

Halandri, Greece

Green life in the city of Halandri

The case of Halandri is an example of how local, regional and international cooperation through EU-funded networking can give the opportunity to local administrations to develop specific planning and policy tools for sustainable urban development and to improve their operational capacity. 'Green Life in the City of Halandri' is one of the projects implemented with ERDF support, related to the Local Action Plan elaborated in the framework of the URBACT II RegGov Fast Track Network.

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This case is an example of how local, regional and international cooperation through EU-funded networking can give the opportunity to local administrations to develop specific planning and policy tools for sustainable urban development and to improve their operational capacity. Furthermore, by funding a number of local development projects the ERDF is supporting the Municipality of Halandri to implement, step by step, the Local Action Plan for the area of Patima elaborated in the framework of the URBACT II RegGov Fast Track Thematic Network.

In 2008 the municipality of Halandri became part of the Thematic Network for 'Regional Governance of Sustainable Integrated Development of Deprived Urban Areas' (RegGov). The delivery of an integrated Local Action Plan for a disadvantaged neighbourhood of each partner's city, with the participation of local actors, was an integral component of the three-year learning process.

The main objective of the creation of a Local Action Plan (LAP) for Patima was the elaboration of a sustainable urban strategy for an area with important problems of under-development in terms of urban infrastructure, public utility networks and public spaces, due to the rapid urbanisation it had undergone in the last 10 years. The ERDF-funded project 'Green Life in the City of Halandri', which delivered a new public square in the area of Patima, is one of the steps taken to implement the priorities identified in the LAP. ERDF support for the entire project amounts to €1 020 000 and was delivered through the Attica Operational Programme.

Other projects already implemented or under way in the area, with ERDF support or the municipality's own funds, include sewerage and drainage infrastructure, flood protection systems and educational and social infrastructure.

The task of delivering a concrete Action Plan with the participation of local stakeholders, together with a substantial and fruitful collaboration with international partners both from competitiveness and convergence regions, has been a very significant legacy for Halandri. Furthermore, close cooperation with the IMA of Attica Region through the Fast Track labelling has been important for the improvement of the municipal agencies' competences and the formation of a methodology for participative integrated planning that can be transferred and used in other areas.

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In 2008 the municipality of Halandri became part of the URBACT II Thematic Network for the 'Regional Governance of Sustainable Integrated Development of Deprived Urban Areas (RegGov)', which was dedicated to developing models for the successful governance, or steering, of integrated development processes in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. URBACT is a European exchange and learning programme enabling cities to work together to develop pragmatic solutions to major urban challenges, that integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions.

The collaborative context provided by URBACT was the perfect opportunity for the municipality of Halandri to get inspiration and concrete know-how to develop a local strategy for integrated sustainable urban development in one of its rather underdeveloped areas. With input from the European partners and experts of the network, it applied participatory and collaborative governance mechanisms, which were quite novel in the Greek context. A number of follow-up investment projects, related to the above process, are being implemented with ERDF support by the municipality contributing to the improvement of living conditions in the area.

Deprivation in a privileged area: Halandri and the Patima neighbourhood

The municipality of Halandri is one of the biggest and wealthiest in the wider metropolitan Athens area. It is situated in the north-eastern part of the centre of Athens. It started as a rural area with agricultural activities and was rapidly populated after the mid-20th century both by Athenians leaving the centre in quest of 'good suburban areas' (upward social mobility), and also by more affluent newcomers. Today it formally has 74 000 inhabitants, but the actual population is estimated at more than 100 000, which is even larger if we add the number of commuters working in the area. Halandri is a middle- to high-income area and is generally considered one of the privileged areas of Athens. Real estate values before the crisis were between €2 200 and €3 000 per square metre. Its main land use is residential and its economic activities are primarily related to commerce and services. It has an extended commercial area in its centre with supra-local appeal. Also, many big Greek and international ICT companies, private medical centres, private schools and colleges are based in Halandri.

