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The Urban Lab of Europe !

The URBAN SOIL 4 FOOD project Journal N° 5

Project led by the City of Maribor



**CIRCULAR
ECONOMY**



The BRICK-BEACH project

The **BRICK-BEACH** project seeks to use construction and demolition waste to regenerate a disappeared beach in Velez-Malaga through the development of a circular economy model. The project will create a debris treatment plant and will design an innovative process that will allow the output materials to have the granulometry and softness needed to regenerate damaged sandy beaches such as the Mezquitilla beach. Debris from local illegal dumps will be treated and used for the integral beach regeneration and its surroundings, as well for experimenting together with local businesses other innovative circular economy products. An integrated set of socio-economic and environmental restoration programmes will be implemented to complete the beach regeneration. The newly created urban space next to the regenerated beach will also be used as an opportunity to generate new tourism-related as well as environmental leisure services and activities.

Partnership:

- City of Velez-Malaga
- Spanish Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries, Food and Environment
- Andalusian Agency for water and environment
- University of Malaga- 1 higher education and research institute
- Aula del Mar de Málaga- NGO
- Andalusian Association of Business of Construction and Demolition Waste recovery (AGRECA)

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The period between February and November 2020 have been radically and globally signed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has greatly affected local activities within the Urban Soil 4 Food project in Maribor. Overall, most activities have been delayed and greatly adapted to the new context, which is characterised by strict measures such as social distancing, home office and no gatherings amongst others. All this, has meant that public activities, such as community garden training or entrepreneurial workshops, could only partially take place, whilst participation of citizens was limited to ensure the necessary safety measures.

The pilot, the main project investment, was supposed to start to be built in the first half of October 2020. At the moment the building permit was acquired and all parts of the device for the plant, so the project is on track aside from the delay due to COVID-19. All three providers for the machinery are not from Slovenia, but from Serbia, Croatia and Austria, so some extra safety measures were taken to be sure that the delivery will be done in any case. Regarding the prolongation it was planned that the urban soil will be provided by late autumn or beginning winter, in order to have three different growing seasons. After that, there will be the monitoring phase after the end of the project. These costs won't be funded by the project, though, as the end of the project has been postponed to the 31st May 2021.

The urban community gardens have been very successful and active, where all sorts of contests were carried out for the production, such as the biggest tomatoes, or those vegetables with the funniest colour or shape, to which many people

participated. The gardens had a lot of surplus production which was donated to CARITAS, which has a soup-kitchen, the only one accepting fresh non-certified food and coming from stores. For instance, the municipal soup-kitchen is not allowed to collect non certified food, reason why in autumn there will be a certification of the community garden vegetables as locally produced.

In September, when it was still possible to have events, there was a food festival and a political debate where many people attended and allowed the project to get more known locally. Furthermore, in the last months the entrepreneur activities were partially done, at least, whether it was possible under the current conditions. There was communication about management and communication for the ten innovative products related to food, and out of these five were chosen to be supported through a crowdfunding campaign.

Instead, activities related to the short food chain distribution system, as illustrated in the guidebooks, have had no updates because activities were paused due to a delay in the payment under the current COVID-19 conditions.

With the project heading towards its end, the partnership in Maribor is extremely busy in ensuring that all activities are carried out as much as possible under the current pandemic condition, ensuring the activation of the pilot, the running on the long term of the community gardens as well as the short chain food distribution system and strengthening of the circular economy entrepreneurship.

2. WHAT HAPPENED

The past Urban Soil 4 Food Journal n.4 was issued soon after the pandemic started also in Slovenia. As the readers will remember, the conditions in March-April were not very hard in Maribor, at least not as hard as in many other countries, as the numbers of infected and hospitalised people were still within a number which could be managed by the national health infrastructure. Whilst participatory activities in the project were basically paused, the community gardens were still operational, ensuring the involvement of the local communities. The short food chain application system was in its piloting phase and despite the smart working also within the public administration, it was possible to pursue the public procurement of the pilot system.

