

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE WITH YOU: MEDIATION BETWEEN BOTTOM-UP AND TOP-DOWN APPROACHES IN URBAN RENOVATION POLICIES

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Abstract

While the literature on the governance of social-ecological systems increasingly recognizes a general role of bridging organisations (BOs) in transition processes, our paper provides a more nuanced understanding of specific BO activities and their contributions towards urban sustainability. Our analysis is based on applying methodological triangulation (drawing on geolocalised data, interviews and action research) to 20 years of urban renovation investments in the city-region of Brussels. We distinguish between multi-scale, multi-actor and multi-dimensional tensions in urban renovation programmes and link these tensions to three different mediation roles for BOs. Empirical observations suggest that the three types of tensions/mediations form a trilemma rather than a trilogy: the BOs in our case study have mediated one tension by de facto exacerbating another. Lessons from action research suggest that a wider use of temporality and conceptual translations in urban renovation projects could attenuate the mediation trilemma faced by BOs.

JEL codes: R11, R38, R58

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, virtually every large agglomeration in the Northern hemisphere was forced to adapt to regional structural change. Despite substantial heterogeneity across city-regions, Couch et al (2011), in their review of 30 years of urban regeneration projects in Britain, Germany and France, have identified deindustrialisation, globalisation, demographic change and obsolete urban structures, environments and housing as common pressures in many city-regions. These drivers of regional structural change often develop over several decades and are mostly exogeneous to the evolution of city-regions¹ (Moretti 2013; Clayton et al 2014).

It is a stylised fact that some city-regions have been less successful than others in responding to these pressures: agglomerations like Detroit, Cleveland or Rochester in the United States or Charleroi in Belgium, which had previously prospered by exporting their industrial production, have experienced prolonged social and economic crises and lost both population and employment since the 1980s (Hill et al 2012, Cowell 2013). By contrast, cities like Toronto in Canada (which is situated less than 400 km away from Detroit) and Lille in France (which is less than 150 km from Charleroi) provide more employment today than in the mid-1970s and have increased in population size over the last two decades. The contrasting evolution of Toronto/Detroit and Lille/Charleroi is not only striking in light of their geographical proximity, but also because their respective socio-economic structure in the 1970s and their exposure to similar external forces over the last forty years. This could suggest that regional policy responses to structural change might contribute to make a difference.

This paper is concerned with place-based policies in response to structural change in urban social-ecological systems (Folke et al. 2005). These policies are alternatively referred to as ‘urban regeneration’, ‘urban renovation’, ‘urban revitalisation’, ‘urban renewal’ etc. While most academic research in this area has focused on the link between implementation and outcomes (Nolan and Wong 2004; Glaeser and Gottlieb 2008; Busso et al 2013), our paper focuses on the understudied relationship between governance and implementation, and in particular the tensions and possible mediation strategies between urban renovation projects that are implemented at different scales, by different types of actors or concerning different dimensions of social-ecological systems.

Our empirical evidence draws on the case of the main urban renovation policy in Brussels, Belgium’s largest city-region with a surface of 161 km² and 1.2 million inhabitants. Through this policy, the “Neighbourhood Contracts” (NCs), 1.14 billion euros have been invested over the last twenty years. The NC programme brings together local, regional and federal actors and allows a study of the tensions and mediations between different scales, actors and dimensions over a long period.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we situate our research in the governance literature in general and research on the role of bridging organisations (BOs) in urban renovation actions in particular. Section 3 describes the main features of Brussels’ urban renovation programme. Section 4 presents a triangulation of our case study based on 1) an exhaustive administrative database with all geolocalised urban renovation investments between 1994 and 2014; 2) a series of qualitative interviews with key stakeholders that we

¹ We use the terms ‘urban agglomerations’ and ‘city-regions’ interchangeably. Following Le Corbusier, an agglomeration can be defined by its limits: the area of influence of another agglomeration (Le Corbusier, 1957).

carried out between 2013 and 2015; and 3) four action-research projects in which we engaged between 2013 and 2015. The final section concludes.

2. Governance of urban renovation

The management of complex social-ecological systems such as urban agglomerations is increasingly framed as a governance problem. A rapidly expanding body of research is concerned with how the governance of social-ecological systems can be improved so as to increase the systems' adaptability, sustainability or resilience (Dietz et al 2003, Kemp and Parto 2005, Holling 2006, Brunner 2010). However, the traditional focus of the governance literature on issues related to natural resource management such as forests or fishing stocks (e.g. Plummer and Armitage 2007) means that scholars have started only recently to study the adaptation of urban social-ecological systems from a governance perspective (Brenner 1999, Biddulph 2011, Vandergert et al. 2015), so that our study is one of the first to examine empirically the governance of urban renovation policies.

A central issue regarding the governance of urban renovation is its scale: indeed, policies can be implemented at city/regional, local/neighborhood or any intermediate scales. Larger scales are generally associated with 'top-down' and smaller scales with 'bottom-up' approaches (Németh and Langhorst 2014). In practice, the difference between top-down and bottom-up adaptations not only refers to the "direction that is given to regeneration policy" (Couch et al 2011), but also evokes distinct types of actors. For instance, specialised experts are more likely to intervene in projects carried out from the top at larger scales, whereas local communities typically play a more prominent role in small-scale projects initiated from the bottom.

A key insight from the urban planning literature is that different scales should not be regarded as having per se any intrinsic value (Swyngedouw 1997, Marston 2000). Born and Purcell (2006) warn against a "local trap" that consists in the increasingly popular assumption that policies are inherently better if they are carried out at a smaller rather than a bigger scale. Instead, scale is only a means that can lead to different desirable or less desirable ends: the final outcome of a strategy "will depend not on the scale itself but on the agenda of those who are empowered by the scalar strategy" (ibid).

