relatively short (from 30 to 45 minutes) and focussed on limited agenda items. A **high frequency allows the topic to be kept alive** in the minds of participants over extended periods of time. The **limited duration** of each session leads to tighter conversations and, as a result, a higher **level of attention**. Follow-up meetings also proved to be a useful tool to finalise discussions that could not be concluded within the initially scheduled timeframe.
- Different levels and types of meeting require carefully **selected constellations of participants**, and to maximise the effectiveness of the session, only people who are actually involved, affected, or knowledgeable about the topic(s) being addressed should be invited. We therefore recommend establishing dedicated **task forces or working groups** in charge of specific topics as this makes it easier to identify the appropriate people.
- In the early stages of a project or in large meetings when participants are not necessarily acquainted with each other, it is vital to establish a positive working environment and **break the ice before starting**. Organising **informal warm-up sessions** at the beginning of a meeting proved to be extremely effective in stimulating **team building and bonding** among participants and, even more importantly, in **creating enabling environments** in which everyone feels welcome, accepted, and able to voice their opinions.
- Adopting agile and **engaging facilitation** methodologies is crucial to ensuring active participation and commitment to the meeting. We therefore advise sessions with short **to-the-point presentations** and adequate time for **discussion and interaction** rather than longer presentations with marginal Q&A time. This way, participants' attention is kept high and active contributions to the work are constantly stimulated, thus ensuring better overall collaboration.
- Online meetings often need to identify an alternative whiteboards, flipcharts, and boards. For many projects, adopting a **virtual collaborative board** which is simultaneously accessible and editable by all participants (e.g., Miro, Mural, etc.) proved to be excellent for sharing ideas, notes, visuals in written and graphical formats, especially

during brainstorming and/or co-creation sessions.

- o Finally, to guarantee the smooth flow of a meeting, we recommend: using one of the various **video conferencing tools** available on the market (e.g., Zoom, Webex, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, etc.) and adopting this at project level; providing **basic training** on the essential features and functionalities of this software (e.g., screen/window share; chat and file sharing, reactions and raise hand, microphone and camera settings, etc.); allowing partners to familiarise themselves with the software; and establishing a clear **online meeting etiquette**.

2. Developing effective online collaborative platforms and repositories

- o As many projects highlighted, working documents are often co-produced simultaneously by different partners. **Cloud-based editing platforms** (e.g., SharePoint, Google Docs, OwnCloud, Darwin, etc.) proved to be extremely effective, as they enable a **single document** to be **edited and reviewed online** by all collaborators and their **version histories to be stored**.
- o When multiple collaborators have access to the same files and folders, it is crucial that they are easily findable by everyone. To allow this, online archives and **repositories** need to be extremely well **structured**. We recommend that projects **organise folders** according to a clear logic (e.g., following the project's phases and division into Work Packages, Activities, and Deliverables), and to adopt a shared files/folders **naming convention**.