When looking at the past semester through this Journal, we see mainly two periods: 1) the

2.1 Community gardens

The gardens were not closed or restricted during the lockdown, despite there were general restrictions, such as social distancing. Slovenia was partially in lockdown at the end of March-April, as it was needed to have a permission to move in-between cities, but this was not applying to the gardens. People were still able to go, probably going even more than before as they had more time and wanted to get out of home, if not that they also needed food. In fact, during the outbreak the interest for the gardens went way up, people were looking for possibilities to grow their own food, and to go out to do something, but sadly the garden was full.

“People were searching for gardens, really intensively, for two reasons: escaping from the



*Volunteers preparing herbs in the community gardens.
Source: Aktiviraj se*

summer which was very positive both in terms of the pandemic and subsequently for the project activities; 2) the autumn which saw a spike of the pandemic curve and a restriction of security measures which also affected the project.

home, some form of detoxification, and the other reason was for the food. Mostly families started to appreciate having this small piece of land where to grow your own food. We think that the next spring will also be the same. We believe that if we are opening a space for thousands of gardens, it will be full rapidly.

From the project point of view, the importance of the food chain and the food locally produced went really high as people started to realise its importance.”

Andreja Kuhar, Aktiviraj se

The urban community gardens have been very successful and active during the summer, regardless of all other pandemic circumstances.



Community gardens potatoes produce.
Source: Aktiviraj se

Volunteers were keeping the spirit in the garden, all the 66 individual gardens were full, even though some people were dismissed as they were not adequately taking care of their plots and opened again the invitation to other people. What emerged is that people don't know the real effort that it is required for taking care of a garden plot.

All sorts of contests were carried out for the production, such as the biggest tomatoes, or those vegetables with the funniest color or shape, to which many people participated. The gardens had a lot of surplus production which was donated to CARITAS, which has a soup-kitchen, the only one accepting fresh food not certified and coming from stores. For instance, the municipal soup-kitchen is not allowed to collect non certified food, reason why in autumn there will be a certification of the community garden vegetables as locally produced.

Since spring a number of workshops were held in the garden and open to the public, in order to teach people about gardening and food. Even people that own a plot in other gardens were coming to the US4F garden for taking part in the workshops. These were held on a wide number of topics: herbs distillation, herbals, health and immune systems from herbs, no dig garden, seeds production, bees (there are two beehives in the garden), take care of orchard and food trees,

self-sufficiency, movie night about food waste, storytelling to children about nature, wild food, effective microorganisms. This year 18 workshops were held and 3 are planned for the spring. This number of workshops was planned already at the beginning of the project and was probably overambitious, regardless of the unexpected pandemic, but nevertheless they were carried out.

The long-term sustainability of the garden remains a major unsolved issue.

"We've been discussing what will be the sustainability of the garden since the beginning of the project. The garden will stay, but we don't know yet who will manage the garden and the people there. Also, it is not only individual plots, there is an orchard, a part for children, a garden for social integration and a model garden. Even though we can increase the number of individual plots, there are still 60+ people there to be managed and controlled. This is still a question..."

Andreja Kuhar, Aktiviraj se



Sunflowers in community gardens.
Source: Aktiviraj se

There is an ongoing dialogue amongst the municipality and some for other community gardens to develop a shared governance model of the community gardens in Maribor, but there still is no specific plan nor leadership of the process within the Municipality, for example by appointing a responsible person for community gardens. Community gardeners feel this is a problem also because the gardens are increasing in number throughout the city, and the management of such spaces cannot only be left to volunteering, as it is extremely demanding to organise activities,

2.2 Innovation Circle

Another component of the project is the support of the innovative products in the field of circular economy, especially within the agri-food sector. The reader will remember that in the previous journal a call was opened for the selection of ten products to be mentored. As a result, twenty ideas were submitted to the open call and evaluated by a Jury composed by the EZavod institute and the Municipality of Maribor. All the projects are connected to the circular economy, waste food, agriculture and gardens. The selected ten projects were supported with indirect funds for advisory and support for materials, as they were supposed to develop the products with two prototypes. The support depended on what the projects needed and a public procurement process was carried out with three offers to select the cheapest option to be provided as a material or service to the selected projects.