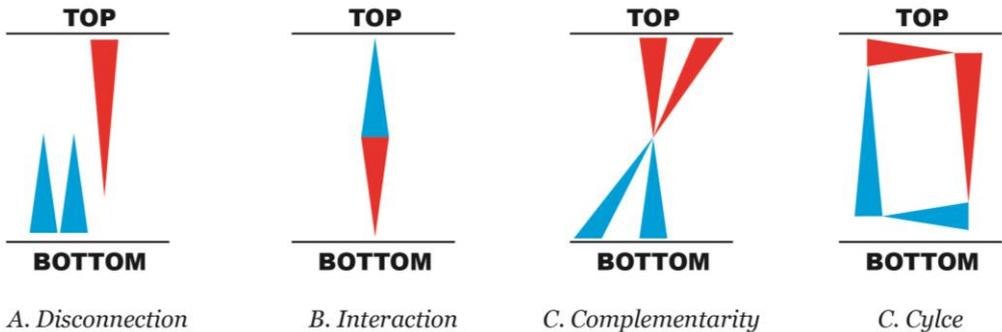
In the context of urban regeneration, it is likely that both bottom-up and top-down approaches provide opportunities for improving the capacity of urban social-ecological systems to adapt to structural change. On any account, in most cities multiple approaches to urban renovation coexist at different scales and involve various types of actors and knowledge. One of the key governance problems is therefore not picking the "most appropriate" scale for urban renovation, but rather improving the interactions across different scales and heterogeneous actors. These interactions can be problematic: for instance, bottom-up and top-down projects can be disconnected from each other or even be counterproductive. Németh and Langhorst (2014) argue that avoiding such negative outcomes requires processes combining top-down (city/regional scale) and bottom-up (local/neighborhood scale) analysis and action.

According to a widening consensus in the literature on the governance of social-ecological systems, BOs can play key roles in facilitating the interactions across scales or across types of actors. BOs often have the capacity to create horizontal linkages and information flows across sectors, but also across scales (Brown 1991; Vignola et al. 2013). While "bridging"

can be defined as interorganizational collaboration (Westley 1995), it should be noted that BOs do not necessarily imply formal institutions. According to Folke et al (2005), BOs “appear to be essential for building the capacity to adapt to change”. They describe their role as facilitators and leaders who lower the nonmonetary costs of collaboration and conflict resolution in multistakeholder governance set-ups, for instance by providing social incentives to all stakeholders to invest in building trust and by identifying common interests (Hahn et al 2006). Berkes (2009) argues that BOs act as fora for the interaction of knowledge acquired at different scales and contribute to the coordination of other tasks that enable co-operation.

Our paper adds to this literature by zooming in on the scope, roles and challenges faced by BOs in the context of urban renovation policies. In order to frame the analysis of our empirical material, we can schematically distinguish different governance configurations in which BOs operate. These configurations are characterised by a) the scale at which urban renovation actions are initiated; b) the direction of these actions; and c) the relationships between different actions. The schematic representation below illustrates a sample of different configurations.

Figure 1: Schematic representation of relationship between top-down and bottom-up policies



3. Overview of Brussels’ urban renovation programme

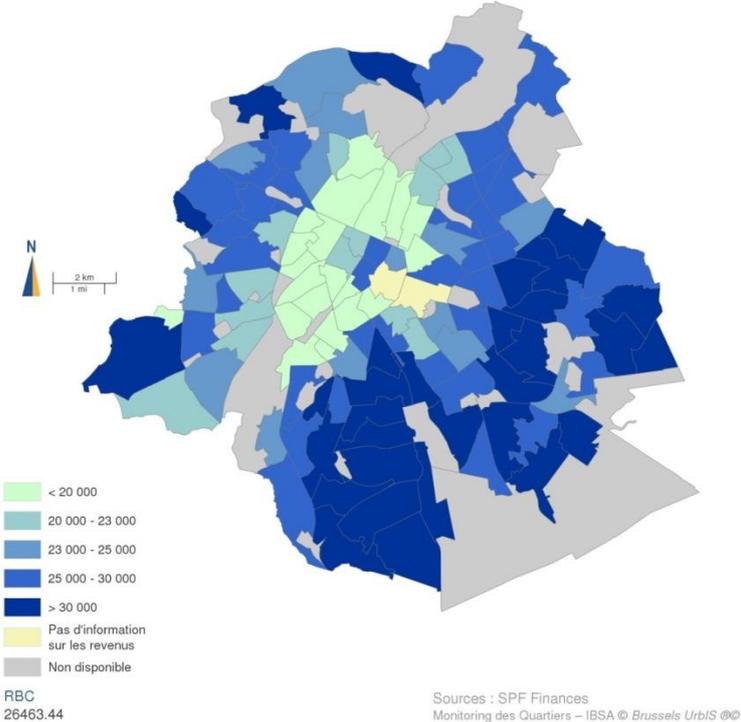
This section provides background information on Brussels’ neighbourhood contracts (NCs). The legislative basis of the NC came into force in 1993 as one of the first major policies of the Brussels-Capital Region, a new territorial entity that was institutionalised in 1989. The first wave of NCs started in 1994, the second and third generations in 1997 and 1999. Since then, a new wave of NCs starts every year. Although the regulation and implementation of the NC programme has somewhat evolved over the last twenty years, the policy is characterised by remarkable stability.

