

**URB-AL Programme Phase I
Final Evaluation Mission**

(Project No. AML/B7-3010/94-168)

**Summary of the
Evaluation Report**

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SUMMARY

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"cities are made up of people and their hopes - not of buildings and streets"
Augustin, 400 A.D.

This feasibility report has been prepared with the European Commission's financial assistance. The opinions expressed in it are strictly the consultants' personal opinions and are not necessarily shared by the Commission.

Summary

1 General Appraisal

URB-AL is an institutional support programme for Latin American and European local communities which achieved satisfactory quantitative results in its first phase: two biennial meetings were held, eight networks were organised and 70 joint projects were carried out.

Taking into account the fact that the budget was limited to €14 million and the complexity of the decentralised system's operation, the activities' had a qualitatively important effectiveness and impact on participating local communities. In addition, many small and medium-size cities learnt about international cooperation project management.

URB-AL has all the qualities of a decentralised programme, allowing satisfactory efficiency levels in the use of resources while at the same time very demanding in terms of human resources.

Although the original logical framework suffered from weaknesses and inconsistencies, those in charge of the programme made the necessary changes to adapt the intervention instruments, creating more coherent and defined components which certainly contributed to the positive results.

One of the programme's flaws was the lack of a mechanism to record and publish the activities' results.

2 The Mission

The aim of this report is to examine the results of the first phase of URB-AL's, which consisted in preparatory work, defining the logical framework and support structures, and the activities carried out by the eight Networks which operated between November 1997 and May 2003, as well as the results of the joint projects generated as a consequence of these activities.

The European Commission (EC) laid down, as general guidelines, the examination of the contexts, objectives, results obtained, activities and the means envisaged and employed, for the assessment of:

- the programme's relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability
- the programme's continuity on the basis of the EC's current and future political priorities, and
- the making of operational recommendations both at the working and at the visibility level, according to financial regulations and contractual rules.

3 Background

URB-AL came into being when it was shown that there was a strong and persistent demand from many Latin American entities (such as mayors and Heads of State) to consider a cooperation programme to approach urban problems as a whole. It is an answer to the growing importance of cities in both Latin America and Europe.

From this standpoint, it seemed appropriate to choose an approach which was both decentralised, so that the actors concerned could participate directly in the development of the activities, and horizontal,

to enable American and European local government representatives to interact in the activities. This approach attempts to show, for the benefit of Latin America, the breadth of the decentralisation movement which has been taking place in the European Union (EU). At the regulatory level, the EC already had a framework within which to define and enable decentralised initiatives in Latin America.

4 Conception of the Programme

An analysis of the initial document leads us to conclude that the approach was lacking in guidance for those in charge of the technical side of the programme. On the one hand, it underestimates the difficulty and complexity of implementing a decentralised programme with complex organisation for 33 countries and, on the other, in spite of the reliability of the hypothesis, the region's specific risks were not taken into account, and the division between activities and means wasn't sufficiently clear in the relevant part of the logical framework.

The intervention logic was improved at the launch stage, with the search for more realistic objectives. In order to achieve higher coherence, the people in charge of the programme redesigned the logical framework as they went along.

The development of direct and long lasting links between European and Latin American local authorities for the acquisition, dissemination and application of "better practices" in urban policy, was laid down as the programme's general objective.

The programme was conceived as a group of activities which would bring together personnel to build these links and generate mutual enrichment.

5 A Programme of Great Relevance

The URB-AL programme is well known for pursuing general and specific objectives consistent with the needs and problems faced by local governments since the mid-90's.

Since approximately the mid-90's, local authorities had been facing many problems adapting to the new decentralisation processes. The local governments' actual needs to face the new demands ranged from how to structure the budget to how to face the community's development problems.

The proposal to begin the process of association between cities undoubtedly offered the chance to find a solution to the new problems.

Phase I of URB-AL coincides with the Community's both regional and transversal priorities. The first two EU-AL summits have confirmed the relevance of URB-AL at the political level.

6 The Efficiency of the Programme

Overall, the results achieved were as expected. The eight Networks' three annual meetings are estimated to have created over 10,000¹ days/meeting or days/contact, and the joint projects around 7,300² days/ meeting.