Although Halandri could by no means be characterised as a disadvantaged or deprived neighbourhood, the area of Patima, which was selected as a target for the RegGov network, has some peculiarities (which are by no means unique in Greece) that could allow the term. It consists of two distinct areas, Patima I and Patima II, and sits in the northernmost part of the city. These are the most recently urbanised areas. Unregulated private housing construction had started long before their insertion in the spatial plan of the city (Patima I in 1998, Patima II in 2004).

The first residents of the area were peasants and Roma. During the 80s and 90s, while the adjacent suburbs were developing, Patima was viewed as a cheaper location since it was still not included in the plan, and urbanisation started slowly and sparsely. Saturation and excessive increases in land values in nearby areas encouraged more and more high-income (and very high-income) households to settle in the area and to build luxurious houses and villas. Nevertheless, real construction pressure and overactivity started in 2004, when a new metro station was opened. Promoters and real estate companies expanded their activity in the area, leading to a construction boom. The population of Patima rose from 2 395 residents in 2001 to more than 10 000 in 2012.

From a completely rural setting, the area was very quickly transformed into a high-end suburb. The rapid housing development overtook the extension of city plans and infrastructure. And so this supposedly luxurious residential area was left with almost no urban infrastructure – technical or social – given that the rapidly and massively created needs could not be met by the municipality in the respective time period. Meanwhile the absence of prior planning led to a non-functional urban fabric and an incoherent distribution of public and open spaces.

It is clear that deprivation in Patima has a particular meaning; however the problems and shortcomings are many. At the same time, being a new and quite unstructured neighbourhood it has a lot of potential. The municipality of Halandri considered this openness as an

opportunity to apply innovative governance mechanisms, based on active citizen participation, to create a strategic plan for the sustainable integrated development of the area. The framework of international co-operation and learning provided by the URBACT II thematic networks offered the best context in which to develop such novel approaches.

Inspiration from Europe: The RegGov network

The main challenges of the RegGov network have been the fostering of sustainable and integrated urban and neighbourhood development policies and the creation of participatory processes in policy-making and implementation. It focused on the role of cooperation and integration at and between different administrative levels for multiply-deprived urban neighbourhoods, and dealt particularly with the following question: how can an efficient model and good forms of governance in integrated neighbourhood development be established and implemented in order to achieve successful and sustainable integrated neighbourhood regeneration?

As is the case with all URBACT II networks, it brought together actors at local and regional level to exchange experience and learn from each other in the field of urban sustainable development. In ERDF terms, the RegGov partnership consisted of five cities from competitiveness regions, and five from convergence ones. All of them developed an integrated Local Action Plan (LAP) for at least one of their disadvantaged neighbourhoods, involving local actors in this process. Local Action Plans are a key feature of the URBACT II programme and have the aim of improving the effectiveness and impact of a wide range of urban policies at the local level, putting innovative policies into practice and leveraging concrete follow-up investments.

The equal access of all citizens of Halandri to a similar level of services and urban infrastructure was one of the main goals of the RegGov LAP for Patima. As mentioned above the reason for choosing Patima as a target area was the objective of a more balanced development in relation to neighbouring areas. There was also an urgent need to tackle the problems caused by the early unregulated urban development and the effects of recent rapid urbanisation and private construction.

Since the initial stages, the municipality of Halandri considered the LAP exercise not only as a chance to produce a guide for the future development of the specific area, but also as an opportunity to develop a methodology for integrated planning and to introduce locally new forms of participatory and co-operative planning. Both the outcome and the learning process were anticipated gains for the municipality and the area.

The Department of Planning and Development and the programming office responsible for EU programmes, including the RegGov network, was created shortly after the initiation of the RegGov network, in 2009.

Towards a participative, co-operative planning process

At the time the RegGov network set off, there were no permanent structures for the participation of citizens in decision-making at the local level. It was only in 2010 that the New Municipal and Communal Code introduced 'Municipal Deliberation Committees' in all municipalities, but except in rare cases these have been operating in a procedural rather than a substantial way until now. Even so, the experience of the preparation of a concrete and dedicated LAP based on participatory and co-operative processes was quite unique for Halandri. The organisation of the whole process followed the modalities proposed by the URBACT II initiative, which are articulated around a Local Support Group created for this very purpose. These were further elaborated and specified amongst the RegGov partners.