The NC programme is in part a response to a long history of large-scale projects that left visible scars in the urban tissue of inner-city neighbourhoods: the tunneling of the Senne river and the construction of the central boulevards, the construction of the maritime port, the railway junction between South and North stations and the new Central station, the reconfiguration of the Monts des Arts, the construction of the metro... each of these projects

came with its share of uncertainties, expropriations, demolitions and large construction sites that lasted for years, sometimes even for decades (Demey 1990, Lenel 2013). They also exacerbated the two historical trends of Brussels' urbanization since the mid-19th century, namely a) a centrifugal movement of middle- and upper-class households from the centre to the periphery and b) the contrast between the relatively poor working-class population in the canal area and the former wetlands of the Western Senne valley (the "poor crescent") and the bourgeoisie in the South-East.

Starting in the 1970s, regional structural change further accentuated the bipolarity of the city-region: the manufacturing industries in the canal area, traditionally the main employers of workers, slowly but steadily declined. Having reached its maximum capacity in the mid-1970s, the port lost much of its importance as the city's transportation hub. Over the 1990s and 2000s, relatively new socio-demographic developments have arguably complexified the historically determined dichotomies of East-West and Centre-Periphery. Like other service-oriented urban economies, Brussels is witnessing an influx of young professionals who prefer living in inner-city neighbourhoods to commuting to peripheral suburbs. A more idiosyncratic factor is a predicted "demographic boom" in neighborhoods with high unemployment and immigrant rates (Guerin, Maufroy and Raynaud 2007). These developments have, however, not yet erased Brussels' historical dichotomies: Figure 2 shows the distribution of average income in tax declaration in 2012 for different neighbourhoods and illustrates that outer neighbourhoods still tend to be richer than more central ones and the concentration of relatively poorer neighbourhoods in the canal area.

Figure 2: Average income in tax declarations (in 2012 euros)

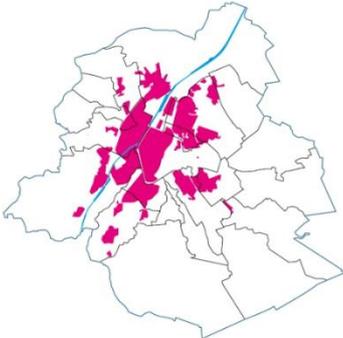


In order to target the neighbourhoods most in need of revitalisation, the regional authorities used a series of socio-economic criteria to define a priority zone from which each year neighbourhoods are selected for a local NC. This zone was defined in two Regional Development Plans in 1995 and 2002 (Figure 3) and subsequently enlarged in the Regional Sustainable Development Plan in 2013 (Figure 4). The priority zone covers neighbourhoods

situated in 12 of the 19 municipalities that are part of the Bruxelles-Capital Region and, with some exceptions, roughly coincides with the area in the vicinity of the canal.

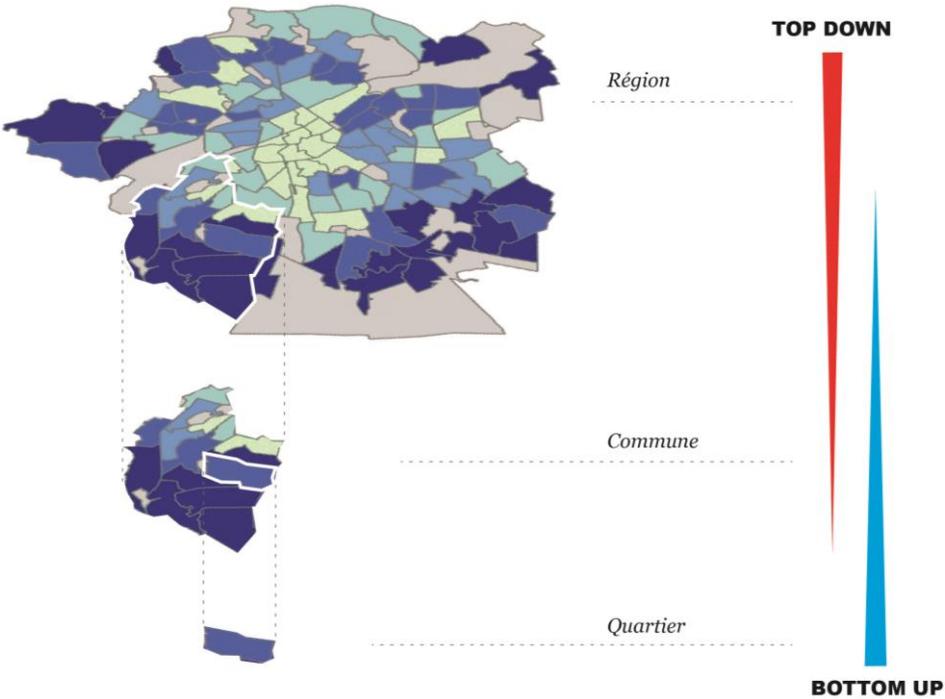
Figure 3: Priority zone 1994-2013

Figure 4: Priority zone since 2013



The NC is formally an investment contract between the region and a municipality, but also involves other actors at different levels of governance, including federal (notably the Beliris investment fund), regional (regional ministries and administrations, regional NGOs) and local actors (different municipal services, local communities, local NGOs, individuals). The multiple levels of governance are depicted in Figure 5, which also illustrates that both bottom-up and top-down approaches can be associated with the same level: the direction given to urban renovation policy by municipal actors can point to the top when it interacts with regional or federal interlocutors or to the bottom when it is concerned with local communities in individual neighbourhoods.

FIGURE 5



The total duration of a local NC (including preparation and completion of all interventions) spans around 7 years, a relatively short period of time to carry out some of the more complex operations.²

By the end of 2014, a total of 75 neighbourhood contracts have been signed between the regional and local administrations. The cumulated investment for all NCs that started in the last 20 years was 1.14 billion euros³, yielding an average of 15.14 million euros per neighbourhood.

