

EXPLORING THE EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION OF URBACT EUROPEAN PROGRAMME

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Abstract: *Over the past two decades, scholarly investigations have focused on the role that municipal partnerships play in carrying out urban policies, ranging from those concerning the environment, sustainable transportation, employment policies, and research to those concerning social inclusion, education, and lifelong learning. This paper summarizes the key findings of a study on how the Urbact III program's thematic objectives include (or do not include) education and training. The content analysis of data (2014-2020) supplied by Urbact served as the foundation for this analysis. Comparisons are made about the position that educational interventions hold within city networks, the relationship that exists between the education component and the size of cities, and the appeal of programs with an emphasis on education. The results of this study show that, in comparison to programs focused on social inclusion (29%), the educational component does not attract the attention of local actors more than 4% of the time. The indicator of the analysis that targeted the distribution of Thematic Objective: education, skills and lifelong learning by size of cities shows that the big cities were the ones that invested in educational partnerships. Furthermore, the findings of this research indicate that certain procedures for promoting educational initiatives are required at the European level. The study shows that initiatives from towns in Italy, Belgium, and Lithuania prioritized education, for organizations like NGOs, and that in Romania, local actors from the 18 program-participating cities responded to the primary requests, resulting in the implementation of 36 sustainable urban development initiatives.*

Keywords: *education; inclusion; URBACT; network of cities; sustainable policy.*

1. Introduction

During the last decade, the educational policies were addressed in academic debates, with an emphasis on research aimed at entrepreneurial education (Thomas, 2023), educational structures, functions, impact and effects.

From this point of view, the intervention mechanisms of the European Union (EU) represent a special dimension of analysis. Against this backdrop, the Urbact programme proved promising in terms of supporting cities by implementing strategies for sustainable development.

Nowadays, cities are at the crossroads of the greatest challenges and opportunities: urban shrinking cities (Țăruș and al., 2022), urban segregation (Musterd, 2020; Iosif, 2024), mobility (Miskolczi et. al., 2021), smart cities (Rothe and al., 2018; Van Twist and al., 2023) and urban resilience (natural, physical, social, economic and institutional) (Beilin & Wilkinson, 2015; Zhang & Li, 2018; Ribeiro & Gonçalves, 2019).

In this context, Urbact promotes a series of actions, aimed at developing vertical and horizontal integration policies. On the one hand, the vertical approach implies the collaboration between local authorities and national and international representatives, on the other hand, on the horizontal level, the analysed dimensions aim at the economic, social and environmental spheres, which are the basis of strategic partnership networks developed at local level, interconnecting.

2. Literature Review

In this section, we first present the Urbact programs, which in the last 20 years have promoted sustainable urban development.

The first Urbact program, Urbact I took place in the period 2002-2006 and targeted actions directed towards the European urban regeneration policy, implemented by 217 partner cities and 38 networks.

The Urbact II program from 2007-2013 (the period in which one of the most important European investment programs in the development of human resources POSDRU took place in Romania) focuses on the activities of 519 partner cities and 46 networks.

The primary focus of the research is the Urbact III program, which from 2014 to 2020 organized approximately 83 networks, comprising 679 partner cities. These networks, in turn, promoted ten

thematic objectives (TO) in areas including research, ICT, SMEs, low-carbon economies, climate change, environment (with a focus on protection and resources), sustainability in logistics and transportation, labor mobility, social inclusion, education, and lifelong learning (URBACT, 2021).

Urbact has been a pioneer for integrated urban development. To achieve this objective, Urbact encourages European cities to collaborate, to learn from their own experiences and to exchange good practices, to strengthen their capacity and know-how, to share lessons learned throughout Europe.

Urbact acts as a catalyst that develops processes and tools known as the “Urbact Method”, through which decision-makers, cities and citizens participate in the development of new models of local governance.

The Urbact method is based on 3 fundamental principles: integration, participation and learning through action (Stigendal, 2006).

The integration. For connecting, the integrated approach combines a number of different dimensions: vertical cooperation between all levels, from governance to local actors; horizontal cooperation between different political fields and departments of the municipality; territorial cooperation between neighborhoods, municipalities, rural areas and regions and the balance between hard and soft measures, hard meaning investments in infrastructure and soft representing the development of the human factor, such as administrative capacity and knowledge exchange.