Local Support Group



Public meeting

The Local Support Group (LSG) was a very significant experience for all actors involved. It comprised about 15 persons, from the city administration, business associations and local residents. Not all of them followed the work of the group systematically, but most of them were really committed and appreciated the process. The truth is that it was the first time they were asked to sit together, discuss the problems of their area and decide upon a common strategy for its future development.

A Steering Committee, appointed by the city council, coordinated the work and was actually in charge of delivering the final outputs. A Planning Group, consisting of staff from the Department of Planning and Development of the municipality, provided technical support. A further extremely important factor was the active support of the Intermediate Managing Authority (IMA) of Attica Region, which, following the Fast Track labelling of the network, provided its active support and participated in all the LSG meetings. The Fast Track label is a specific instrument of the 'Regions for Economic Change' initiative that encourages the active role of Operational Programme Managing Authorities in URBACT networks, and aims to generate synergies between cohesion policy and other EU policies and to enhance communication and dissemination.

The deliberation with citizens and local stakeholders started in 2008 and consisted of a number of big open public meetings (with approximately 100 citizens taking part) and the distribution of information material and questionnaires in

between times. The first meetings were mostly informative and were intended to introduce to local residents and actors the purpose and procedures of the LAP exercise and to open a discussion about the problems of the area.

The main challenge for the LSG and the municipal administration, at this preliminary stage, was to achieve open communication with local society and to create an environment of dialogue and trust between the two parties. Residents were initially negative towards the communication and co-operation process with the municipality, mainly because they feared being deceived or used for political purposes, but also because they had no prior experience of such processes.

An awareness-raising campaign at municipal level, mainly launched through the internet, was part of the deliberation process. Besides this, an important contribution to the information and sensitisation of local residents was the work undertaken by the local citizens' cultural association 'Renaissance'. It actually carried out the task of direct mediation between the administration and the residents of the area by organising informative seminars and doing door-to-door work to fill in questionnaires.

The questionnaire was used in order to register the variety of problems identified by residents. It consisted of an open question about the priority actions that should be included in the LAP in relation to four sections identified in the initial deliberation phase. These axes, subsequently used in the LAP, were related to the upgrading of the urban environment, the preservation of the natural environment, enhancing social cohesion and supporting local entrepreneurship. More than 300 citizens filled in questionnaires, and they were the main resource used by the LSP in order to start working on the Local Action Plan.

The outcome of the above-mentioned participative and multi-stakeholder process was the LAP for Patima which included a series of actions considered of utmost importance for the sustainable development of the area. Leaving aside any concerns for its future implementation, it is acknowledged as a significant achievement, precisely because of the involvement of the different actors in its preparation and drafting.

A new strategic foundation: the Local Action Plan for Patima

A number of strategic aims were identified in the RegGov LAP for Patima and were further divided into lines of action. A priority list according to the urgency of each action was drafted at the end.

Patima Local Action Plan	
Strategic aims	Lines of action
Upgrading the urban environment	infrastructure completion waste management flood protection traffic management and urban transport noise pollution energy saving beautifying the urban fabric
Protection/rise to prominence of the natural environment	green spaces and open spaces renewal relocation of non-compliant activities management of the Patima stream
Strengthening social cohesion	security social infrastructure connection with the rest of the city public consultation procedures supporting volunteer action
Strengthening local entrepreneurship	provision of incentives interconnection with commercial centre employment innovation and new technologies

The more pressing issues raised by local residents related to flood protection and completion of the drainage network, the improvement of roads and pavements, and sufficient educational infrastructure to serve the children and young people living in the area.

A five-year timeframe related to specific possible sources of financing for projects was formulated following the hierarchy of operations as it had emerged from consultations with residents and the work of the LSG. Of course, this also had to do with the maturity of various projects, previous programming under way and the foreseen availability of funding sources.

