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Author:
Frederik Spinnewijn
UIA Expert



The Urban Lab of Europe !

The 5 Bridges project Journal N° 3

Project led by the City of Nantes



**URBAN
POVERTY**



The 5 Bridges project

The 5Bridges project looks at breaking the circle of social and spatial polarisation, targeting the city's homeless and socially excluded population. The project will tackle the interrelated causal factors of urban poverty by creating a one-stop-shop in a new neighbourhood providing comprehensive and tailored services interconnecting different social groups. Designed as a multifunctional area, the one-stop-shop will propose and test new jobs, provide housing and health-related services based on a participatory approach to foster social integration and empowerment (including a neighbourhood restaurant, urban farm, solidarity shop, temporary and social housing and low-threshold-care). Prior to the completion of the building, small-scale labs will be set up allowing the homeless population to test and co-design the activities and user involvement approaches. It will permit this group to participate and connect to the neighbourhood, therefore changing the perception of socially excluded groups. Together with the partnership, social NGOs, public services for employment, housing, health and police, as well as neighbourhood associations will be involved in the project implementation.

Partnership:

- Ville de Nantes
- Nantes Metropole- Organised Agglomeration
- Association Les Eaux Vives- NGO
- Société Anonyme des Marches de l'Ouest- Public/Private Company
- Société d'Aménagement de la métropole ouest atlantique (SAMOA) - Public/Private Company
- Association Emmaus 44- NGO

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 5Bridges project is now in full implementation mode. Almost all aspects of the project are now active or in the process of being launched. The construction of the site is advancing quickly and created a new boost to project dynamics. The work on employment opportunities for the clients of the 5Bridges services is advancing fast. The work on health and housing, two other key components of a sustainable way out of homelessness remain somewhat underdeveloped. The investment into participatory approaches pays off and has created a more collective ownership of the project. The economic reality required a revision of some

of the economic activities but the ambition to have a social restaurant, an urban farm, and a second-hand shop on site remain intact. The project activities proof that the mobilisation of the general public on the issue of homelessness is possible. It remains to be seen how much this potential mobilisation will translate into actual interaction between homeless people and residents of the 5Pont site's neighbourhood. New managing and communication instruments have been introduced which made the management and coordination of the project more efficient.

2. LEADERSHIP

The leadership of the project remains strong. The city authorities, including elected policy makers such as the mayor, continued to actively support the 5Bridges project. At the ceremony for the start of the construction on the site, several important local politicians were present, and the mayor reiterated publicly her belief in the project which she considered an example for other cities in France and abroad. The project leaders made sure that policy makers are kept informed about the project and presented 5Bridges also at a session of the local council. The Directorate Social Inclusion steers the project but managed to get a large part of the Nantes city administration

involved in 5Bridges. The large involvement increases the bureaucracy but secures collective ownership of the project by the city of Nantes.

Les Eaux Vives is playing a more prominent role again after some internal staff changes. This is important because LEV is the mastermind behind the project and plays an important role in the project dynamics. The other leading partners continue to play their role as anticipated.

The coordinator of the project got some assistance from external professionals to help her manage the project and enhance the interaction with and between the leading partners.

3. PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

As the 5Bridges project is a large construction project, public procurement is an essential part of the work. The partners involved have abundant experience with public procurement and it does not pose any major problems. But not only the work related to the actual construction is being procured, also important parts of the social and community work are allocated through public procurement.

Even if the city of Nantes and the key partners have abundant experience with public procurement, the tendering procedures have not always delivered the right results. Some of the contractors have been replaced over the course of last year, and some tenders had to be revised because the services requested turned out not to be financially viable. This is probably inevitable when a project includes so many activities that need to be tendered as is the case for the 5Bridges project. The fact that the project is co-developed with so many partners requires the flexibility to change contracts for services, supplies and works. The regular complications with the tendering processes did not create any unsurmountable extra delays. The replacement of the contractor for the action research happened swiftly and did not jeopardise the dynamics around the co-construction of the project.

Substantial progress has now been made with a key feature of the 5Bridges project – the urban farm. A contractor has been found and a sound business plan developed. For the social restaurant

it was more difficult to develop a viable economic model. It looks as if a catering service will need to be added to allow enough earnings. A potential contractor has solid experience with catering, but their way of working might not be adapted to the profile of the clients of the 5Bridges services who will form the main part of the workforce of the restaurant. Little progress was made on the second-hand shop and other social economy projects for which there will be space on the 5Bridges site. The rent for the buildings seems to high to allow social economy initiatives to thrive.