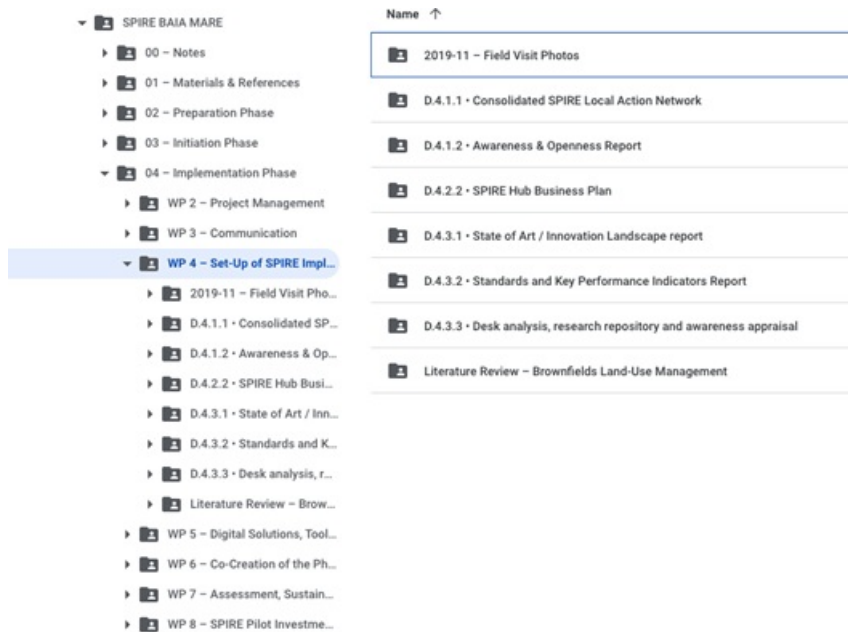


Figure 4 - SPIRE Baia Mare folders structure

- o Brief or longer discussions between co-workers are a core element in the daily office routine, and it is therefore crucial to find a way to reproduce them in a spatially distributed setting. To do so, several projects have relied on **messaging software** (e.g., Slack), which allows for both **instant messaging and swift file sharing** in a more direct manner, thus avoiding time-consuming back-and-forth exchanges by email.

3. Organising regular face-to-face meetings and joint fieldwork

- o **Interactions in person** are a key way to strengthen the **bonds among colleagues and partners**, both professionally and personally. For this purpose, some projects (e.g., the ICCARUS project in Ghent, Belgium) established a **physical coworking space** and organised **weekly gatherings** for all partners to work together.
- o Fieldwork is also a core part of urban innovation projects and the risk is that multiple partners might end up separately carrying out their activities in the same location and/or with the same target groups. To overcome difficulties in implementing multiple one-partner visits, for example, various projects (e.g. EPIU in Getafe, Spain and A PLACE TO BE-COME in Seraing, Belgium) **clustered all partners' activities** with the same target group / in the same location and on this basis organised **single multi-partner fieldwork sessions**. See the case study box below for more details about A PLACE TO BE-COME.
- o Allowing physical gatherings in a global pandemic requires additional measures to guarantee all participants' safety. We therefore recommend that projects **establish internal safety / health protocols**, in compliance with local/national laws and partners' regulations.



To overcome difficulties in implementing multiple one-partner visits, A PLACE TO BE-COME clustered together all its partners' activities with the same target group and organised multi-partner fieldwork sessions.

"When the COVID-19 restrictions started to soften in the Autumn of 2020, we decided to cluster our actions aimed at citizens. Since we hadn't had the opportunity to hold a proper kick-off event, we wanted to present all the aspects of our project to citizens and make the most out of the rare opportunity for in-person events.

For instance, in October 2020, we took part in the 'Fieris Féeries' a large-scale popular event that was that year remodelled as an outdoor exhibition. On this occasion, we opened our temporary creative station to the public and gathered input for the collective urban needs analysis, but we also showcased the work of nature trainees in the park and held a nature workshop. This was also an opportunity to present the whole project to citizens. In this event, each partner was in charge of its own activity in coordination with other partners. AREBS (management) oversaw the general organisation. Later, in 2021 and 2022, when the Creative station was open to the public, it continued to host the nature working teams and nature-based activities." (Julien Bebronne, AREBS)

#2 Workflow organisation and communication protocols adapt to the new distributed workplace

Managing a complex project with a large partnership requires a great deal of **coordination**. Under the peculiar circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent spatial dispersion of co-workers due to remote working, projects highlighted an increased need to clearly **structure the organisation of work**, the flow of **communication**, and the **monitoring of progress**.

4. Clustering tasks and people in working groups

Given the complexity and multi-disciplinary character of urban innovation projects, it is essential to always be able to **identify and contact the people** with the relevant expertise, resources, and/or decision-making power in relation to a specific project task. In this respect, the EPIU and GAVIUS projects (Gava, Spain) are worth mentioning. So that the partners' workflow was as smooth and agile as possible, they **clustered tasks and partners in working groups** according to specific targets and project goals.

5. Establishing internal communication protocols

A second crucial condition for smooth project management is **regular flow of information** between all partners involved at all levels of implementation. We therefore strongly recommend that projects establish **clear communication protocols** so that all relevant data and information are duly shared and in a timely manner. Specifically, it is paramount to **establish specific timeframes** for:

- Communicating **roadmaps and deadlines** for the preparation and submission of deliverables, reports, or other project-related activities
- **Responding to emails** and/or requests for data, information, and working materials
- Providing regular **progress updates** on project activities.

The SASMob project in Szeged, Hungary, is worth mentioning in relation to good communication practice as it

introduced a **periodic internal newsletter**, so that all partners would always be up-to-date with the achievements, pending items, deadlines, and next steps at project level (see the case study box below).