The funds were spent on 1,933 different operations so that each NC combines on average 26 individual operations. More than half of the total NC programme has been financed by the Brussels-Capital Region (55%). Municipalities are the second largest source of funding (22%). The federal government also invested in the NC programme through a cooperation with the Beliris fund: 16% of the entire investment over the last 20 years were funded in this way. Finally, 7% of the NC programme projects are financed by other sources such as public-private partnerships for housing projects.

The distribution of the total investment among different spending categories and by source of funding is shown in Figure 6. Supply and quality of housing is the biggest spending category (39%), followed by social cohesion and public facilities (28%), amenities and infrastructure (26%) and local economy (5%). The management of the programme accounted for 3% of the total budget.⁴

Figure 6: Cumulated funding by investment and source of funding (1993-2014)

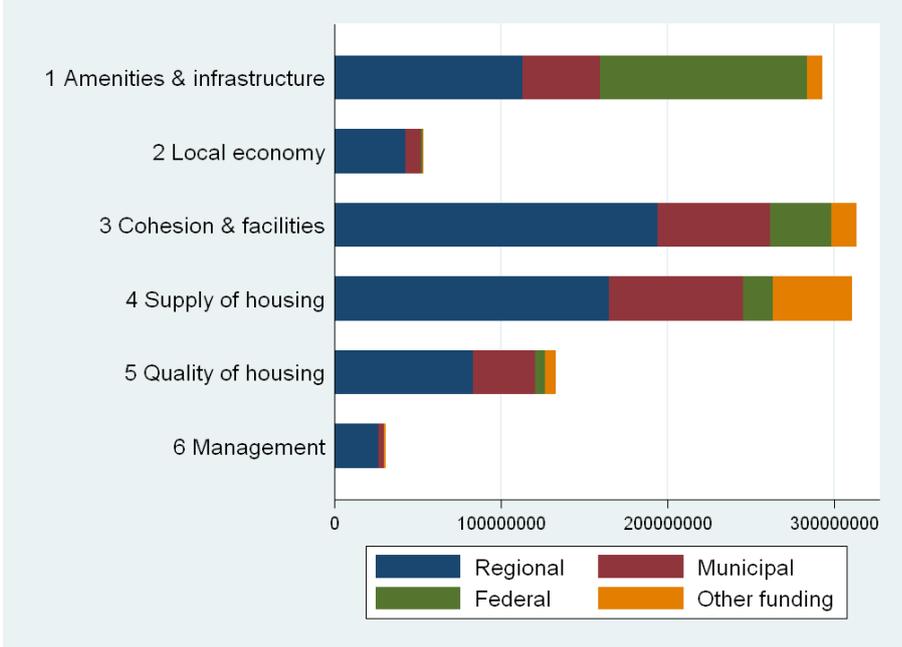


Figure 7 shows the evolution of the NC investments over the last twenty years. The total annual amount fluctuated around 50 million euros during the first ten years and then increased to around 70 million euros over the last ten years. In the 1990s spending was

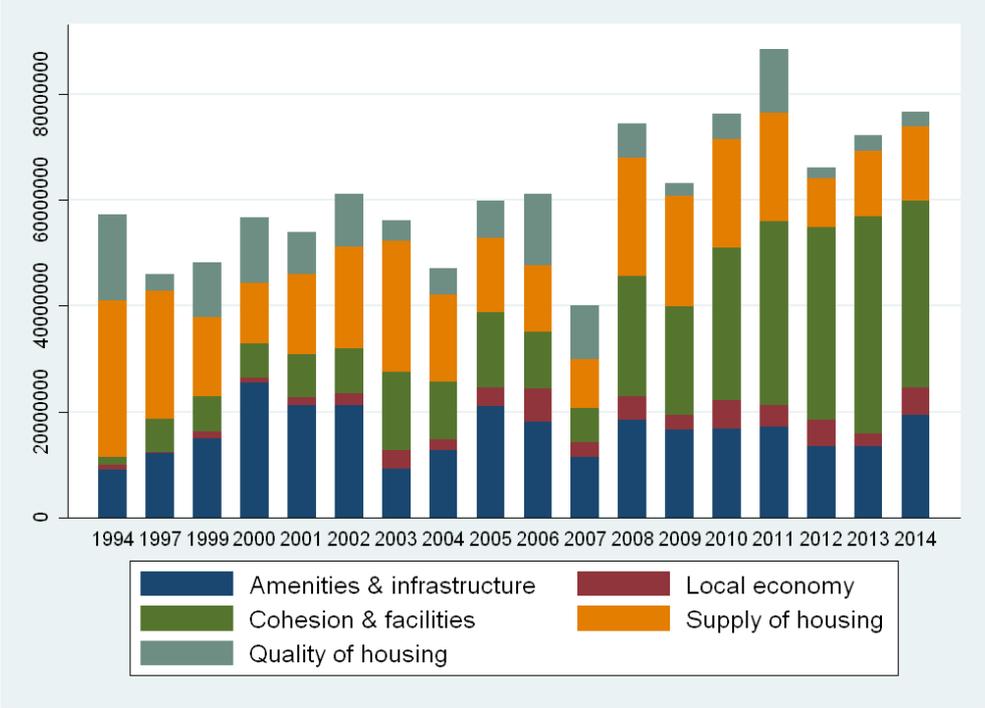
² A detailed description of the lifecycle of a local NC programme can be found in CREAT/METICES-CRU (2008).

³ All monetary amounts in this article are deflated and expressed in 2013 euros.

⁴ For a detailed description of the definition and content of the different spending categories, see Kampelmann et al (2015).