An important step: 'Green Life in the City of Halandri'

Transforming the LAP's strategic objectives into concrete action has been a major task for Halandri's city administration since its completion in 2011. Of course, it is a long distance from theory to practice and in most cases the way is not straightforward.

Despite all current economic and financial turbulences in Greece, the city has already managed to take important steps in the right direction. The implementation of the 'Green Life in the City of Halandri' project expresses the city's ongoing commitment to realise the LAP's multiple goals. According to the administration it is the first large-scale integrated project implemented in the city of Halandri. It involved targeted actions to revitalise the urban fabric, focusing on its environmental upgrading and improvement of urban equipment.

The Green Life project was realised in parallel to the work of the RegGov network. It was studied and presented as a case study in 'creating opportunities: places and spaces in the neighbourhood' in the RegGov final report. It was the first time that such a major project has been carried out all over the municipality and has influenced the quality of life of a large percentage of the citizens (about 36% of the population) as noted in the final report.

The municipality's objective in undertaking this project was to provide residents with adequate – both in quantity and quality – green areas and public spaces, with improved accessibility for all potential users (children, elderly, disabled people etc.), and ensure that these are safe and attractive. Furthermore it intended to enhance environmental conditions and promote environmental awareness through the 'green schools' action.

The specific actions carried out by the 'Green Life in the City of Halandri' project were the regeneration of public spaces by redesigning existing squares and turning empty plots into new squares and playgrounds, the extensive planting of vegetation in renovated areas and school playgrounds, and the creation of a network of pedestrian and cycle paths (including road traffic calming measures).

With a total budget of €1 200 000, of which 85% came from the ERDF through the Attica Region Operational Programme 2007-2013, 'Green Life in the City of Halandri' delivered 4 500 square metres of fully-equipped public green space, two redesigned squares, an 80% increase in green spaces in the areas of intervention and a 450-metre network of cycle paths and low-traffic roads.



Figure 2. Regenerated public space in Drosias St in Patima

In the URBACT II Local Action Plan target area, Patima, the 'Green Life in the City' project created a new public space in Drosias St, of about 1 000 square metres in size, which included a sitting area, a 155 square metre playground, infrastructure for disabled persons and vegetation,. The budget for this ran to about €250 000, including an 85% ERDF contribution.

Of course this is not the only development project implemented in the area. In 2009, when a team of experts and partners from the RegGov network visited Patima for a peer review, the municipality had already undertaken a total investment of €11 million. It had invested in a bioclimatic kindergarten as well as a new school which opened in September 2009. Two-thirds of the sewerage system had been installed; waste recollection and a local transport system had been set up. Since then, other projects have been got under way, and a number of them are being implemented with the support of ERDF funding. These include two childcare centres in Patima II (implementation starting in September 2012) and in Patima I (still in the design phase), flood protection works (implemented by the Region of Attica), and the completion of sewerage and drainage infrastructure (municipal resources, ERDF and residents' contributions).

Gains from international co-operation

Since the beginning the municipality had a twofold intention in participating in the RegGov network. The first aim was the elaboration of an integrated LAP for Patima that will be used as a concrete guide for the future sustainable development of the area. The other had to do with the benefits from working within a Europe-wide network.

The development of a tool or methodology for the formulation of LAPs, the acquisition of expertise in involving citizens in decision-making, the know-how for practicing participatory integrated urban planning and the contribution to the substantial improvement of its participatory and planning mechanisms are considered the most important gains from the municipality's involvement in the URBACT network, and are expected to 'take the municipality forward to the next era of sustainable administration' (Halandri LAP, English abstract).

For Alexandra Alexandropoulou, head of the municipality's Planning Department, this was 'a rehearsal, a pilot implementation, of how things should be done for the entire municipality'. Actually, the process for the formulation of Halandri's current five-year Municipal OP (2011-

2014), approved in September 2011, was very much informed by the experience of the Patima LAP. This is reflected in the outcome of the process, since the current Municipal OP is much better than the previous ones, in terms of structure, ranking of priorities, inclusion of different interest needs etc.

