

Barletta, Italy

Old buildings make way for young entrepreneurs

Bollenti Spiriti is a programme of the Puglia Region aimed at youth empowerment. Although directed by a sectoral office for social policy, it is explicitly conceived as an integrated programme with an urban development approach, which combines building renovation with the creation of new public facilities for socio-cultural and educational initiatives, valuing the entrepreneurial and creative potential of young generations. The programme's Urban Laboratories action uses imaginative ways to engage young people in driving forward ideas around growth, the knowledge economy and social inclusion.

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In the relatively short time since 2006, the Bollenti Spiriti ('High Spirits') programme has been able to mobilise a great number of young people, associations, and municipalities to enhance a network of cultural facilities and social projects supporting creativity as a resource for the region, and empowers young people by encouraging cooperation, participation and coproduction among several stakeholders. The programme also developed a series of participative practices that are innovative in the regional administrative context.

The programme comprises three main actions which run in parallel and are meant to build a system in which youth-based actions will create a critical mass of micro-cultural transformations.

Principi Attivi is a programme aimed at young people (18-32) who are required to form a partnership (minimum two people) and propose an idea for territorial, social or entrepreneurial activities. Good ideas are granted up to €25 000 and given full support for the development and communication. The action has financed 610 projects so far.

The **Laboratori Urbani** action redevelops public properties using a multi-stakeholder and participative strategy: the regional administration invites municipalities to identify unused buildings in their area, and funds a twofold action for their recovery: first, the physical regeneration of the building, managed by the technical offices of the local administration; second, a public call for an organisation to manage the new facilities for training, education and cultural purposes. These organisations are contracted for five years, and given a start-up contribution for the first year. Since 2006, 150 buildings have been selected. All the regeneration processes have started, and are creating more than 100 000 sq. m. of new public facilities. So far, 109 managing organisations have been contracted, and 91 structures are already fully active.

Libera il Bene is a newly started sister programme of Urban Laboratories aimed at the redevelopment of public properties confiscated from the mafia into social facilities, without targeting young operators.

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Puglia is one of the regions of Italy's *Mezzogiorno*, which even today lies way behind the northern regions of the country in economic and social terms. It is a long thin region, stretching for 400 km along the Adriatic sea from the 'heel' of Italy halfway to Rome. It has a polycentric structure with a great number of medium-sized towns, most having between 30 000 and 100 000 inhabitants. The strategic vision for its development aims to make the most of this balanced network structure and its fabric of SMEs, after the general disengagement from big industry. Since the 1990s, the region has made an effort to renovate governance and planning tools relating to decentralisation and subsidiarity, with a focus on their alignment with European policy. In 2005 the region's new governor was instrumental in changing regional policy so as to bring in more participation, transparency and youthful energy.

Bollenti Spiriti ('High Spirits') is one of the most successful policies promoted by this new regional government. It is widely recognised at national and European level as an exemplary case, gaining an award for good practice in the European Year of Creativity and Innovation 2009. The programme was firstly conceived by an informal steering committee of supporters of the new regional government as a necessary step to activate creative energies in the region. At that time neither a department nor even a specific office for youth policy existed in the regional administration. Bollenti Spiriti was initiated in practice and strongly supported by the former Councillor for Transparency and Active Citizenship, who used charismatic leadership to activate the energies of the young team, and outlined a completely new approach to policy for the younger generations. This was summed up in the slogan: 'Don't ask what the region can do for young people, ask what young people can do for the region.' In substance, the shift was from a paternalistic approach seeing youth policies as supporting a vulnerable social group, to providing tools, financial and knowledge resources to a dynamic sector of society, deserving of trust and operational autonomy. In the elaboration of the programme the Bollenti Spiriti team developed a set of principles that proved to be successful in determining the effectiveness and dynamism of the operation. They have been synthesised into a series of slogans and adopted as pillars for the programming:

- *Change is a process, not a method.*
- *Don't just allocate and monitor, but also be the first to share.*
- *Not only a person responsible for the process, but also responsible processes.*
- *To trigger new processes, we need new people.*
- *Without trust, no innovation.*
- *Change is contagion, and contagious.*
- *Nothing will happen as planned. This may be good news...*

Three spirited actions

The programme's first initiatives were grants for international mobility by the region's students, aimed at transferring knowledge and enabling young researchers to contribute to the region's growth. The *Cosa Bolle in Pentola?* ('What's brewing?') study was commissioned from the University of Bari to provide a screening of youth expectations and problems: the research set up an online collaborative platform and focus groups involving young stakeholders in the discussion.