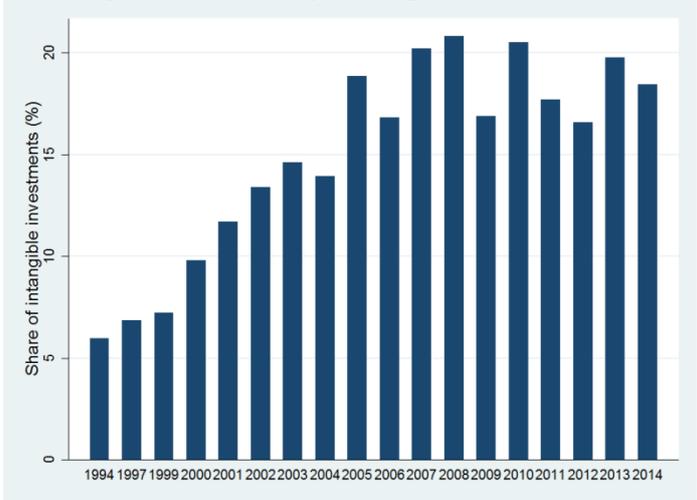
concentrated on the renovation and construction of housing, but the share of this category decreased over time as investments in cohesion/facilities increased.

Figure 7: Evolution of funding by type of intervention



Finally, an important feature of the NC programme is that it invested not only in tangible operations that modify the physical environment of neighbourhoods, but also in projects directed mainly at people, such as training activities, awareness raising, cultural or artistic projects, neighbourhood cohesion etc, which was the case for around 47% of all operations (including project management). However, the average tangible operation was more than four times as expensive as the average intangible operation so that 84.5% of the total budget was spent on physical modifications, while only 12.8% were intangible investments other than project management. Figure 8 depicts the evolution of the annual share of intangible investments since the start of the programme. After a strong increase during the first ten years, the share oscillated around 17% over the last ten years.

Figure 8: Share of intangible interventions



4. Empirical analysis

In this section we analyse the role of BOs in Brussels' urban renovation programme. We employ methodological triangulation and combine three complementary perspectives: a database with all geolocalised urban renovation investments (Section 4.1), interviews with key stakeholders (Section 4.2) and action research (Section 4.3).

4.1 Database of urban renovation investments

We are the first to exploit an exhaustive administrative dataset on all 1,933 urban renovation operations carried out under the NC programme since 1994. The data has been collected and provided to us by the Directorate for Urban Renovation (DUR), the agency in charge of running the programme for the regional government. All municipalities directly report programme statistics to the DUR through standardised procedures.⁵

In order to provide a quantitative picture of the multi-level and multi-dimensional setting in which BOs operate in Brussels' urban renovation programme, we have used the database to calculate measures of a) the relative influence of different levels of governance on investment decisions and b) the links between tangible and intangible projects within local NCs.

Multiple levels of governance

An indicator for the relative influence of the regional and municipal levels of governance on the distribution of spending among main investment categories can be derived from the variation in budget allocations across different municipalities; low (high) variations between municipalities could be interpreted as evidence for top-down (bottom-up) budget allocations. We have measured this variation in all 75 local NC programmes through a simple regression framework with spending shares on each investment category as dependent variables and 19 municipalities as independent variables. If municipalities (the region) exert stronger influence on the spending shares, then we would expect relatively high (low) coefficients of determination.

As can be seen in Table 1, the explanatory power of municipalities is weak for amenities and cohesion and the supply of housing (the municipality variables account for less than 10% of the variation in budget allocations) and somewhat higher for local economy and quality of housing (18 and 16%, respectively). In a second step, we have added time variables to the regression; results suggest that the time trend is more strongly correlated with the budget allocation for amenities and infrastructure, cohesion and facilities and supply of social housing (second column in Table 1). Including year and time variables in the regression yields coefficients of determination between 15 and 50%. We interpret these findings as evidence that the allocation of funding among different spending categories is relatively top-down and/or driven by a regional trend, except for investments related to the local economy and the quality of housing for which a relatively larger share of the variation is associated to the different local municipalities. This points to a potential area of bridging activities between the top-down decisions on spending allocations and the bottom-up perspective of municipalities.

Table 1. Regressions with investment shares as dependent variable

⁵ For a detailed description of the database, see Kampelmann et al (2015).

| Dependent variable | Adjusted coefficient of determination | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| | Only municipality variables | Only year variables | Municipality and year variables |
| Share of amenities & infrastructure | -0.0101 | 0.2735 | 0.2443 |
| Share of local economy | 0.1812 | 0.0665 | 0.1776 |
| Share of cohesion & facilities | -0.0799 | 0.5408 | 0.5029 |
| Share of supply of housing | 0.0793 | 0.0933 | 0.1492 |
| Share of quality of housing | 0.1571 | 0.0897 | 0.3463 |

Note: Pooled Ordinary Least Squares estimator, N=75 programmes.

Multiple types of projects

The multi-dimensional character of the NC programme is captured by budget allocations to different spending categories (amenities, housing etc), but also by the fact that it invests in both tangible and intangible projects. An indicator for the link between tangible and intangible investments can be obtained by comparing their respective distribution among different investment categories (Figures 9 and 10). This comparison clearly illustrates that intangible projects were more often concerned with the local economy and the quality of housing, whereas tangible operations focused more on cohesion/facilities and the supply of housing.