Furthermore, a crowdfunding campaign was carried out for five selected projects. Some were selected through the same open call for the mentoring program, others were found through other channels. All projects underwent an interview to assess the potential success of their product for a crowdfunding campaign. The

ensure the dialogue amongst gardeners and keep the interaction alive.

Finally, the postponement until May 2021 of the project due to the Coronavirus was a great challenge for the garden, as there is no additional budget available to run the activities further for the following six months and no for profit activities can be carried out until June 2021, meaning that the two of the people working in the association managing the gardens will have to leave the project.



Prototypes of circular economy products

support they received was to develop the video campaigns, which were carried out through Indiegogo, Kickstarter and the local Adrifund.



INDEMAND

KEFIRKO - VEGGIE FERMENTER

Ferment mixed veggies, sauerkraut, kimchi, or any other vegetable in your kitchen!

Borgia d.o.o.
2 Campaigns | New York, United States

€164,118 EUR by 3,241 backers

€154,828 EUR by 3,107 backers on Jun 27, 2020 with another platform

♡ FOLLOW



crowdfunding campaign of the Veggie Fermenter

What makes a project crowd fundable?

- 1) Wide public of users;
- 2) Interesting story behind to attract people to support the project;
- 3) Products should not have a very low price;
- 4) Large social networks support the possibility of reaching the aimed goal.

In fact, it's not the platform that makes the difference but the social network of the promoter. If projects don't reach the aimed target they will lose the collected money, meaning that the entire effort will be lost. When this happens many projects reapply with lower targets and promote more of their product. The risks in fact are:

- aiming too high
- not being proactive enough

"We are promoting the products, but this does not make a big difference. You have to be proactive by yourself."

Crowdfund is also used for the testing of the product, a sort of pre-marketing. You will get information on the products if they are sellable or not."

Darko Ferčej, eZavod

Overall, this part of the US4F activities was not greatly impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic. In fact, the training and capacity building was

fortunately done in person with the participants before the Covid-19 outbreak. As there were some resources left over, the ten selected projects were offered the possibility of having a business plan developed for them, and three of them accepted.

In the coming months the Capitalisation (WP7) activities should start, and these will probably be greatly impacted by the pandemic, for instance when considering the site visits. However, this will be seen in the coming months and discussed with the readers in the next Journal.

2.3 Food festival

In September, a Festival to promote local food products and cooking culture was organised in partnership with the school of gastronomy for restaurants. There were different dishes with a total of six choices. All the dishes were prepared with local ingredients, which was also one of the conditions from the Municipality. Furthermore, there were cooking classes organised with the cooking school, to which the general public could apply through an online application to one of the three courses provided. The school provided the cooking facilities and the chef whilst the project partners organised the involvement of participants, who unfortunately were limited to 4 or 5 per class due to the current restrictions. All the ingredients were produced by local farmers in the radius of not more than 25km, with the exception of meat.

Special attention was also posed on the price, which was kept low in order to ensure to as many people as possible to join the meal. Finally, all the money that was collected through the food and drinks was donated to organisations that provide education to youngsters on local food production and consumption.

“With the different restrictions due to the COVID-19, to organise such activities was not as easy as it would have been under normal conditions, such as to get all the permissions from the different institutions.

We could have, at one certain time during the day, a maximum of 50 people in the area where we had this festival. It was not a free entrance to everybody. We had to take a list. There was one entrance and one exit at the same spot, so organisational wise was a bit of a nightmare but we managed. We also had a health inspection on Friday, and to go through that was challenging and it required more effort than we expected.

From the list we had 570 people signed. However, some people were not properly respecting all the rules and getting in and out from other parts of the area, so we think we had around 600 people participating at the event. Then, it was a success, considering also that people are still afraid of going out and that it was the first event of this dimension organised till now in this year in Maribor.”