The Bollenti Spiriti programme is organised according to three main actions which represent a full package of innovative policies covering the whole region. Even though the programme has a special focus on youth policies, several measures such as the renovation of buildings, coordination with local stakeholders and cooperation among different administrations, make this programme an interesting example of how horizontal and vertical cooperation can function in practice. There are now 800 projects under way, grouped into three main actions: Urban Laboratories, Principi Attivi and Libera il Bene. The first action was the inspiration for the whole programme, the second supports bottom-up projects proposed by young people, and the third is similar to Urban Laboratories but with a focus on properties confiscated from criminals.



Fig. 1. The Bolleenti Spiriti 2.0 website

- *Urban Laboratories –youth centres in redundant buildings*

The lack of space in which to carry out cultural and creative activities was identified as an issue, and so the first step in the history of the Bolleenti Spiriti programme was the launch of the Urban Laboratories action. It has been the most consistent in terms of investment with €48 million spent in one call for projects. The call invited all the municipalities in the region to identify unused buildings in their urban areas to be transformed into cultural centres: the programme would pay for their renovation as well as the start-up of a local management organisation. The resources came from the FAS (Fund for Underdeveloped Areas), allocated by the CIPE (Interministerial Committee for Economic Programming). According to the Financial Law 2007, the national resources of the FAS equate to the EU Structural Funds, and respond to the same NSRF and related monitoring and certification procedures. This is to say that while Bolleenti Spiriti is only partially funded by the Structural Funds, its procedures and approach follow the EU principles and respond to the general objectives of the ERDF regional operational programme. It was not an easy task to adapt the procedure for accessing funds from axis 7 of the National Strategic Reference Framework dedicated to urban regeneration with a youth programme. Particularly innovative was the fact that together with the resources for regenerating unused public buildings, the programme was funding the first years of social and cultural activity of a locally formed organisation, which means that one of the difficulties was to design an integrated measure while using a sectoral fund.

The first call for Urban Laboratories projects was designed before the Bolleenti Spiriti staff was in place, and only one officer of the regional administration was in charge of the new programme. In order to manage the new programme, an external body was created employing seven people. This staff, which responded efficiently to the goal of designing the new policy approach, was successively integrated into the regional office on an annual contract basis. Today, this team constitutes the core of the programme's management, and forms a new office in the regional administration. The members form a cohesive and dynamic team of seven young executives with mixed backgrounds in sociology, political sciences, economics, international cooperation etc. and a skilled understanding of communication and social media. The team is responsible for the innovative procedures of stakeholder involvement and partnership governance as well as for accountancy and certification procedures. Its members are extremely committed and active in mobilising energies in the field, facilitating local partnerships, presenting the Bolleenti Spiriti programme and its opportunities by organising and facilitating discussions and workshops with local actors, travelling all over the region to meet local stakeholders and discussing the policy's aims with the target groups.

The Urban Laboratories (ULs) represented a big challenge for the regional government, which has been able to support the recovery of 150 disused buildings involving 169 municipalities (some projects are the fruit of inter-municipal cooperation), and already has 91 managing organisations fully activated. It was the testing ground on which the Bolleenti Spiriti programme

and its philosophy have been formed, with a 'learning by doing' approach. It introduced a participative approach based on wide partnerships, involving the regional administration as strategic coordinator, local administrations and NGOs. In theory the procedure for creating a UL is as follows:

'After a call of proposals, for the projects approved the implementation process starts (activities), which have these main steps:

- the refurbishment of buildings
- the setting up of an institutional body for youth participation with advisory functions (local youth network)
- the writing of the executive plan of the laboratory (local management plan)
- the selection of the partnership that will manage the laboratory (management body)

