

The role of a Lead Expert in mediation, conflict management and empowering/encouraging unconfident or inactive partners

Interview with Miguel Sousa, Lead Expert of Wood FootPrint project

Miguel Sousa has a proven experience in designing and delivering transnational exchange and learning activities as can be understood in more than 30 EU projects that he coordinated over the last 15 years. He is an invited speaker on Innovation, EU policies, European Territorial Cooperation, Energy, Transport and Information Technologies topics in conferences at national and international level. Since 2012 that he is an URBACT Lead Expert for the Wood FootPrint project.

In a world of global competition the European wood industry and wooden cities are facing complex problems. How Wood FootPrint is addressing such challenges?

Wood Footprint aims to respond to the challenge to reactivate the economies of participant cities, whose main economic activity is the furniture industry and have suffered as a consequence of the economic crisis and the impact of globalisation. The abandonment of large units, formerly used to manufacture, store and display furniture and wood products caused an urban problem. By bringing together key players in the wood industry from across the EU, and through the sharing of ideas, experiences and practices, we intend to find new and innovative ideas to assist the sector and to promote and foster a renewed diversification for redundant premises

Wood FootPrint presents answers to the question of how to conciliate the manufacturing sectors need for, and eventual abandon of, massive suburban space, with the notions of quality urban development, sustainability and economic competitiveness.

Can you describe your experience as Wood FootPrint Lead Expert?

It's being a fantastic experience. Having the opportunity to work with 10 cities representing 9 EU countries is priceless. By one side I had the opportunity to learn new methods and tools during the URBACT training sessions, practicing methodologies such as the Problem/Solution tree, OPERA, Bono's hat and others. On the other side I worked out with cities from different EU regions learning with them and contributing to gather and replicate knowledge within the network. I can say that during these 3 years I improve myself as a professional and as an individual. Also, is important to say that this 3 years were very funny!.

I can imagine that during the 3 years of the project you faced problems in keeping the network of cities engaged with the project. Can you give highlight the mains difficulties during the project Implementation stage?

When we are working out with a network of cities, with a community of 150 organizations (taking in consideration the ULSG), problems can come from different sides and we, as Lead Expert, need to have leadership, conflict management skills and capacity to empowering/encouraging unconfident or inactive partners.

The most critical situation occur after 6 months of initiating project Stage II. The Lead Partner (the city of Paços de Ferreira) had elections and all the original project team was replaced by a new team that had limited information about the project and lack of enthusiasm to implement the project. It was a project that comes from the previous elected representatives, not a priority for the new Mayor. At that time, there was a real risk to have the project cancelled by the URBACT Secretariat. During 4 months I, as Lead Expert, had to manage the conflict between Lead Partner and URBACT Secretariat, between Lead Partner and the other cities, to empower the new team about URBACT methodology, tools and procedures, to keep the other 9 cities focus on the implementation of the project and negotiate with the new Mayor of Paços de Ferreira a new direction for their LAP without losing the original focus of the project.

Looking behind, we did a great work as a network and must congratulate the City of Paços Ferreira for the professional work that they did until the end of the project.

The database of URBACT Lead Experts will be renovated. Do you intend to apply and what key messages can you leave to the next generation of URBACT Lead Experts?

I will apply and I recommend others to apply because it is a great experience. As a key message, it's important to say that the Lead Expert is the glue of the network, however, should not be the centre of the network. The main priority of the Lead Expert is to work out the common interests of all partners using emotional intelligence to keep the network working together. The use of tools and methods to stimulate exchange and learning processes is important to animate the transnational meetings.

My main message is, apply to be a Lead Expert and enjoy the experience. Links:



<http://urbact.eu/wood-footprint>

<http://videos.sapo.pt/sy5mJNdbBUupzHHAUoRz>

<https://www.facebook.com/municipiopacosdeferreira?fref=ts> (see video 30/04, 10:11)

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