Igor Kos, WCycle Institute

A roundtable discussion was organised to create a high-level political and professional debate over circular economy and short food chains. The event was attended by the Vice Mayor of the municipality of Maribor, two Mayors from towns near Maribor, a Member of the European Parliament, the Slovenian President of the Chamber of Commerce for Tourism and Restaurants and finally Professors from agricultural faculty. Unfortunately due to the current restrictions the event could not be attended by the public. It lasted half an hour more than anticipated, as participants were very engaged in the conversation and had very good media coverage.

In fact, next year Slovenia will be the European gastronomic capital, so the discussion was about how to promote local food from local producers, how to help them, provide information, help with the finance and the role of the Municipality. The major problem in Slovenia is not only according to the quality but also regarding the quantity of local produce. Slovenia is not self-sufficient from the vegetable sector as it produces 50% less of its needs. Even though there were some contradicting thoughts, all participants agreed that there is the need to provide local grown food to children in kindergarten and schools.

2.4 Administration

Under the current conditions it was hard to carry out the public procurements, for instance for the stands of the public market, as out of the ten invited companies none of them submitted an offer. For this reason the deadline was extended, the companies were contacted directly and three of them submitted an offer of approximately € 24.000 for 19 stands. The other challenge was for the tool sheds in the urban gardens, for which no offer was received and despite the

same procedure described above, none of the companies was willing to carry out the work for the available €40.000 budget.

With the prolongation the partners had to restructure the project budget, to which private partners were forced to be in accordance with that. For instance the short food chain app currently postponed the licensing of the app.

2.5 Participation

“We couldn’t organise all the activities that we had planned, we did not organise the dissemination events, and still can’t or in a very restricted manner. We had planned a workshop at the agricultural fair in August, but it was cancelled. There is still

the possibility of organising something through webinar, but we rather prefer to do it in real life, by person because people get much more.”

Brina Lazar, Maribor Municipality

3. PROJECT CHALLENGES

The current pandemic crisis has created or exacerbated a number of challenges within the Urban Soil 4 Food project. Namely the most relevant are related to the limitations of the activities because of the restrictions, such as social distancing and no gatherings, and the prolongation of the project forced the partners to adjust their budget.

There are three main critical areas:

- Sustainability of activities after the project, exemplified by the community garden;
- Participation of inhabitants, due to the Covid-19 health safety measures;
- Capitalisation of the project, which is still to start but the planned activities are extremely hard to be carried out under the present conditions.

Long-term financial sustainability appears to be one of the most critical areas. In the case of the community garden, the existing challenges were radicalised under the present situation. The 18 planned workshops turned out to be too many, and then it was very hard to carry them out under the current restrictions. Furthermore, the postponement of the project has made even more evident the lack of a sustainability plan and governance model for the gardens, with the two people running the community gardens having to leave the project due to the lack of budget. Despite the extremely hard conditions, there is some time to fix the situation before the end of the project, especially considering the high interest that community gardens have amongst citizens, especially under the current pandemic.

For this, a basis for developing the new model could be built on the good practice analysis of the community gardens models provided in the previous Journal.

In terms of participation, this was already one of the points of attention within the project, as little public attention is given to circular economy and sustainable food models. With the present restrictions it was very difficult to accomplish the planned activities, as there were no safety conditions, events were cancelled and people overall are fearful to attend public events. Nevertheless activities were carried out as much as possible under the current conditions, but it would be advisable to develop an online model to carry out activities in an interactive and engaging manner. For example, it could be possible to develop an online activity through the short food chain app, in order to engage people and promote the project output.

The third criticality is in relation to the Capitalisation (WP7) activities, as despite these not having started yet, the risk of them not being carried out as originally planned is most certain. In fact, many activities, such as the site visits, will not be possible. For this reason it would be advisable to revise the capitalisation roadmap in relation to the plan for the upcoming months and years.

Then, there are two points of attention in relation to public procurement and the communication with target beneficiaries. In terms of public procurement here has been a very limited uptake on behalf of local companies to the public tenders, as previously described, this is due to the challenges companies are facing under the

present emergency and will probably last for quite some time. Fortunately no great tender is planned within the project in the coming months.