The laboratory can start up when the refurbishment of the building is complete, a local youth network is based on a formal agreement, a local management plan is ready and a management body is selected. The programme provides operational funding only for the first year (up to €140 000), but the laboratory has to be open for at least for other four years. For this obligation, two actors are responsible: the management body expects to find other useful resources; the local authorities have to assign the refurbished building to the activities funded from the programme.¹

On the other hand, the regenerated structures now need to ensure their economic sustainability after the first year start-up grant is spent. Interviews with the managers of three different Urban Laboratories² highlight multiple issues and problems emerging during the development of the projects,



Fig. 2. Stakeholders involved in an Urban Laboratory project, with the Bollente Spiriti staff on the right

with a great degree of diversity in local factors affecting the implementation and different perceived levels of success. A major set of problems shared by the managers interviewed was the adaptation of the physical structure as delivered by the executive project of the municipality, which did not meet the technical requirements of future activities – because the users' need had not been assessed at an early stage. This resulted in the

managing organisations spending a substantial part of the funding they received to see them through the first year's activities on the technical integration and modification of the building, burdening the social activity budget with an unexpected deficit. An aspect which characterised the projects is the significance (in both positive and negative senses) of the commercial revenue from the bar activity connected with public events. The impression is that the Urban Lab programme has been effective in starting a huge redevelopment operation, which cut typical public works timetables by half – but left a lot of problem-solving to be done afterwards. The Bollente Spiriti team demonstrated however a good capacity to learn from the experience and to readdress the policy-making, creating new tools and programmes to improve its effectiveness.

• **Principi Attivi – one grant for one good idea**

After organising the procedure for creating these 150 new public facilities all over the region, the Bollente Spiriti team was responsible for the second action, launched in 2008. Principi Attivi is derived from a framework agreement with the Ministry of Economic Development for a funding action worth €10.5 million. The initiative was conceived as a dissemination of small grants of up to €25 000 based on the general principle of one grant for one good idea in the

¹ Morciano, D. and Scardigno A.F. (2010)
² ExOpera in Cerignola, LUC in Manfredonia, Giovani Open Space in Barletta.

field of social enterprise and territorial empowerment. The draft call for projects was posted on the website and discussed with the potential beneficiaries until it took its definitive form. In parallel, meetings and focus groups with potential beneficiaries went on, together with the smart use of social networking tools, including a wiki, a blog and a Facebook group, which have been significant for the collaborative design of the programme. Finally, a first 'BarCamp' was organised in 2007 in Bari, involving thousands of young people in open methods of 'unconferencing'. The first rule in a BarCamp is 'all participants, no spectators'. The purpose is to bring together people, projects, institutions, enterprises and operators in a free and open environment, to build confidence, collaboration and peer learning.

Since then the Bollente Spiriti BarCamp has been repeated every year and attracts an ever larger number of people, so it has become a decisive moment for the collective revision of the policy. This set of participative actions, in which the future recipients of the programme were involved in defining its scope and procedures, resulted in the Principi Attivi call for projects. The eligible ideas fall into three areas: the protection and valorisation of the territory; developing the knowledge economy and innovation; and social inclusion and active citizenship. If selected, informal groups are committed to establishing a new legal entity of their choice (association, cooperative or company). In 2008 Principe Attivi had €10.5 million to invest. Out of 1 563 projects submitted, 420 projects were funded, of which 286 were associations, 113 companies, and 21 cooperatives. Today, 73% are operating under the same form, 8% are active in a different form (individuals or groups), 1% are being transformed, 12% are in existence but currently inactive, and 6% closed after the end of the project. In 2010, for a €4.8 million fund, 2 231 projects were submitted but only 190 could be selected.

Principi Attivi, although financing small actions with small grants, is a successful formula to activate collaborative energies all over the region, producing an explosion of creative projects, ranging from sustainable mobility (bike-taxi, green paths, car-pooling) to participative planning and community empowerment (public space



Fig. 3. Unexpected: The Blackshape Prime, the fastest ultralight plane in the world, is produced by a young enterprise in Monopoli which started with a Principi Attivi grant, despite the initial idea of designing carbon fibre furniture.

intervention, community gardens, open GIS), sustainable tourism (valorisation of old local railway networks, valorisation and protection of natural environments) and smart enterprise (creative recycling of materials, aeronautical industry, design, fashion).