Very few stakeholders involved in fight against homelessness which are not involved as partners in the 5Bridges project have used the many public tenders to link up to the project. Even Emmaus which was considered a sure partner for the second-hand shop is reconsidering its potential involvement. A more prominent involvement of the *established* homeless sector would be useful to strengthen the transformative impact of the 5Bridges project on the way homelessness will be addressed in the future.

The procurement of the construction works and supplies continues to be difficult. Some further delays were inevitable because of major alteration to the design of the social restaurant and the lack of skilled labour force such as electricians in the region of Nantes. The partners are hopeful that they can avoid unsurmountable delays similar to the unexpected time lost for the decontamination of the soil.

4. ORGANISATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

The driving force behind the 5Bridges project is Les Eaux Vives. LEV is a major NGO player in the fight against homelessness in Nantes. After some important staff changes and sick leave of a leading staff member, LEV has been able to give the 5Bridges project a new boost. The experimentations with different forms of supported employment for the future clients of the 5Bridges and with the urban farm, for instance, have progressed substantially. The work to prepare the staff, volunteers, and homeless clients to the changes that the 5Bridges project will bring have also intensified. It is clear that LEV holds the key to the success of the project because it is the only leading partner that is able to proactively bring the whole project to life in all its dimension. It is also the partner that is organisationally and intellectually most invested in the 5Bridges project.

With the advancement of the project the number of organisations and people involved in the project increases. It is a challenge for the coordinator of 5Bridges to keep everybody

sufficiently involved, and to ensure deadlines are met. But she clearly managed to step up the number of activities in 2019 as compared to previous years. The introduction of a range of new management tools and the web application Basecamp helped to improve communication, planning, and monitoring of progress, although there is still room for improvement.

There has been a clear increase in the number of formal meetings between organisations and informal meetings between individuals as part of the project. The large number of activities require sufficient interaction between the partners in order to ensure the project dynamics remain coherent and contribute to the project objectives.

The decision to recruit an agency to provide support with the management of the project was the right one. With delays related to the construction of the site, the financial management turned out a real challenge. Thanks to the external support the project coordinators have regained control over the management.

5. PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

Participation is built into the 5Bridges project as a key element of success. The focus of the project is on homeless people as the end beneficiaries and the residents living close to the 5Bridges site.

During the last year considerable progress has been made to engage homeless people in focus groups, seminars, and experimentations. The longstanding experience of ATD Fourth World to engage in an empowering way with vulnerable people and the support of new external professional facilitators has allowed a meaningful involvement of the future homeless clients of the 5Bridges project. The number of homeless people that actively engaged was small, but the outcome of the discussion was useful and practical. Their views were *confronted* with the views of the professionals and volunteers who will be working in the 5Bridges services. With the arrival of the new contractor Periscop the partners changed the methodology to allow for more affective interaction between the different stakeholders. It helped to overcome some of the initial scepticism of the different groups and collectively embrace the new way of working needed to make the 5Bridges project a success. The risk that the views of homeless people would as key experts would remain unchallenged did not materialise, and professional expertise was sufficiently taken into account.

Several activities took place in 2019 to involve the local community and to experiment with the interaction between homeless people and the average citizens. The mobilisation of the residents seemed easier now that the construction on the site has started and the 5Bridges becomes more tangible. Since the activities did not take

place on the site of 5Bridges, it remains unclear to what extent the mobilisation reflects future involvement of the residents living in the neighbourhood of the 5Bridges services.

Part of the 5Bridges project are the thematic support groups on health, employment, and local governance. The idea is to reach out the external stakeholders not actively involved in the project to secure longer-term integration of the clients of the 5Bridges services. Stakeholders have been identified, but the number of meetings that took place is limited. It might be useful to wait with stepping up the number of meetings until there is more clarity and shared understanding of how the 5Bridges services will work among the partners actively involved in the project.

Participation is usually a strength, but it becomes a weakness if it is not adapted to the objectives of the project. If the ambition is indeed to use the 5Bridges project as a lever to change fundamentally the way homelessness is addressed in Nantes, the investment in wide participation is certainly useful and necessary. The change of paradigm will affect the wider ecosystem of social, health and housing services, and early involvement of a large set of stakeholders can only benefit the new approach to homelessness. If 5Bridges project evolves in a new set of services in a precise location that is a mere addition to what already exist for homeless people, then the time and money spent on engaging with so many actors might be a waste of time. It seems that there is no shared understanding of what the ambition of the 5Bridges project exactly is among the leading partners and sometimes key individuals in the same organisation seem not entirely on the same

wavelength. A change of paradigm goes beyond the stated objectives of the UIA contract, and time pressure might steer the leading partners

towards a *lighter* set of objectives. The work on participation has to be evaluated, and potentially reorganised, in the context of these dynamics.