Finally the communication is a point of attention because despite the activities being carried out as planned, the great limitations in terms of events

and workshops make it hard to have news that are of interest to a wider public.

Below is a more comprehensive overview of the challenges faced within the project US4F at this stage.

MAPPING URBAN SOIL 4 FOOD AGAINST THE ESTABLISHED UIA CHALLENGES

Challenge	Level	Observations
1. Leadership for implementation	Low	The Municipality has been working in close relationship with the local partners and all have been very collaborative to develop and adapt the activities according to the emergency conditions. Even in relation to a sensitive issue such as the postponement of the payments due to the prolongation of the project, partners have found a common agreement.
2. Public procurement	Medium	The public procurement has proven to be a challenge as at first all invitations to companies to submit proposals were unsuccessful and only partly answered after a second attempt. This is to be traced in the difficulty that businesses are having under the current situation and will remain in the coming months, where no large public procurements are planned.
3. Integrated cross-departmental working	Low	To the present state the cooperation amongst departments has been successful, for instance to deliver all necessary permits for the pilot and other project activities.
4. Adopting a participative approach	High	This is one of the major criticalities under the present pandemic limitations, as social distancing and no gatherings greatly affect the possibility of having public training and events. Partners have done as much as possible up until now but it will be needed to develop an alternative online participation model to ensure activities towards the end of the project. It could be beneficial to build upon existing online tools, such as the short food chain app.
5. Monitoring and evaluation	Low	Up until now the monitoring and evaluation activities appear to be in order, also taking into consideration the changes of plan due to the pandemic.

Challenge	Level	Observations
6. Financial Sustainability	High	This appears to be a great challenge of the project, especially now that it has reached its end, as most activities, aside from the pilot, will not be carried out. For example the entrepreneurial mentoring is currently not planned to continue further and the community gardens have no defined plan for their future goevrnance. At this stage, there could still be the possibility of developing a plan, based on the great interest expressed by the involved users. A basis for developing this could be the good practice community gardens model provided in the previous Journal.
7. Communicating with target beneficiaries	Medium	Communication activities are being carried out but due to the current limitations in participatory events and workshops it is hard to have content to be of interest to the wide public in order to strengthen the engagement.
8. Upscaling	High	Maribor over the years has been very active in promoting the circular economy model and the US4F activities, but the limitations in travelling, having events and conferences will be most surely a great limitation to the planned activities, especially as they are having tangible results that are easier to use as a proof to get new municipalities and stakeholders committed to implementing the model. For this reason it is advisable to devise a new plan accordingly.

4. TAKE-AWAYS

Under the very special moment that we are living globally and that is affecting the US4F project, we can identify three main take-aways:

- Resilience and flexibility in planning, in order to adapt to existing changes is a necessary skill which the pandemic has shown us. This has been applied by all partners in adapting the activities over the past months and will be further needed until the end of the project, especially to guarantee the financial sustainability of the community gardens and entrepreneurial workshops.
- Going online is necessary because of the limitations in pursuing real live participatory events. For this it is needed to develop a new online engaging methodology, which could be built upon the existing digital infrastructure such as the app for the short food chain systems.
- Capitalising results is fundamental when heading towards the end of the project. For this a new plan needs to be amended in order to ensure that the achievements and innovations carried out within the US4F project can be effectively shared with other cities and stakeholders in Slovenia and Europe.

5. COMING NEXT!

We are heading towards the end of this exciting journey together... read our next Journal to know more about how the project was accomplished in Maribor and how the partners have addressed the current challenges!

Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) is an Initiative of the European Union that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges. Based on article 8 of ERDF, the Initiative has a total ERDF budget of EUR 372 million for 2014-2020.

UIA projects will produce a wealth of knowledge stemming from the implementation of the innovative solutions for sustainable urban development that are of interest for city practitioners and stakeholders across the EU. This journal is a paper written by a UIA Expert that captures and disseminates the lessons learnt from the project implementation and the good practices identified. The journals will be structured around the main challenges of implementation identified and faced at local level by UIA projects. They will be published on a regular basis on the UIA website.



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