Many of the Principi Attivi projects demonstrated a clear capacity to engage with territorial transformation and urban development, often establishing synergies with the Urban Laboratory projects. This action, despite the smaller level of funding, has found an easier way to mobilise creative resources, pointing to more direct involvement of the project's recipient associations, while the Urban Laboratories action, which was more ambitious and complex in its partnerships and governance, had more difficulties in finding its way through the consolidated urban development praxis.

- ***Libera il Bene – reusing the spoils of crime***

In 2009 a third Action was launched: Libera il Bene (LiB), in collaboration with the Libera association, which has long been active at national level redeveloping properties confiscated from the mafia. This programme – although not specifically directed at youth but at the conversion of buildings into socially useful structures – draws on the Urban Laboratories experience of recovering disused buildings, with some substantial improvements derived from experience. Here, management associations and municipalities have to form a partnership to participate in the call, submitting a common project for the reuse of the building. This programme is the only one that is almost completely (90%) funded from the ERDF, responding

to Priority 3 of the regional OP: 'Social inclusion and services to enhance the quality of life and the attractiveness of the region' (measure 3.4.2 'Interventions for the social reuse of goods confiscated from criminal organisations'). Ten projects have been financed so far, with a public investment of €7 million. 'Given the lack of resources in the local budget, the risk with confiscated goods was of causing a boomerang effect, with local people seeing properties fall into dereliction and associating public intervention with degradation in respect to when the criminal families held them,' explains Regional Councillor Fratoianni. 'That is why we created LiB, to provide a means for a quick and practical recovery of the buildings.' LiB represents a smaller and somehow more sectoral intervention among the Bollente Spiriti programmes, but demonstrates the transferability of the approach promoted with the Urban Laboratories and Principi Attivi.

Giovani Open Space – from distillery to cultural centre

The Municipality of Barletta applied in 2006 to the Urban Laboratories call for projects to create the Giovani Open Space – GOS ('Youth Open Space'), an urban centre dedicated to music and education, by redeveloping a brownfield site in a disadvantaged area of the town. Barletta is one of the three main towns in the polycentric province of Barletta-Andria-Trani, with a recently instituted Broad Area Strategic Plan – BAP (*Piano Strategico di Area Vasta*). The project of recovering the old distillery has a long gestation period. The factory, built at the beginning of the 20th century, closed at the end of 1980s. In 1990 the Ministry for Cultural and Environmental Heritage listed the complex as a heritage object to defend it from possible speculation. By 1991 a 'Forum for the reuse of the distillery' was launched by a group of citizens and experts concerned with the regeneration of the area. This civic initiative planted the seed of a concerned recovery, and mobilised a number of individuals who contributed over the years to defining the vision for its implementation.



Fig. 4. The squatted old people's home and the unused Botanical Garden

In 2002 the Municipality of Barletta acquired the structure. Since 1996, the redevelopment of the area has been the lynchpin of an Urban Regeneration Programme (PRU) aimed at upgrading the neighbourhood. However, the PRU's planned vision has only been patchily implemented over the last 15 years, through four different administrations, without a sound or clear integrated management of the actions. Some projects have been completed, like a residential building for elderly people, which was formerly illegally occupied by disadvantaged families, and a botanical garden, which has been almost completed but has not yet found the means to be inaugurated.

In this uncertain situation, within a clearly problematic urban context, the regional call for Urban Laboratories provided a solid base for creating a youth and employment centre. The municipality almost doubled the investment of the region, spending a significant sum – over €1 000 000 – on the structure, far more than the minimum co-financing required by the programme. Renovation works started in February 2009 and were completed by November 2011. Meanwhile a call for tenders was issued for the management of the structure – but no candidates applied. A second call attracted no local participants. The management was therefore assigned to the Prometeo Social Cooperative, based in the nearby town of Trani, with

experience mainly in professional training and education. In March 2011 the managing organisation started its official activity.

