

THE SUSTAINABLE DISTRICT CONTRACT: DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION AND MANAGEMENT AT LOCAL LEVEL

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Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to apologize for my poor English and so, for you to understand me better, I will rigorously stick to my text.

Mister Piereuse just explained to you the architecture of the district revitalization programme.

As for me, I had the pleasure of leading RenovaS, almost since its creation, and my colleague Françoise Deville, is in charge of the methodology and communication.

But what is RenovaS?

RenovaS was created in 1996 on the initiative of the alderman for urban renewal at the time, and when the first district contract was granted to the municipality of Schaerbeek the council decided to entrust RenovaS with the implementation of the programme. Eighteen years later, we're on our tenth programme and, hopefully, soon our eleventh. Indeed, the regional government will grant two new district contracts at the end of this year and we hope one of these will be allocated to Schaerbeek.

While the districts contracts in the other municipalities of the Brussels region are managed by their own administration and often by several different departments according to the sort of operation, RenovaS manages the whole programme, its technical aspects as well as the information and participation of all the concerned actors.

RenovaS has thus accumulated lots of experiences and is also the sole interlocutor for the region. The importance for the region of having one single interlocutor for each programme has since a few years lead the region to finance one project leader per programme.

I mentioned ten districts contracts for the municipality of Schaerbeek

Schaerbeek is the second largest municipality in the Brussels region with a surface of more than 8 km² and more than 130 000 inhabitants with 150 different nationalities.

It is characterized by a significant difference between the upper, let's say rich, part of town and the lower part that is a lot poorer and that has known the exodus of its original inhabitants to make room for a population that consists for the greater part of a immigrated population that was, until a few years, mainly of Moroccan and Turkish origin.

That is why, as you can see on the map, the ten districts contracts allocated to Schaerbeek, are all situated on the lower part of the municipal territory.

But let's get to the core of our subject, the practical implementation of district contract. We'll first of all determine the timeframe. A district contract is spread in total over a period of 7 years.

The first phase consists to submit the candidacy by the municipality. This phase to which we lend our experience, follows the lead of the alderman for urban renewal. It will determine the geographical priorities while taking into account the perimeters that have already been treated. Thereafter we have to analyse, within the selected geographical zone, the

sociological and urban realities and make a first locating of the possible operations. The whole is assembled into a file that is transmitted to the region in September in order to allow the latter to decide on the different candidates. The happy chosen receive a confirmation by the end of the year.

Then comes the race against time since we have to recruit a project leader; pass a public service contract to designate the design office that will assist the municipality and us, RenovaS, in the drafting of the programme; establish a detailed analyses of the state of the buildings; get acquainted with the socio-economical characteristics of the chosen district; mark the possible operations, and describe and quantify them; consult the different municipal departments concerned; organize a regular feedback to the region; and all this preferably before summer because the draft of the programme must be submitted to a public enquiry at the latest in September.

During this time period we must also determine the frame for the socio-economic and environmental projects

that will generate the call for projects.

We finally also have to prioritize the operations according to their possible impact on the district, the preferences of the inhabitants, their feasibility in terms of, amongst others, the land management and financing.

The whole district contract is supported by a participation programme so we must, at the start of the development phase, organise the setup of a district committee.

You will have seen that, taking into account the brief development phase, the latter is not done on a schedule « bottom up » but rather a « top down » and the district committee has therefore only an advisory power.

Nevertheless we do our utmost to gather the opinions, advice and wishes of as many local actors and, of course, inhabitants as possible, way more than the purely regulatory requirements. Thus we make informative documents, we organise diagnostic walks, organize stands in the public spaces, form workgroups ...

A number of actors would wish to extend the development phase but such extension is technically difficult because of the annuity principle of the regional budget that imposes that a budget must be allocated during that same year

Finally we note that, since a couple of years, the region imposes that the creation of crèche be included in all district contracts. In addition, all new constructions must meet the passive standard and the renovations must meet the low energy standard.

So, the programme has been developed, submitted to the public enquiry and the consultation committee. The remarks of the committee have been integrated and after approval by the city council, the region has validated the programme with or without remarks and/or conditions. We now enter the implementation phase.

We recruit de collaborators who will assist the project leader during the 4 years of implementation. We thus form a small team consisting, besides the project leader, of an information officer who will pilot the socio-economic and environmental projects, and

especially those concerning the participation and information, and an animator. We complete this team with an architect-renovation advisor and we settle this little group in a facility in the heart of the perimeter of the district contract, rooms we rent for 4 years. The project leader will see to the smooth development of the programme and he can rely on the support of the technical cell of RenovaS for the realisation of the physical construction or renovation operations. He will also propose possible changes in the programme. These changes concern mostly real estate operations whose feasibility seem difficult considering the deadlines, or whose inclusion in the programme have instigated the owner's interest.

The team of the urban district contract will, during 4 years, ensure the information and generate the participation of the local actors, promote the social cohesion, give advice to citizens for the renovation of their house.

Beyond the regulatory device that guides the information and participation, we use a whole series of other means in order to reach the greatest number of people and to collect, when needed, the maximum number of opinions. Thus we vary the media: brochures, newsletters, posters of the project on the site of the operation, meetings, communications for the assembled groups... and we don't forget a more personal contact through door-to-door visits. This seems to be very efficient but is, as you can guess, very time consuming.