Alexandros Kappos, member of the LSG and Steering \Committee, pointed out that: 'the contribution of the international partners was crucial in this process. It was important to have input from countries that are way ahead in planning and governance and have already implemented such projects, but also from countries which are in a pretty much similar state to us, like Bulgaria. It has been a very substantial co-operation. The role of the lead partner was also very important. With their help, we managed to gain time, we avoided mistakes.'

Keeping up the pace

Continuity and consolidation of the progress made in the RegGov framework is now the most difficult challenge that the municipality is facing. First, in showing commitment to the implementation of the LAP and finding resources for the realisation of concrete works, but also in establishing permanent structures for the open participation of citizens in planning procedures.

As Brigitte Grandt, leader of the network, mentions in her article about RegGov: 'the key question pursued concerns how integrated urban development can be channelled into the 'mainstream' of urban policy, and how 'grass-roots structures and projects' can be kept alive once funding dries up' (*Information on Spatial Development*, issue 6.2009).

To keep up the momentum, the municipality is advancing projects for the completion of social and educational infrastructure in the area. One childcare centre in Patima II area, identified as high priority by local residents, is in the final stage before construction and is expected to be delivered in less than two years. It will be built on a plot owned by the municipality of about 1 650 square metres and will serve 46 infants from the area. Meanwhile another childcare centre launched in Patima I is now getting its building permit. Both have been included in the Attica OP and are being implemented with ERDF support.

Nevertheless, although these projects are very important, they cannot reverse the shrinking of social structures and services in the municipality due to the austerity measures implemented in the public sector as an answer to the financial crisis. Swingeing budget cuts (up to 60%), suspension of recruitment (it is reported that since 2010, educational and assistant personnel has fallen from 130 to 48 persons), restriction of facilities and supplies (four of Halandri's nine childcare centres are likely to close in 2012) and fee increases are only some of the problems the sector is facing.

In this critical socio-economic context and without undervaluing the steps that are being made through the implementation of specific projects, the realisation of the goals set by the LAP becomes even harder. Needless to say, the priority given to meeting more basic needs is diverting attention from the achievements of the RegGov experience in relation to governance. Consolidating and expanding the legacy of the participatory planning processes in Patima is a much more demanding task.

Taking the fast track is not always easy

Funding investment projects and urban policies through OPs with EU Structural Fund support is one of the few possibilities the municipalities have today in order to implement their urban development strategy. The URBACT Fast Track instrument has the explicit objectives of forging closer links between urban development and cohesion policies and facilitating funding to implement the action plans elaborated in URBACT networks. The municipality of Halandri, as part of a Fast Track thematic network, had the chance to work in close cooperation with the Attica Region OP's Managing Authority. This was a positive experience in the sense that it gave the municipal staff the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the IMA's logic and procedures and to get a clearer idea of the steps needed to obtain funding for specific projects.

Yet both the availability of the municipality's own resources and the timing of funding calls from the Managing Authorities can significantly impact the implementation schedule of the LAP and also the eventual realisation of planned actions.

It is true that the URBACT initiative recommends the Intermediate Managing Authorities to include specific reference to the Fast Track label so as to facilitate the implementation of URBACT LAPs in the framework of their respective Convergence or Competitiveness and Employment programmes. However, no specific prioritisation is considered in the Attica Regional Operational Programme. This problem was pointed out both by the Managing Authority and by the head of the Planning Department of the municipality. Alexandra Mavrogonatou, who representing the IMA at the RegGov meetings, said: 'I can give them advice and explain to them how to prepare better proposals, but no priority for URBACT projects is included in the OPs. There should be a separate priority axe especially for this kind of proposal that could fund more integrated schemes.'

Of course another major issue, impeding the rapid advancement of follow-up investment projects, is the degree of maturity of the proposed actions. The municipality of Halandri is quite privileged in a sense, since it has a self-sufficient technical service which can deliver technical studies on its own. This is not always the case, especially in the current context of limited human and financial resources for local administrations, which have to outsource technical studies. Even so, supply cannot meet the multiple demands of a large municipality like Halandri. As a result, a lot of projects are stalling because of the slow advancement of preparation procedures related to incomplete planning, acquisition of building permits and other bureaucratic requirements.