Figure 9: Evolution of intangible investments by adaptation tool

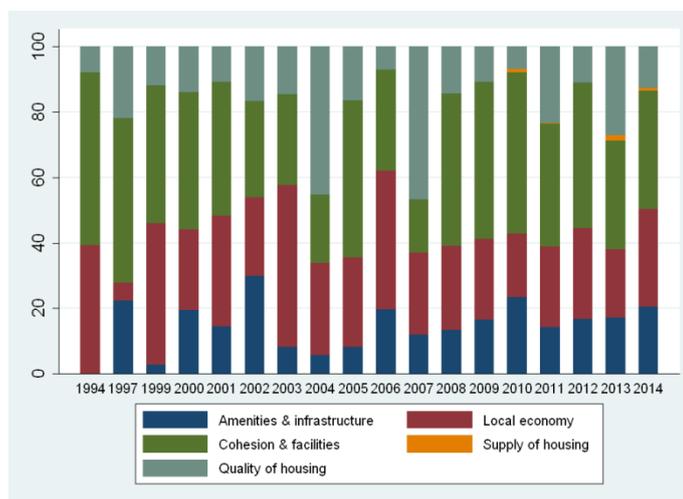
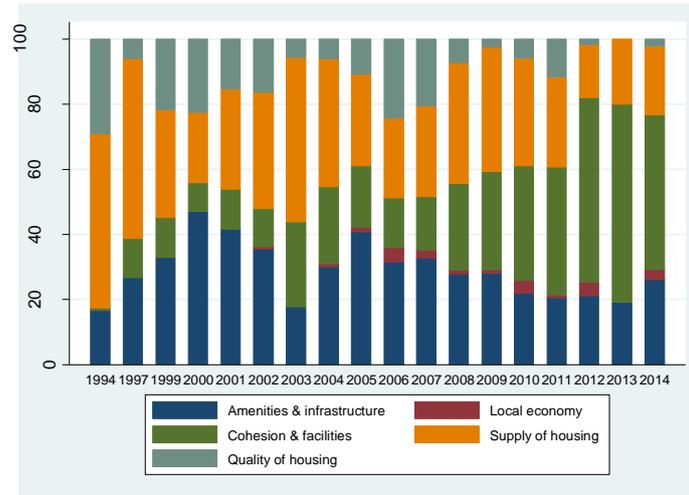


Figure 10: Evolution of tangible investments by adaptation tool



We have used a simple regression framework to produce a first measure of the connection/disconnection between tangible and intangible investments in local programmes. The rationale of our measure is that a strong link between tangible and intangible investments should lead to a positive correlation between the shares of tangible and intangible projects in the same investment category: a higher share of investments in the physical support for the local economy, for instance, should be positively correlated with a higher share of intangible investments in the local economy in the same NC.

Table 2 presents results for Ordinary Least Squares regressions on investment shares in all 75 local programmes. The dependent variables are the shares of intangible investments in each investment category; the shares of tangible investments for the same category are the main independent variables. The estimated coefficients suggest insignificant correlations, except for the supply of housing where the coefficient is very small.⁶ We interpret this as quantitative evidence that the tangible and intangible elements of the urban renovation investments are relatively disconnected, suggesting potential scope for bridging activities between different dimensions of the programme.

Table 2: Regression on link between tangible and intangible investment shares

| Dependent variable: share of intangible investments | Amenities & infrastructure | Local economy | Cohesion & facilities | Supply of housing | Quality of housing |
|--|---|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Share of tangible investments | 0.06 (0.04) | -0.21 (0.20) | 0.01 (0.05) | 0.00* (0.00) | -0.03 (0.02) |
| Year variables | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Municipal variables | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 75 | 75 | 75 | 75 | 75 |
| Adjusted R2 | 0.12 | -0.06 | -0.03 | 0.08 | 0.34 |

⁶ This conclusion is robust to dropping local programmes from the sample with zero investment shares for certain categories

4.2 Interviews with key stakeholders

Our second perspective draws on 20 semi-structured interviews that we carried out between 2013 and 2015.⁷ While we do not claim that our sample is statistically representative of all stakeholders involved in the NC programme, we have selected the interviewees so as to cover 1) different levels of governance (i.e. local, municipal and regional); 2) different types of actors (residents, real estate owners, NGOs, planning companies, civil servants, politicians); 3) different stages of the programme; and 4) different age and gender groups.

In order to flesh out the governance configuration in which BOs operate, we begin by relating the top-down and bottom-up elements of the urban renovation policy at hand, as well as the tensions that were mentioned by our interviewees. We then use the interviews to identify principal BOs and the roles and challenges with which they have been confronted.

Renovating the physical environment down from the top

The regulatory framework of the NC is determined top-down by regional actors. Not only has the priority zone been defined through development plans at regional scale, but also the eligible spending categories (amenities and infrastructure, social housing, etc), the administrative procedures and the decision-making rules are defined unilaterally by the regional government and its administration.

Moreover, the content of individual investments reflects regional priorities. A local programme manager underlined that the region deliberately limits the share of intangible investments in local NC budgets to 20%; this was confirmed by a regional administrator who said that the region thinks the programme “*should remain mostly about physical interventions*”.

Local and regional interviewees agreed that “*the region has the final word*” in the decision-making process on all important aspects of the programme. The top-down role of the regional administration is also confirmed by the view of a municipal employee who perceived the region as “*relatively distant*” and “*neutral with respect to the actors on the ground*”.

From the perspective of the local communities, however, not only the region but also the municipalities appear to impose their interests in a top-down way. In all NC meetings we observed, representatives of local communities often used expressions such as “*they have decided that...*”, where “*they*” typically confounds municipal, regional or even federal instances.

Several interviewees noted that the region accords less discretion to the municipalities when deciding on tangible (buildings, parks, facilities, housing) than on intangible (cultural projects, socio-professional training, social cohesion) investments. The municipalities in turn also tend to exercise closer control when implementing projects concerning the physical environment, while often delegating decisions regarding the content and implementation of intangible operations to local communities or the organisations that claim to represent them.

Revitalizing people up from the bottom

⁷ A list of the interviews is available from the authors on request.