The Participation: a participatory approach is one that recognizes the voice of all those who have a say in the city. This implies the involvement of citizens, co-creation and a multi-level dialogue. Public participation is a positive dynamic in which all members of the local community are involved in the change process, stakeholders collaborate with the authorities to enhance urban living. They try to find solutions by creating a genuine feeling of accountability and ownership.

Learning through action implies an increase in the level of knowledge and working skills with partners, solving tangible issues through the design and testing of personalized actions. This includes managing the policy cycle from planning, resource identification and action planning for policy implementation and monitoring, impact assessment and internalization of lessons learned.

In this study, we investigate the way in which education policy is present in Urbact III initiatives. We are specifically interested in exploring the place occupied by the educational dimension within local action networks. Thus, the purpose of the study is to see the city not only through the prism of an actor, but, moreover, the city becomes, through Urbact, a connector (Rozenblat & Melancon, 2013) that is the basis of the relationships between cities (networks).

At the European level, for a long time, educational policies were dominated by those of the Nordic countries, of continental Europe and by the UK, benefiting from the expertise of the leaders and relying on solid resources (experience, knowledge, promotion and, above all, financing) were the benchmark for analysis (Charret and Chankseliani, 2023).

According to Welsh and Swain (2020), the term “urban education” is commonly defined in terms of six factors: population/location/geography; enrollment; student demographic composition; school resources; inequities and educational inequality; and social and economic environment.

In this context, Urbact III directed its centre of action on the learning efforts at the local level, the interactions and tools generated by the timetable for the city (by cities and for cities), to the detriment of a top-down intervention, guided from the top, as in the case of many European programs that elaborate templates, methodological guides, evaluation norms and objectives to be achieved (Domorenok and al., 2023: p. 784). Moreover, in establishing the Urbact partner networks, the cities could choose from the 10 thematic objectives, depending on the local analyses and their own development policies/visions.

This “decisional autonomy” was correlated with that of “good practices” (component of the European idea of “good governance” (Vettoreto, 2009).

An important indicator in the analysis of the impact of this program is the fact that the partner cities were included in large cities, medium-sized and small from the 4 different sub-regions of the EU: South, East, North and West, their “mapping” being the subject of numerous studies (Briot et al., 2021).

Urbact III (2014-2020) analysed 3 partner networks focused on the educational dimension: CITIES4CSR

To promote inclusive, sustainable, and innovative urban transformations, the network will increase cooperation between enterprises, civic society and municipalities through the comprehensive capacity building of local players. In order to better address unmet and rising local requirements, the project intends to increase the added value and role of enterprises' CSR efforts at the local level, towards social innovation and urban regeneration, with a special emphasis on education.

ON BOARD

Local governments can be used as a tool for innovative education. The project's goal is to assist local actors and governments in forming new alliances and jointly developing policies that will equip young people with the hard and soft skills they need to become involved, active citizens who can meet the challenges of emerging societies.

Stay Tuned!

Stay Tuned! aims at lowering the alarmingly high rates of early departure from training or education. The project's key goals are to advance the field's urban know-how by using an integrated approach to delivery, preserving stakeholder engagement and coordinating delivery-related decision-making, establishing effective indicators and monitoring systems, and transitioning from plan to action.

Based on the reviewed research (data), the following two questions, guided this study:

RQ1: Is the choice of partner networks on the thematic education, skills and lifelong learning objective influenced by cities size?

RQ2: What are the major characteristics of TO 10 projects?

3. Methods

In this research we relied on the thematic content analysis of the data extracted from the website "https://urbact.eu/". Urbact.eu is an updated site of the European action Urbact, which lists all 3 completed programs and updated data of the 4th one (ongoing until 2027). For this research we collected Urbact III data.

Thematic analysis is defined as the method used to identify and analyse certain patterns in a series of data (Briot et al., 2021), highlighting the main dimensions that are present in the analysed corpus.

Following Braun & Clarke's model, we highlight the following stages of the thematic analysis:

1. Familiarization with the data present on "https://urbact.eu/";
2. Coding;
3. Identifying and explaining the educational dimension of Urbact III;
4. Presentation of the results.