To avoid such often unpredictable delays, the IMAs demands as a prerequisite in the selection process the completion of all technical and legal requirements for construction works, and thus it does not fund the projects' preparation phase. On the other hand, this requirement is impeding the advancement of a number of otherwise eligible projects, since the municipalities do not have the resources to go fast.

Consolidating participation on the long run

Maintaining long-term forms of democratic participation was one of the main objectives of the RegGov network. The process launched for the production of a Local Action Plan in Patima, influenced and inspired by international co-operation, was a unique experience for all actors involved. However, the co-operative opening of the administration towards the residents of Patima ended with the end of the RegGov network. Nikos Tzakis, a resident of Patima and a member of the LSG, testified: 'It has been a very good effort from the part of the municipality and the people who coordinated and worked for it. It was the first time we had the chance to discuss our problems, and to be informed about the planning processes... However now there is a kind of numbness, a disappointment. After one year there has been no communication or information about the progress of work. We would appreciate at least knowing what has happened, where it is going.'

A new possibility has arisen through the 'Municipal Deliberation Committees' introduced since the 'Kallikratis' local self-government reform of 2010. Deliberation committees are formed by representatives of local actors such as commercial and professional associations, scientific organisations, unions, municipal officials, parents' associations, athletic and cultural bodies, various NGOs and citizens. Their role is purely advisory in relation to the five-year 'municipal operational plans', the budgets and technical programmes and any other issues concerning local problems and potential developments. Additionally, the latest law asks local administrations to carry out 'open deliberation' processes for issues related to spatial and urban planning, developmental choices and other local issues. These are done mainly through online questionnaires and open public meetings.

Nevertheless, these 'novelties' are very recent and municipalities seem to be falling behind their new legal obligations rather than laying the basis for an inclusive and comprehensive governance mechanism. The composition of Halandri's Municipal Deliberation Committee was not so inclusive in the end, participation is not very consistent, it operates in quite rigid timeframes, and its deliberation is based on quite vague opinion polls and on most occasions is not related to real choices but is rather used to affirm predetermined options. In a sense, these mechanisms have not been valorised yet and the fact that they are so centralised and rigid makes it difficult to see them operating in the substantial and focused manner the RegGov experience introduced.

Some lessons to be drawn

Cooperation and learning are key elements of EU cohesion policy and are supported by a number of networking mechanisms. The URBACT II initiative aims to enhance the effectiveness of sustainable integrated urban development policies by sharing experience, disseminating 'good practice' and transferring knowledge. In addition to that the Fast Track label is promoting close co-operation between partner cities and Managing Authorities when elaborating Local Action Plans, so as to facilitate funding for implementing follow-up projects.

The case of Halandri is an example of how local, regional and international cooperation through EU-funded networking can give local administrations the opportunity to develop planning and policy tools for sustainable urban development and to improve their operational capacity. Green Life and its follow-up projects form part of a wider sustainable development strategy of the Municipality of Halandri that was elaborated and specified in the framework of a European cooperation network, the URBACT II RegGov Fast Track Network.

Cooperation at all levels proved an important source of knowledge and information sharing. Cooperation (in working meetings, field trips, cluster groups, peer reviews etc.) with international partners, especially the lead partner and those from developed urban planning contexts, was a valuable experience and legacy, especially for the administration staff and local actors involved. Cooperation with the Intermediate Managing Authority provided the municipality with a clearer understanding of its operation, the formation of the operational programmes and the funding procedures. Cooperation at the local level with residents and local actors substantially informed the planning process with experiences from everyday life in the area.

However, a number of issues related to follow-up investment in concrete projects and policy actions, as well as the consolidation of comprehensive structures for citizen participation based on the RegGov experience, are jeopardising the continuity of the efforts made. The municipality is advancing step-by-step with priority urban development projects in the Patima area. Yet in a period of limited resources for the local administration and rapidly growing social problems, the most crucial challenge for the municipality of Halandri is how to encourage the active engagement of residents in local governance mechanisms.

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