A Zoom into the Projects

SASMob, Szeged (HU) – INTERNAL NEWSLETTER

SASMob introduced a periodic internal newsletter, so that all partners would always be up to date with the achievements, pending items, deadlines, and next steps at project level.

“During the project period, newsletters were sent out monthly (WP and Activity breakdown of the previous month), then quarterly and later semi-annually to the whole partnership by e-mail.

Separate round table meetings were also held on project communication to ensure accurate preparation for project and city events. The progress of the communication activities was communicated to the whole partnership initially every 3 months and then monthly by e-mail.

In all cases, the partnership newsletters were sent out by the lead partner to the partnership based on the work package leaders’ reports (outlining current status and project level progress). Progress reports on communication activities were sent out by the partner in charge of the communication work package to the whole partnership by e-mail. (Tímea Pajkó, Municipality of Szeged)

6. Adopting project management and monitoring tools

To keep track and **monitor the progress of all the activities** in a complex project, we recommend that all partners and collaborators should be able to access - and contribute to - updating a **common platform** where **tasks can be assigned, and their progress shared in real-time**. In this respect, some projects – for example A PLACE TO BE-COME, and YES WE RENT in Mataró, Spain – reported benefits in a more efficient distribution of work and progress monitoring, and, ultimately, timely completion of tasks by adopting dedicated **collaborative software and/or project management tools** such as [Airtable](#) or [RACI matrices](#)[1].

RACI CHART EXAMPLE							
Project tasks	Senior Analyst	Project Manager	Head of Design	SVP Finance	SEO Lead	Sales Director	Senior Management
Phase 1: Research							
Econometric model	R	I	I	A	C	I	I
Strategic framework	A	I	I	R	I	I	C
Risk factors	R	I	I	A	I	I	I
Phase 2: Structure							
Product specs	I	A	R	I	C	C	C
Design wireframe	I	C	R	I	C	I	C
User journey	I	C	R	I	C	C	C
User experience testing	I	C	R	I	C	C	C
Evaluation framework	I	R	C	I	C	I	C
Development backlog	I	R	C	I	C	I	C
Delivery roadmap	C	R	A	C	C	C	I

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Figure 5 - RACI Chart Example

[1] A RACI chart, also called a RACI matrix, is a type of responsibility assignment matrix (RAM) in project management. In practice, it’s a simple spreadsheet or table that lists all stakeholders on a project and their level of involvement in each task, denoted by the letters R, A, C or I. Once these roles are defined, assignments can be attributed to the roles and work can begin. R, A, C, I stands for: Responsible; Accountable; Consulted; Informed. (source: [Forbes.com](#))

The continuous unexpected changes and the consequent unprecedented uncertainty experienced during the pandemic challenged the initial implementation plans, methods, and schedules of almost all UIA projects. This forced them to implement adaptive management with a high degree of flexibility literally on a day-to-day basis. In this sense, several projects demonstrated a high level of resilience and capacity to achieve their main objectives.

7. Reorganising the implementation methodology

- Integrated projects, by nature, foresee a certain degree of interdependence between actions and activities, and often envisage a cascading approach in which every step directly influences the next. **Switching to a different implementation approach** was in many cases the most effective and resilient response deployed by projects. In some cases (e.g., EPIU in Getafe, Spain) the project switched from a cascading to an iterative approach and implemented activities in an incremental way. In other cases (e.g., CULTURAL H.ID.RA.N.T. in Halandri, Greece or OASIS in Paris, France), projects reorganised their workplans in separate cycles or phases to be run independently from each another.

A Zoom into the Projects

EPIU, Getafe (ES) – ITERATIVE APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTATION

The project-management team changed the implementation method from a cascading to an iterative approach based on mini-pilots. Alternative sets of data were collected, and once a certain amount was collected, the project continued the other activities. This process was repeated as new sets of data were progressively collected. This allowed the project to advance in an iterative and incremental way, meaning that they were improving the activities with each iteration, each iteration acting as mini-pilots.