4. Results

Regarding the thematic coverage of submitted proposal only 4% refer to education, skills and lifelong learning, the most proposal covering TOs 6 and 9.

The analysis of the partner networks on TO 9 shows that the topics addressed are: inclusive cultural policies (network of 8 cities); representative and participatory democracy (8 small and medium-sized cities); the creation of an NGO residence, which provides resources to improve NGOs' capacity, data sharing, experience and good practices (6 cities); policies dedicated to the integration and quality of life of migrants (arrival cities project); the transformation of social services (nine partner cities).

Table 1. Thematic Objectives (TO) (1-10). Distribution of projects (2014-2020).

TO main sectors	No.	%	Ranking
9. Social inclusion	24	29%	1
6. Environment	17	20%	2
1. Research and innovation	10	12%	3
3. SMEs	10	12%	3
4. Low-carbon economy (LE)	5	6%	5
8. Work on labour mobility	5	6%	5
2. IC technology	4	5%	7
7. Sustainability in transport	3	4%	8
10. Education and lifelong learning	3	4%	8
5. Climate change	2	2	10

Source: Author elaboration based on the data reported in the URBACT database

At the same time, an important indicator is the size of the cities that were involved in the implementation of the Urbact III actions. Urbact program data shows that the program has focused on

decision-makers in small and medium cities: in this sense, 65% of all the cities involved have less than 250,000 residents.

Table 2. Urbact III. Size of cities - Partner distribution.

No. of residents	No.	%
Very small	154	23%
Small	129	19%
Medium	156	23%
Large	97	14%
Very large	142	21%
Grand total	678	

Source: Author elaboration based on the data reported in the URBACT database

The first factor we suggested explaining is the connection between the size of the partner city and the need for initiatives to implement actions aimed at the educational dimension.

To understand the connection between the two indicators, we cross correlated education, skills and lifelong learning by the size of the cities.

The analysis according to Table 3 shows that large and very large cities are involved in a proportion of 28% each, to the detriment of very small and small cities that have a percentage of 16%, respectively 20%, the latter being less proactive in the Urbact networks, with activities specific to the educational component.

Table 3. Urbact III (2014-2020). Distribution of Thematic Objective: Education, skills, and lifelong learning by size of cities.

TO/ size of cities	Very small	Small	Medium	Large	Very large
Education, skills and lifelong learning	4	5	2	7	7
	16%	20%	8%	28%	28%

Source: Author elaboration based on the data reported in the URBACT database

The analysis of the connection between the thematic objectives and the 7 calls from 2014-2020 shows that the educational dimension attracted the interest of the partner cities in 3 of them (4%).

TO/ URBACT III calls	APN	APN	IN	SDG	TN	TN 2	UTM	Grand total
1. Research, technological development and innovation	3	2			4	1		10
2. Access to and use of ICT	1	2			1			4
3. Competitiveness of SMEs	4	2	1		1	1	1	10
4. Low carbon economy in all sectors	1	2			1		1	5
5. Climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management					1	1		2
6. Environmental protection and resource efficiency	2	7	1	1	4	2		17
7. Sustainable transport	1	2						3
8. Employment and labour mobility	2	1					2	5
9. Social inclusion	6	4	1		10	2	1	24
10. Education, skills and lifelong learning with Lead Partner from Italy, Belgium, Latvia		1	1		1			3

Grand total	20	23	4	1	23	7	5	83
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Source: Author elaboration based on the data reported in the URBACT database

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The distribution of Urbact III projects is analyzed, and the results indicate that, despite the extremely high needs, the education and lifelong learning dimension—which is mentioned in the speeches of European actors—remains a vulnerable sector. The focus is on social inclusion, which can be attained without a strong educational foundation.

This study can provide practical insights regarding the new dimensions of urban life in which we must invest, but especially the way in which this intervention must be carried out. Thus, the Urbact program, but especially Urbact III, has the merit of starting a bottom-up intervention.

The relevance of the program also lies in the fact that a new perspective of Europeanization is taking shape, in the sense that the vision of the local actors is the one that shapes the transnational structures, using all the resources in accordance with their own objectives. The study's conclusions cannot be broadly applied because it solely uses dates from the Urbact period. To gain deeper understanding of how to support educational initiatives, additional research on education and urban regions is consequently required.

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