Although the coordination cells in all Networks carried out their administrative functions adequately in relation to their contractual obligations, the technical potential for "excellence" in the theme for which they were selected was not used. Of course, as the Networks' organisation improved, so did their results, thanks to the learning process offered by the first Networks.

These results were achieved in spite of the initial document's weakness, which prejudiced the implementation of the programme in the first two years. Good management was also hindered by changes in the entities which managed the programme and in the Commission's external assistance structure.

Another management weakness, especially for a decentralised programme, is the lack of tools for activity follow-up, monitoring and dissemination. This has caused the URB-AL results not to be adequately projected.

The two Biennial Meetings were held as planned, but the expected results were not achieved, partly because they were not realistic.

In some cases, the beneficiaries' lack of management skills with regard to the application of contractual terms delayed the payments for financing the activity.

Inefficient communication mechanisms were to blame for the failure to fully achieve URB-AL's visibility.

7 The Efficectiveness of the Actions

The activities' results have contributed to the achievement of most of the specific objectives as regards the participants' skills assessment and search for concrete solutions to specific problems. The forging of a hopefully long lasting cooperation between local communities relating to tools, methods and good government practices started through the thematic Networks.

An additional result, namely the production of over 90 substantive documents in terms of background, realities and good local government actions with regard to a growing variety of problems which are becoming municipal-level problems, was achieved.

Finally, it is in the large number of local authority actions that the planned results were most strongly expressed. 46.4% of those interviewed stated that "the policy guidelines changed", 67.9% said that "new policies were designed", 92.9% that "new actions were taken", and 44.4% that "new municipal or local services were created". These results are evidence of a very important impact.

¹ 1,124 partners were brought together three times for an average of 3 days each time.

² The 811 partners who took part in the joint projects were brought together on at least three occasions for an average of three days.

In addition, there were unforeseen results relating to specific aspects, mostly in the form of bilateral cooperations.

8. The Impact of the Activities

The first phase of the URB-AL Programme has definitely had an impact. On the one hand, it encouraged a wider knowledge of international cooperation and strengthened the participants' action capabilities and, on the other, it encouraged dialogue between the two regions' civil societies.

The Networks' and projects' main themes are closely related to the Community policies' current and future priorities, mainly in economic and social development, democracy and the Rule of Law, and protection of the environment.

However, the effects have been limited to the beneficiaries. This is because no diffusion and institutional recording mechanism to publicise the results and benefits to a wider group than the direct beneficiaries was organised. This still need to be fixed; such a mechanism must be organised, but it must be done urgently, before the information becomes obsolete.

9. Most Relevant Conclusions

Overall, the appraisal found evidence that the programme has achieved positive results and a reasonable efficiency and effectiveness level of the allocated resources, that the unit in charge of the programme should be consolidated and reinforced, and that the programme should be given continuity.

- The programme adequately responds to the beneficiaries' needs, and the decentralised implementation method is efficient.
- Just like in other assessments, URB-AL showed that decentralised programmes are efficient because more results are obtained with lower administrative costs.
- The organisation of the Networks' annual meetings plays a key role in strengthening the cooperation spirit and generating joint projects.
- The programme helped promote and go more deeply into the priority themes of Community policy.

In spite of the overall positive assessment of URB-AL's merits, some evidence of weaknesses which, when solved, may boost the results of subsequent phases significantly further, were found.

Achieving a more precise description of both Network and project coordinators' functions seems to be important.

- The information communication cycle, especially from the projects' implementation until the collation and publication of the results, is one of the programme's most important flaws. A suitable dissemination system consisting of a website displaying the results in a systematic and comprehensive manner is recommended.
- A programme website displaying the results in a systematic and comprehensive manner must be urgently structured. It is recommended that the URB-AL programme be supplied with the relevant human resources to carry out this task.

- A higher involvement by the Delegations, especially with regard to political backing for the programme's activities, is recommended.
- There are options to reduce the EC's technical assistance tasks, for example by granting contracts covering the coordination of a Network and its joint projects to a single beneficiary.