Centralising the technical aspects and communication is naturally a plus for the quality of the latter.

After the four years, the socio-economic projects are no longer financed by the district contract and the public works contracts must have been granted. The team of the district contract is then dissolved but, fortunately, our technical cell and our communication cell allow us to take over, thus we don't jump from a communication flow into a deafening silence.

In general we notice a strong participation at the start of the process and especially during the development of the programme and the detailed definition of some of its operations. This participation tends to lessen during the implementation phase and the regulatory frame is sometimes cumbersome when it imposes meetings of the district committee although there is no relevant information to communicate. The administrative procedures that regulate the public contracts and the obtaining of the urban permit are in fact long and this explains why several months may pass without any specific communication about an operation.

Finally, two years later, the work sites must be finished and all executed works are passed to the municipality.

As explained, a district contract is amongst others, a series of physical operations and some of them concern the public space: repairing the roads and sidewalks, developing a square or a park, improving the public lightning, placing urban furniture ... all in accordance with the plans on a larger scale than the directly concerned district such as the light plan that covers the whole of the municipal territory, or the mobility plan.

It concerns an important component that requires specific attention and that presents a snowball effect that may not be ignored. It's not exceptional to see a private owner renovate

the facade of his house after his sidewalk has been renovated. Therefore the increase of the regional renovation grants during the four years of the implementation of the programme, merits surely to be moved forward for two years.

The operations on the public space need more consultation. Certain developments justify the consultation of the future users aged from 3 to 97 years and we organise therefor thematic workgroups which we adapt according to the different concerned publics.

The public space is, indeed, a multicultural challenge in as far as its perception and use vary with the different publics that live there or that frequent these districts. However, these publics distinguish themselves as much by their functions: office workers, businessmen, commuters, students, as by the social or cultural origins of the 137 nationalities present in the concerned districts.

In short, the work in the public space can start very early after the approval of the programme since, in principle, the public authorities are the owners of these spaces. This work demands, however, longer consultation and the relative necessity to start the worksites two years after the approval of the programme seems in numerous cases unrealistic.

A second series of physical operations concerns the creation of houses and infrastructures.

These operations which are mostly carried out on sites with little importance for the private sector, are the perfect means to eradicate eysores and to fill up hollows.

They make it possible to create social housing or to provide a district with an infrastructure that is lacking such as for instance a crèche or a sport hall.

It is also a good opportunity to test new construction methods for energy performance of buildings as well as green roofs or the use of rainwater.

Lastly these operations offer also the possibility to stimulate contemporary quality architecture. Indeed, we pass on to the municipality, at the moment when it will allocate an architecture contract, the opinion formulated by a committee consisting of professionals members of the contracting authority as well as third parties, whereby we make sure that the latter form the majority. The different competing architecture offices present their project to this committee whose opinion has always been followed by the municipal authority.

A district contract has, besides the physical operations also an important socio-economic and environmental component.

The part of the budget allocated to this component has been considerably increased compared to the programmes of 15 or 20 years ago.

Besides the budgets for the information and participation, we benefit, in general, also from a budget that enables us not only to intensify our work as renovation advisors within the concerned perimeter but also to setup pilot actions such as, for example, the rent for renovation programme. It consists, for us, of convincing an owner to renovate a house, to

entrust the renovations, under our technical supervision, to a social real estate association that will later ensure its management. Money wise the operation is financed for one third by the district contract, one third by the renovation grants. The social real estate association advances the third part to the owner and it recuperates the sum through the differential of the rent between the sum it receives from the tenant and the rent it transfers to the owner. This setup revealed interesting in as far as the average cost for a thus created social housing, is considerably lower than the cost for the construction of a new house.

Besides these recurrent projects, we use the diagnostic phase to identify the axis between which the socio-economic projects should fit. These axis allow us to start up different project calls and invite the candidates to come and present their intentions before the district committee.

The most frequently encountered axis refer to employment, schooling, education, embellishment of the living environment and learning to live together.

We develop several projects for professional integration in the fields of paving, gardening but also childcare. The aim is to give persons who are remote from the labour market a technical and behavioural training that will allow them to find or to find again a good job. Certain paving trainees, for instance, have found a job in a firm that executes the roadworks planned in the programme. People following a training for childcare will have a chance of finding a job within the infrastructures built within the scope of the programme of the district contract, others are trained for jobs in a restaurant that is also build in the scope of district contract.

Several projects aim also to change the image that some people have of a district, whether or not they live in that district. They may consist of a mural painting, decorating paraboloid reflector, artistically illuminating certain spaces in the district or making a movie with the youngsters of the district as co-writers and actors.

Our team ensures the proper execution of these projects by federating the different project initiators as well as the local associations. They all have to work together and can thus profit from each other's work.

While speaking of our team you will have understood that it has to be multidisciplinary. That although 20 years ago, the common characteristic of our colleagues was their interest in the city and a certain social awareness, today, and without disowning the aforementioned characteristics, we present a greater professionalism in terms of training and experience. We can only rejoice about this in as far as our frame of interventions becomes more complex because of the various regulations that cumulate and the ever growing socio-cultural challenges.

Thank you for your time!