The top-down governance of projects concerning the physical environment can be gauged by the actors that are seen to be most important for their inception and implementation: the regional government and its administration, the municipal politicians and their administration, international/national planning companies and national/regional construction companies. This contrasts with the actors involved in the inception and implementation of projects that focus on people, such as training activities, awareness raising, cultural or artistic projects, neighbourhood cohesion etc. Key actors in these projects are the municipalities, who select the projects and carry out many of them through municipal departments, but also regional/local NGOs and community-based initiatives. Our interviewees clearly associate the intangible projects with a more bottom-up approach to urban renovation: the involved actors are seen to be “*closer to the field*”, they know the complex problems and opportunities of the neighbourhood through first-hand experiences, long-standing relationships and credible engagements.

Several regional interlocutors pointed out that the success of bottom-up operations hinges crucially on the existence of capable local actors. They argued that operations involving community-based organisations had been rare and problematic in the 1990s, when these organisations were still unfamiliar with the procedures of the new urban renovation policy. But over time a learning process seems to have helped local organisations to adapt some of their core activities and turn them into eligible NC projects. An interviewee from the regional ministry pointed out that new local NGOs were created in order to benefit from the available funds for urban renovation, saying that “*there is a whole sector that has created itself around this*”. Today, many community-based organisations closely follow local NC programmes. As one regional administrator put it: “*They know that we are coming, that we are interested in this kind of initiative.*”

Compared to projects shaping the physical environment, intangible urban renovation projects appear to generate more participation from local actors, for instance through participatory instruments such as regular Neighbourhood Commissions. The local community seems to be more involved in choices among alternative intangible projects and the follow-up of their implementation. Due to the relatively heterogeneous composition of Neighbourhood Commissions and other participatory bodies, intangible projects tend to cover a broad set of interests and concerns, which over time has generated a kaleidoscopic collection of environmental, economic, social and cultural projects funded under the NC framework.

Trouble is multi-level’s middle name

In all interviews we encountered descriptions of conflictual relationships between the different elements of the NC programme. Many of these problems can be associated with issues related to different scales, types of actors and dimensions of urban renovation.

The first critical issue is the often conflictual relationship between the municipal and the regional governments/administrations. Although each local NC is formally a contract between the two levels of governance, it is a contract between parties with unequal power and potentially diverging interests. Both municipal and regional interviewees mentioned regular clashes, heated discussions and walkouts. In many cases such conflicts are underpinned by political differences: administrations ultimately report to politicians who are affiliated to political parties. On issues such as the choice between a public or private operator for a specific intervention, different political visions can obstruct cooperation. The underlying importance of party politics frequently resurfaces when elections change the

majority in either municipal or regional governments, which can lead to a revision of a previously negotiated urban renovation programme.

Although the region has always “*the final word*”, it cannot impose the implementation of any specific operation without the complicity of the municipality in charge of the neighbourhood. A regional administrator framed this problem as “*a divergence of visions*” and gave a series of examples. For instance, some municipalities do not want to increase the stock of social housing and prefer to attract richer residents through prestigious real estate projects. This contradicts the regional priority of creating more social housing through the NC programme. The municipal and regional visions for urban revitalisation can also clash in the case of intangible projects. A local programme manager told us that regional socioeconomic objectives tend to focus on policy priorities such as employment creation and youth unemployment. While these issues are also on the agenda of municipalities, the latter often prefer to focus on more palpable and immediate concerns. A programme manager described the divergence of visions in this way: “*As a neighbour one could think ‘Yes, OK, there should be more jobs for young people but I am here to talk about the neighbourhood’. We are at a different scale here.*” In other words, issues such as youth unemployment are often perceived as pandemic/regional problems by municipal actors, whereas from a regional perspective local interventions in many neighbourhoods appear as a solution to these problems.

A second area of conflict arises from the complex relationship between grass-roots initiatives and public administrations. Many grass-root or community-based organisations participate in the NC programme, either through their presence in public meetings or by receiving subsidies for the implementation of bottom-up projects. But some grass-root organisations have repeatedly criticized the predominant role of public administrations. These activists argue that massive investments in the physical environment lead to the gentrification of working-class neighbourhoods and that bottom-up projects are often instrumentalised to legitimize these investments in the eyes of the local population. In meetings with representatives of the regional federation of neighbourhood committees, our interlocutors said that the NC policy has a “*very bad reputation*” among grass-roots organisations: while some of the investments formally resembled bottom-up initiatives, they were seen as instrumentalising local actors to serve external, top-down interests.

Finally, a third conflict stems from an apparent disconnection between the bottom-up and top-down elements of the policy. While the former focuses on people, the latter targets the physical environment; the policy hence approaches bricks and people in completely separate, disconnected ways.

One symptom of this issue is the *institutional disconnection* of the two types of interventions. From a very early stage of a local NC programme, the interventions are split into tangible and intangible elements that are subsequently implemented by different actors that only rarely cooperate with each other. The contractors implementing the physical interventions and the community-based organisations running the people-focused projects seldom meet and almost never work together.

We also identified a *cognitive disconnection* between the two approaches. Actors we observed made a strict separation between tangible and intangible projects in their neighbourhood and only rarely made spontaneous connections between them. Tangible investments are mostly referred to as “*bricks projects*”, whereas the intangible operations are “*socioeconomic projects*” or simply “*the NGOs*”. In meetings with representatives of local communities, the cognitive disconnection translates into the opposition between “*them*” and

“us”, where the former refers to the operators involved in physical transformations and the latter to socioeconomic projects targeting people.

Take me to the bridge

Each of these three sources of governance-related conflicts can be associated to different mediating roles of BOs. More specifically, we argue that these conflicts can be attenuated or even resolved by a) multi-level mediation (e.g. finding a vision for neighbourhood regeneration that is shared across different levels of governance); b) multi-actor mediation (resolving conflicts between different types of actors); and c) multi-dimensional mediation (connecting “bricks” and “people” projects).

