



### Case 40 Brussels, Belgium: Sustainable Neighbourhood Contracts, 1989<sup>1</sup>

#### Problem to resolve

Participation of the community is desired in most urban upgrading policies in order to assure sustainable results, but it is less frequently realized in practice – especially when there is an exchange of the mayor or the governing party after local elections.

#### Neighbourhood contracts can support sustainable participation

Faced with significant problems of physical and socio-economic decay in the centre and the older suburban areas, the Brussels Capital Region has been implementing an integrated renewal and development policy for deprived neighbourhoods. The major instrument in this revitalisation policy is the Neighbourhood Contract. A Neighbourhood contract must define a clearly limited area, address housing provision, the renovation of buildings or public spaces, but also include socio-economic actions, like the setting up, or remodelling of infrastructure or services (social, cultural, sporting and others), at the local or district level.



Participation is part of the Neighbourhood Contract<sup>2</sup>



Invitation for a public hearing for the neighbourhood contract<sup>3</sup>



A neighbourhood contract proposal is normally written by a consultant under the supervision of the local authority. To ensure that the programme best meets the needs of the district, the Commune has to organise ways in which the people who live, work and visit the district are kept informed and involved. Operations deal with three large action areas – housing, public spaces and socio-economic development. Actions may consist of:

- upgrading existing housing;
- creating new housing units;
- upgrading or creating spaces reserved for handicraft or industrial activities, associated with complementary housing initiatives;
- refurbishing public spaces;
- creation or upgrading of the infrastructure and equipment present in the district, whether socio-cultural, sporting or other;
- setting up social and economic activities

The formal contract is signed between the Brussels regional government and the eligible districts of execution, which must belong to list of neighbourhoods in deprivation. This list includes 13.8% of the capital region or 30% of its population. More than 50% of the funds were invested in (mostly social) house building or improvement, 20% for upgrading of public space, about 25% for socio-economic measures.

Since 2010 also measures to reduce climate change can be financed. Individual house owners can also apply for improvement grants funded from a different source. Remarkable is the high degree of community participation in all measures of the program. The rotating principle in the distribution of funds assures a wide coverage within the region and avoids the nutrition of a customary grant recipient mentality. →**Tool URR 3**



### Review of the experience

Twenty years after its introduction, the Brussels Contrats de Quartier, thanks to their flexibility and adjustments, can be considered a successful and innovative urban renewal process. Remarkable are a clear time frame, a predetermined upper limit on the use of public funds, the targeting of a small-scale territorial limitation and reliable rules for public participation.

As one of three autonomous regions within Belgium, the capital city has developed strong competences in spatial planning, housing, transport etc. since 1989. The Brussels regional government must respond to an evident socio-spatial divide due to the early deindustrialisation and changing European capital functions. After decades of low investment in central and western districts, efforts

have been to stabilize and upgrade them from the early 1990s onwards in order to offset the better-located suburban neighbourhoods in the east of the city.

The *Plan Régional de Développement* (PRD), which was developed in 1992, defined these areas as a "priority areas for housing development" and introduced effective instruments to attract. One type of these instruments are the "Neighbourhood Contracts", which are based on an agreement between the capital city region and the various municipalities. These require that the neighbourhoods concerned become legal partners in the 'Priority Development Area of Housing and Renewal' (Espace de Développement Renécé du Logement et de la Rénovation - EDRLR), which represents 13.8% of the total City area and well over a third of its population.

Priority Areas have been defined by low standards of living, neglected public spaces, a high proportion of young people, high unemployment rates, a low average income and a high proportion of foreigners originating from Southern and Eastern Europe and developing countries.

Between 1994 and 2008, 52 "Neighbourhood Contracts" were launched and each received around € 10 million. Since 1999, four new areas have been added to the program every year. From 1999 to 2006 alone, € 371 million was used. The funds came mostly from the metropolitan region and its individual communities, later also from the Belgian government. More than half of the money went into the modernization of old and construction of new apartments.

Almost 20% of the funds went to public works. About a quarter of the funds were dedicated for socio-economic projects with an increasing share. Since 2010, climate protection measures have also been funded. On average, 25-30 projects have been realized in the neighbourhoods during the period of the program.

From the beginning, the length of each contract was limited to four years. For housing, an extension and transfer of unused funds can be requested for another two years. Measures in public space are mostly implemented within the first two years. Socio-economic measures cannot be extended. Thanks to this limitation and the rotating process large parts of the priority zone defined in 1992 could benefit within just less than two decades. This assured wide public acceptance of the urban renewal policy, while the affected communities were confident that all areas in need of renewal would sooner or later benefit from the program. An interim review shows that an average of 30 apartments were renovated or newly constructed in each assisted area until 2008. Mostly social housing was subsidized while private investors were rarely targeted.

	
<p>Environmental improvement in the community of Saint-Gilles<sup>6</sup></p>	<p>Batiment L'Espoir –Building for Hope<sup>7</sup></p>

Apart from social housing, private owners could receive cheap loans, subsidies and tax rebates for various modernization measures independently from the contracts. Investment in public space and the architectural quality of construction have undoubtedly contributed improved the image and acceptance of inner-city areas. The establishment of over seventy local amenities such as club homes, neighbourhood homes or youth centres justify a continuation of such interventions. Even critical commentators recognize the innovative combination of building measures with the qualification and employment of unemployed residents, but criticize the short term nature of such projects which can hardly assure a sustainable raise in the quality of living for current residents and the desired return the middle class residents to the city centre.

Remarkable is participatory practice approach within the program. Before concluding the contract, a planning office will assist in the preparation of proposals for possible interventions including a cost estimate for each subproject. A "Local Commission for Integrated Development" will be set up in this phase, which will involve staff from both levels of administration as well as local stakeholders who are elected at a general neighbourhood assembly. All residents will be invited by letter; local clubs play an important multiplier role and may even go from house to house in migrant communities to address difficult-to-activate target groups.

Regular general meetings and committee meetings are required. The majority of the seats of the commission are reserved for representatives of citizens and local associations. In addition, representatives of the respective municipality, the social welfare office, the capital region region and the respective (French-speaking or Flemish) community commission are represented. In the municipality of Schaarbeek, the involvement of a mediator between the planning office, the administration and local actors has proven to be successful.

However, the participatory culture within the "Contracts for Quarters" is not always positively mentioned. While the political leaders praise the open discussions between the municipalities, state development agencies and local residents, other independent observers come up with a more critical conclusion. Some emphasizes the notable differences between participating municipalities, or criticize the limited representativeness of the "local commissions for integrated development". Difficult still remains the participation of immigrants, who make up a significant share among the neighbourhood residents: A remaining 'culture of mistrust' towards migrant associations has been perceived as a threat to social cohesion.

## Credentials

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## References

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<sup>1</sup> , <http://www.quartiers.irisnet.be/>

<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://www.quartiers.irisnet.be/>

<sup>3</sup> Source: <http://www.quartiers.irisnet.be/>

<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://quartieralbertwijk.blogspot.de>

<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://www.25ans-sprb.irisnet.be/25ans/Rapport25ans-FR.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.21solutions.eu/project/participatory-piece-of-the-bosnia-sustainable-neighborhood-contract-in-saint-gilles/?lang=en>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.architectura.be/img-proj-norm/Espoir%202.jpg>