“The mini-pilots were implemented to test the viability of the future Office of Healthy Homes, in order to evaluate and adjust the future service to the needs of citizens in a safe environment before the actual service was launched.” (Beatriz García, Municipality of Getafe)

A Zoom into the Projects

CULTURAL H.ID.RA.N.T, Halandri (GR) – PARALLEL IMPLEMENTATION CYCLES

The project team reorganised their originally connected and cascading implementation phases, and instead ran task cycles in parallel, adopting a more silo-oriented approach. This way, the project could separate potentially problematic tasks/activities from others, thereby pursuing their goals in parallel and distributing efforts more efficiently.

A Zoom into the Projects

OASIS, Paris (FR) – ITERATIVE APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTATION

The project demonstrated flexibility in adjusting implementation methods, deliverables, and procurement, despite the complicated procedures incumbent on a large public administration such as in Paris. In this case, instead of delivering all school yards enhancements at once, the project split the implementation and delivered them in several phases. This allowed the city to expand its monitoring on how to implement the works, how the beneficiaries were using the new spaces, and how a delivery schedule in several phases actually helped a better appropriation and use of the new spaces by beneficiaries. OASIS was flexible enough to see an obstacle as an opportunity enabling us to deliver the project differently than initially planned and to compare the results of each phase. The OASIS team gathered more data and analysis and were able to fine-tune their deliverables.

8. Redefining priorities and project phases

The pandemic circumstances simply did not allow projects to carry out the activities the way they were originally planned or to keep to the initial schedule on a number of occasions. In these cases, projects were forced to **factor delays** into their planning, and therefore, **reshuffle their schedule and priorities** to ultimately deliver the main project actions/outputs. The Super Circular Estate project in Kerkrade, the Netherlands, developed a remarkable overarching **Delay Plan**, in which they **assessed the actual feasibility** and achievability of each project task and deliverable. On this basis, they then **combined or split tasks, identified priorities, and redefined delivery dates** accordingly. In other instances, projects encountered insurmountable blockages that would impede the full implementation of some of their project tasks/activities. Here, for example, the CULTURAL H.ID.RA.N.T. project not only had to prioritise key deliverables over others, but also needed to find a **compromise between ambition**

and reality. In doing so, they defined a **good-enough level** that allowed them to identify which tasks/activities and/or steps of the original plan could be sacrificed, and which had to be kept in order to still achieve the most important objectives and results.

A Zoom into the Projects

SUPER CIRCULAR ESTATE (SCE), Kerkrade (NL) – DELAY PLAN

“At the start of the SCE project we handed in our application form, which included all the work packages, actions, and deliverables. Together with the PCT (Project Coordination Team) and the SC (Steering Committee) we discussed and monitored the work packages every few months. COVID forced us to draw up a delay plan together with all 12 project partners. This plan described how to deal with delays, budgets, how certain deliverables would be delivered, and whether combination was possible. We also created a ‘Memorandum of Understanding’. In this document, the 12 partners indicated that they would also fulfil their obligations after the official project period had ended.” (Marco Theunissen, Municipality of Kerkrade).

9. Adapting project activities

In several instances, projects needed to change the nature and or operational methodology of activities and deliverables, either to overcome substantial blockages or to address other emerging needs through the project. When empirical research was not possible, some projects (e.g., GAVIUS in Gavà, Spain and SPIRE in Baia Mare, Romania) had to rely on **theoretical assumptions** based on academic literature to move forward with key decisions about their activities. In other cases, projects demonstrated great flexibility and proactivity to deliver the planned solution under quickly evolving conditions. For example, the MILMA project in Fuenlabrada, Spain, adapted each step of the project (selection of the trainees, training content, training itself, engagement of collaborating companies) to the pandemic context.

The Future of Work project in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, linked its original objectives with the need to mitigate the impacts of the health crisis and by doing so designed and delivered responses to suddenly emerging pressing needs in the local community.

A Zoom into the Projects

Future of Work, Cluj-Napoca (RO) – LINKING ORIGINAL GOALS WITH EMERGING NEEDS



The project demonstrated exceptional ability to link project objectives with the mitigation of the impacts of the health crisis. As part of a participatory budget, the project financed sanitary facilities (showers and toilets), Wi-Fi hotspots, and bus passes for the Roma community.

In doing so, the project met its original challenges of facilitating access to work for Roma people while also responding to newly emerging challenges created by the pandemic (e.g., by providing additional sanitation and hygiene facilities to counter the spread of the disease, as well as internet access for home-schooling).

See on UIA website

