

# FINDING OUR NICHES FOR SUSTAINABLE LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: LEVERAGING THE NEXUS OF PEOPLE, PLACE AND TECHNOLOGY



**Project name: [iPlace]**

Leaded by the Municipality of Amarante

(Portugal)

## A. Rationale

Cities compete and collaborate. The energy, ideas and pathways that radiate from their interactions are powerful drivers to realise the potential for new sustainable local economic development.

The [URBACT](#) Programme has developed proven methods for cities to work together in well-designed efficient projects to create mechanisms for analysing, learning and planning actions that will initiate integrated and sustainable city development.

The city of [Amarante](#) in Portugal is an active participant in URBACT projects and can attest to the value of learning and working with partner cities in well-planned transnational Action Planning Networks (APNs). Amarante intends to lead a new project which will be a partnership of smaller cities dealing with the challenges, ideas and pathways to find their niches for sustainable economic development.

The success of the proposed project will be that each partner city will have produced a robust economic development strategy after a process of intense place and opportunity analysis using best available tools (also those developed in URBACT), while sharing and learning practices with and from partner cities, engaging with local communities as well as international expertise, followed by experimenting with beta actions to test possibilities in their own context.

Each partner city will decide if their strategy will target the development of a niche specialisation for their city (i.e. in addition to their city's existing development strategies), or if it will be a more generic approach that underpins a range of related activities (existing and planned) to strengthen their city's economic development capabilities.

## B. Focus and method

The project will be designed so as to focus on deepening the understanding of the local economic history of each partner city and its value for future economic activity, as well as to broaden the knowledge of partners on the global trends that will impact on their cities, both as disruptions and pathways for new economic growth. These ‘influences’ will be matched to the existing place experience in each partner city that will establish a baseline from which to improve the city brand while augmenting or transforming existing economic activities with clear short, medium and long-term targets, as per the graph above.

The method will include a set of coordinated project activities to be performed by all partner cities utilising proven place research and analysis tools to tap into their cities’ previous eras of economic growth and to rediscover the drivers of those growth sectors (e.g. sectoral comparative advantages, skill sets, sales and distribution networks etc.) together with seminars and guidance notes on global trends that will shape the future of their cities – especially trends in technology, new localism and entrepreneurial opportunities; and placemaking activities to engage local communities in shaping the experience of their cities.

### C. Thematic learning approach

The context for the creation of economic development strategies will influence the selection of specific themes that will guide content and lead to integrated action planning.

At a global and European level three policy frameworks will be given high priority namely the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, the Territorial Cohesion and Regional Development Policy of the European Union, and the Urban Agenda of the European Union. The main objectives anticipated to be further explored in the project include:

- Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all (SDG 8)
- Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (SDG 11)
- Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns (SDG 12)
- Enhancing access to, and use and quality of information and communication technologies (Cohesion Policy Thematic Objective 2)
- Enhancing the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (Cohesion Policy Thematic Objective 3)
- Jobs and Skills in the Local Economy (Urban Agenda for the EU)
- Digital transition (Urban Agenda for the EU)

With these themes as a contextual framework, the project will be developed as a learning environment for the participants from partner cities to ask questions about changes and improvements that cities are making in areas such as urban mobility, communication infrastructure, smart city initiatives, smart manufacturing and low carbon strategies with the intention to understand the forthcoming economic opportunities, i.e. the needs to be addressed in these areas.

An optimal learning environment will depend on the value that partners find in learning from their city stakeholders, from other partner cities and from the inputs designed and administered by URBACT through its programme expert, lead expert and ad hoc experts. To ensure the best learning environment the lead partner will facilitate a process of partner selection with the following criteria in mind:

- All partner cities will be small sized cities (population below or around 100,000). The main reason for this requirement is that the dynamic in smaller cities differ from larger cities, often because of their geography, smaller pool of resources and deeper reliance on the resourcefulness of their

communities. The other reason is simple: City officials and politicians tend to listen and learn from their peers who experience similar challenges and problems compared to their own.

- All partner cities will be able to demonstrate at least one good practice specific to their respective cities which will contribute to the learning opportunities in the project.
- All partner cities will be willing to offer their cities as case studies for knowledge capitalisation during and after the project.
- All partner cities will participate in 'beta actions' to test ideas and increase the creative engagement of communities, including their own local entrepreneurs, thereby experimenting with and exploring opportunities for change in their cities.
- All partner cities will be committed to actively build a partnership that continues to be a resource and ideas repository after the project.

#### D. Deliverables

The following results will be delivered during and after the project:

1. The establishment of a stakeholder group (ULG) in each partner city that will execute the project objectives and lead their city in planning a new economic development strategy
2. The production of a case study of the economic history, present day challenges, and vision for future economic development in each partner city
3. Training and knowledge sharing in partner cities and collectively in the project with the aim to build the capacity in each city to effectively plan and deliver economic development strategies
4. A series of events (online and offline) to creatively engage with local communities on aspects of their city experiences (live, work, play) and which economic activities could address their needs
5. A set of international seminars on global trends (new technologies) during transnational visits
6. Project competitions for start-ups in the partner cities to prototype new technology initiatives using innovative ideas built on the histories of the partner cities
7. A sustainable local economic development strategy in each partner city which will be the product of integrated action planning using the URBACT method
8. A series of capitalisation activities at international events after project completion to showcase the knowledge gained from the process and to promote the case studies of the partner cities
9. A MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) about Local Based Entrepreneurship, to support entrepreneurs finding opportunities at local level, and to design business models that explore technology possibilities to leverage their success

#### E. Conclusion

The project can best be visualised as a journey where the partner cities are fellow travellers who are always seeking to find *niches* appropriate for their cities, while deepening their understanding of the

*nuances* that make their cities special, with the determination to use the knowledge they gained for *nesting* new ideas that will sprout more sustainable local economic development.