The project has two main parts. One activity is centred on musical production, providing recording facilities, rehearsal space and an auditorium. GOS organises music courses, concerts and events. A complete production studio for music recording is functional, and the project foresees the creation of a music label. The other activity comprises a varied range of educational courses on subjects including theatrical tailoring, theatre, music recording, video editing as well as professional training for real estate agents, gardeners, etc. Through one of its branches, the Prometeo cooperative also runs ESF-funded training activities – thus providing a bottom-up integration of EU structural funds – and contributes to the regional network of employment policy offices. The cooperative has a core of five people which manages a variable number of side projects and collaborators working on short-term contracts. In the case of GOS Barletta the director is the president of the association Zona Effe (which in fact provided the cultural vision for GOS) and is himself employed by the cooperative on an annual contract basis, together with other three full-time workers who manage the place (a sound engineer, a bartender and a logistics person) and three part-time workers (a web designer, a secretary and a door-keeper). Those jobs were funded by the first year start-up grant, but sustainability in the coming period is a serious issue.



Fig. 5. The buildings around the ex-distillery that still have to be redeveloped, and the recording studio

In 2011 GOS hosted, in collaboration with the provincial BAP and the University of Bari, a summer school on participative planning, which focused on designing the new Provincial Territorial Coordination Plan (PTCP). The workshop aimed to constitute a platform for territorial partnership contributing to the first strategic framework for the plan. The summer school will be repeated in 2012, with a greater focus on the regeneration of the ex-distillery site. This is connected to a new project that the GOS management is submitting for funding: a permanent forum for the regeneration of the old distillery (FRED 2012), reviving the forum created by a civic initiative in 1991. The Urban Laboratory aims to play an active role in a participative regeneration process of the area, proposing a calendar of activities and events, including workshops on industrial archaeology, photography, participative storytelling about the neighbourhood, documentary film, documentation and archiving of the urban transformation, lectures, guided tours and theatrical animation. GOS is committed to playing a consistent role, animating integrated and participative sustainable urban development in the local context, demonstrating the capacity of the Bollenti Spiriti programme to stimulate young, innovative and creative energies in the region to produce social change. On the other hand, the prospects of sustainability in terms of revenues from activities and support from local stakeholders and residents are still very uncertain, leaving open issues with regard to the final achievement of its objectives.



Fig. 6 Summer school and workers on the Bollenti Spiriti building site

Is sustainability possible?

A great number of local variables affect the possibility of success of the 150 Urban Laboratories (and the 600 Principi Attivi) in terms of their economic sustainability, including the issue of the coordination and diversification of the offer throughout the region to avoid overlapping and redundancy. This is why the Dolente Spiriti managing team is implementing the next two steps of the programme, which are seen as necessary to consolidate the self-sufficiency of the projects and improve their programming capacity. The first is the creation of a Resource Centre, whose role is to help all the stakeholders of the regional programme to find their role and market, providing consultancy, tutoring, marketing resources and orientation on funding opportunities. The management of the centre has been contracted to an external organisation, the Fitzcarraldo Association of Turin. The second measure is to financially support the diversification of services, equipment upgrades and bottom-up initiatives, which may be fundamental for the survival of the many Urban Laboratories launched in the region.

The general outcome of the Bollenti Spiriti programme appears extremely convincing as regards the approach instilled in the territorial stakeholders, which is based on great transparency and a collaborative attitude, is strong on inclusiveness and social solidarity, and uses smart communication channels. The participative approach is promoted as a substantial planning practice and not as a mere consensus creation and marketing instrument. More problematic is the actual feedback from the field, as demonstrated by the variety of difficulties encountered by the young project teams facing real practice, in particular in their relationship with local administrations and in the ability of municipalities to respond to new challenges and procedures. Nevertheless the programme has demonstrated the capacity to induce transformation and innovation. The managing team contributes its solid capacity to analyse, to learn from experience and to adapt to new procedures. A significant strength is the ability to coordinate a collaborative network organisation.

Bollenti Spiriti, which started as a sectoral programme, has in some aspects become a 'movement' involving thousands of young creative players in the project of creating common visions for the territory. The objective of activating 150 Urban Laboratories at once is an ambitious one, and the issue of the future sustainability of the newly created social centres is a big conundrum. The region's approach is to step up support for their development as a network and to foster the sustainable and cohesive growth of the territory by creating common tools and platforms, to improve the collaborative capacity of the different projects instead of speculating on individual competitiveness.

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