6. COMMUNICATION

The communication and publicity work are effective.

Several leaflets have been produced that give an excellent overview of the project, the wide range of activities, and the stakeholders involved. The leaflets can be used for internal as well as external purposes and lay out clearly the logic of the 5Bridges project. They also explain well the different approaches underpinning the project such as the participatory approach, the multi-thematic approach, and the geographical approach, and how these different approaches are linked and overlap.

The regular newsletter is useful but probably a little bit *thin* in terms of content. It is good to allow space for homeless service users in the newsletter, but there might be more creative and considerate ways of representing their voice.

Four new video documentaries about the project were made – on the start of construction on the site, on the opening of the urban farm, on the seminars organised to involve homeless, volunteers, and professionals in

the conceptualisation and organisation of the services on site, and on the experimentation of “few hours contracts” to help homeless people connect with the labour market. The videos are made in a professional way and are very informative. They are one of the most prominent features of the 5Bridges website.

The mayor of Nantes Johanna Rolland is one of the strongest supporters of the 5Bridges project. She could probably feature more in the promotional material to reach out to a larger audience.

The enthusiasm about the project among the organisations and people involved is clearly growing. That creates a positive vibe around the project and helps to convince the wider neighbourhood that 5Bridges will be an asset for the local community. There are indeed good reasons to believe the project will improve dramatically the situation of homeless people in Nantes. But there might be a need for some caution as the actual impact of the project will only be known after homeless people moved into the shelter, the day centre and other services.

7. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The monthly progress reports continued and are a useful tool for all stakeholders involved in the project to follow the progress and to get information on the remaining obstacles. The reports help to navigate through the many documents made available on Basecamp.

Evaluations of activities and plans are now more regularly available as stand-alone documents or as part of other reports. They show that the plans have to be constantly adapted to the financial and social realities. Some ideas such as the social restaurant and the second-hand shop had to be rethought to make them financially valuable. The co-constructing with homeless people turned out to be more complex than anticipated. Interacting with smaller groups of homeless clients of LEV turned out to be more effective. The change of paradigm that the 5Bridges project wants to provoke does not come automatically

with the concretisation and implementation of the activities. Addressing homelessness in a different way requires hard work to convince both professionals and volunteers. The project leaders and partners adapt well to the outcomes of the formal and continual evaluations and are not afraid to change course when necessary.

The new set of performance indicators produced with professional external help seem to work. It has been clearly identified who is responsible for the collection of the information and what methods will be used to obtain the data. There is a strong focus on getting feedback from the homeless people involved in the project. This is welcome but for some of the indicators the number of people surveyed is so small that it raises questions about the quality and relevance of the information gathered.

8. UPSCALING

The focus of the project leaders is very much on delivery, and therefore less attention has been devoted to promoting the 5Bridges approach in other cities in France or abroad. Nevertheless, articles on the 5Bridges project have appeared in well-read French newspaper such as Ouest France and 20Minutes over the course of 2019. An article was also published in the newsletter of UNCASS which is sent to all public social services of cities in France and must have generated some interest among local policy makers. Most interest in the 5Bridges project seems to come however from the environmental sector because of the urban farm. Urban farming is still a novelty in France and Nantes is considered to be one of the front runners.

The 5Bridges project decided to try to obtain the national label of EcoQuartier. The label is an initiative of the national Ministry of Cohesion and applicants must go through 4 stages before they can call themselves an EcoQuartier. The procedure should be finalised by the end of the year. It will give the 5Bridges project further national and international renown.

The project also gets international exposure with presentations at international conferences. There is also some occasional interest from cities abroad such as in Barcelona where a major NGO wants to integrate elements of the 5Bridges project in a relatively small urban renovation project.

What makes the 5Bridges project special is its strong participatory approach and the involvement of a multitude of local stakeholders from a variety of sectors. The way this happens is to a large extent defined by the local context in Nantes and therefore not easily scalable.

There is further potential to promote the replication of the key elements and the philosophy of the 5Bridges project at European level. Apart from connecting with European social NGOs and European networks of local authorities, such as FEANTSA and Eurocities, it might be interesting to also present the project to European and international organisation active in the area of social innovation and social impact investment such as EVPA for instance.

9. SOME PROJECT FEATURES WITH GREAT POTENTIAL

The experimentation with innovative ways to connect homeless people to work and employment is a success. It showed that an employment contract for a few hours per week which can be taken up in a flexible way can make a difference and prepares homeless people well for more intensive work. It can be offered as an alternative or on top of work arrangement which provide homeless people with material aid, such as a meal, in return for their hours worked. The experimentation showed that homeless people are willing to work if the work arrangements are adapted to their needs. It also showed that people experiencing homelessness are keen to work in services where they are traditionally served by professionals and volunteers. Most homeless people involved in the experiment felt more respected and valued when they were offered the possibility to work in the social restaurant where they eat. But to offer these working arrangements on a bigger scale will require a substantial change of attitude and way

of working of the professionals and volunteers involved in running social economy services such as the future social restaurant on the 5Bridges site.

The urban farm is rapidly becoming a key feature of the 5Bridges project. Even if only in a test phase the farm has triggered a lot of interest and enthusiasm, and is the part of the project that has mobilised most residents from the local community. The interaction with the local residents on the 5Bridges site is most likely to happen through the urban farm which will be laid out partly on the ground and partly on the rooftop of one of the building. The experimentation with urban farming has shown that it is probably one of the most effective social economy projects to connect homeless people with the neighbourhood. It seems also relatively straightforward to make the activity economically self-sustaining especially if ecological features and a focus on healthy eating are part of the offer.

10. SOME PROJECT DEVELOPMENTS THAT REQUIRE ATTENTION

The link with housing remains underdeveloped. The solution to homelessness is housing, often with support. But the route towards affordable housing options from the 5Bridges site remains unclear and undefined. There will be handful apartments reserved for homeless resident on the 5Bridges site but that will be insufficient considering the much higher number of homeless people who will use the shelter accommodation on the same site. These apartments are offered on a temporary basis as a *trampoline* towards other housing options *off site*. But even if regular vacancies will occur, they will never suffice to absorb the demand from the clients of the shelter beds. The 5Bridges project has great potential to function as a *gateway* to Housing First solutions. But this would require close cooperation with social and affordable housing providers to secure a sufficiently large offer of permanent housing

solutions for the 5Bridges clients. We estimate 50 to 100 dwelling per year to be sufficient and realistic. (see for more information ZOOM on role of 5Bridges in Housing First 2019).

Another aspect that requires more attention is the actual involvement of the neighbourhood of the 5Bridges project. Now that the construction is advancing rapidly, it would be useful to try to locate some of the activities to promote interaction between 5Bridges clients and service providers and the neighbourhood on the site itself. But this is not possible just yet because of security issues. The fact that the hardware of the project (the construction) and the software (social activities) have not happened in the same time frame might have an impact on the success of the project. The remaining year will need to be used in a creative way to connect the social activities to the site.

11. LEARNING POINTS

These are the main learning points from the project in 2019:

- Social economy projects are not cheap, and interaction with the neighbourhood as potential customers is often insufficient to make them economically viable.
- Participation of all relevant stakeholders is hard work and requires professional expertise. Participation requires flexibility to adapt to a diversity of opinions because a consensus is not always possible.
- Housing needs to be a key part of any reintegration project for homeless people. No matter how dynamic the site and surrounding services, the outflow to independent life will only be possible if housing is offered in a proactive way.
- Cooperation with a wide variety of stakeholders is necessary and possible but requires strong leadership and a clear vision.

Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) is an Initiative of the European Union that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges. Based on article 8 of ERDF, the Initiative has a total ERDF budget of EUR 372 million for 2014-2020.

UIA projects will produce a wealth of knowledge stemming from the implementation of the innovative solutions for sustainable urban development that are of interest for city practitioners and stakeholders across the EU. This journal is a paper written by a UIA Expert that captures and disseminates the lessons learnt from the project implementation and the good practices identified. The journals will be structured around the main challenges of implementation identified and faced at local level by UIA projects. They will be published on a regular basis on the UIA website.



Urban Innovative Actions

Les Arcuriales
45D rue de Tournai
F- 59000 Lille

+33 (0)3 61 76 59 34
info@uia-initiative.eu
www.uia-initiative.eu

Follow us on **twitter**
@UIA_Initiative
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