In the case of Brussels’ urban renovation programme, all three mediating roles are crystallized in the same type of actor, namely the local project manager (“*projectleider*”). For each local NC programme, the responsible municipality hires a project manager, normally on a four-year contract that is entirely financed by the NC budget. In the 1990s, this role was often shared among two municipal employees. But in order to clarify responsibilities, since 2002 the regional regulation stipulates the appointment of a single project manager. In practice, however, the project manager is still supported by one or several subordinates in charge of specific elements of the programme (e.g. a “*coordinator of socio-economic actions*”). We can therefore say that the project managers and their teams form the most important BOs in the NC programme.

Through our interviews with 5 project managers and with several local/regional stakeholders with whom they closely interact, we are able to analyse in more detail how the project managers perform the three different mediation roles in practice.

Firstly, multi-level mediation between local and regional administrations is an integral part of the job description of each project manager: they represent the institutional link and main intermediary between the interests of their employer (i.e. a municipality) and the principal source of funding of their employment (i.e. the region). Each project manager interacts on a day-to-day basis with regional administrators of the DUR, often more so than with other municipal departments. Their engagement in multi-level mediation is facilitated by the fact that they are often relatively detached from the departmental structure of municipal administrations, while they are at the same time institutionally anchored as municipal personnel. Also their temporary employment contract reinforces their status as being simultaneously “*insiders*” and “*outsiders*” with respect to their municipal colleagues.

None of the project managers we interviewed or who were described to us by others had a political profile. In the event of politically motivated clashes between municipal and regional decision makers, this means that they can act as neutral facilitators who “*want the project to get done*”. As a consequence, they are often the driving force for establishing a common vision among the local and regional levels of administration. One of the ways of achieving this is through focusing on consensual programmes. In many cases, this appears to have tilted investments towards social cohesion and public infrastructure projects: by investing in public facilities the region can claim to address the apparent shortage of daycare facilities and schools, whereas local policy makers can claim to improve the quality of life of the incumbent population rather than attracting new rich (poor) residents that could gentrify (stigmatize) the neighbourhoods. The fact that regions and municipalities have engaged in many NCs over time has clearly facilitated this type of mediation as both stakeholders have gained experience and a better understanding of the negotiation procedure. One

interviewee remarked, however, that this advantage is somewhat offset by the relatively high turnover among project managers due to their fixed-term contracts and the problems with the transmission of information, skills and experience that this turn-over engenders.

Secondly, project managers are often able to mediate successfully between different types of stakeholders. Again, their status as temporary agents and insiders/outsideers of the municipality appears to help them in bridging diverging perspectives and interests of local community-based organisations and the public administrations in charge of the programme. Indeed, several project managers told us that a stressful aspect of their job is to represent community interests in meetings with administrations, and administrative interests in meetings with the local community: *“we are always criticised and have to defend viewpoints that are not our own”*.

One of the ways in which project managers mediate between the administrative and grass-roots concerns seems to be to *“make do”* with the activities of the NGOs that happen to be in the neighbourhood. One project manager described this as follows: *“Instead of defining a project with the residents and afterwards looking for an operator at the regional scale, often we do the inverse: we know that in the neighbourhood there is an association that works with a certain group of people, we take them because that responds to a need.”* This supply-driven process has arguably led to a diversification of intangible projects as local NGOs cater to very different interests and operate in a range of sectors (youth, sports, culture, art, religion, environment etc). Multi-actor mediation has also been facilitated by other features of the governance framework, such as the Neighbourhood Commissions that have been systematically improved and extended over time.

Thirdly, project managers also mediate between different dimensions of urban renovation, notably between tangible and intangible operations. This is also fostered by the fact that they are relatively detached from more sectorally organised municipal departments and that they are one of the few actors following up on all aspects of both tangible and intangible operations. Some project managers have indeed managed to identify local organisations that work on the same issues that are addressed by physical interventions (e.g. water in the public space), and set up programmes that combine “bricks” operations (such as a new fountain) with “people” interventions (such as educational workshops on the role of water in urban contexts). Compared to the two other types of mediation, however, our interviewees related relatively few instances of bridging between tangible and intangible projects, which we interpret as a qualitative corroboration of the quantitative analysis above.

Just enough for the city

Most interviewees spontaneously mentioned one or several mediation activities of project managers. It appears, however, that the latter have been much more successful in multi-level and multi-actor mediation than in multi-dimensional mediation, although we lack quantitative evidence to back up this claim. This being said, no interviewee objected to the assertion of a general disconnection between tangible and intangible projects.

Comparing the different mediation strategies we identified in the interviews, the observed multi-level and multi-actor mediations could have amplified the multi-dimensional disconnection. Indeed, disconnecting the different dimensions of urban renovation could arguably help the project managers to find consensus on tangible projects between different levels of administration (i.e. focus on social cohesion, facilities and public space interventions), while also allowing to cater to grass-roots concerns (i.e. providing more

autonomy and participation in intangible projects). Separating tangible and intangible projects also allows project managers to keep the programmes manageable by avoiding complexity and risks that are inevitably the consequence of the interdependencies of closer links between different operations. This suggests that BOs could be confronted with trade-offs between different mediation approaches: in this case, multi-level, multi-actor and multi-dimensional mediation should be seen as a trilemma rather than as a trilogy.

4.3 Lessons from action research

In this section we confront the analyses based on our database and stakeholder interviews with hands-on experiences that we gleaned by engaging in action research between 2013 and 2015. In essence, our strategy boils down to performing ourselves the role of a BO in order to learn more about the roles and challenges that BOs face in multi-level, multi-actor and multi-dimensional urban renovation programmes. We performed this role as volunteers in the Urban Ecology Centre (UEC), of which one of the authors is a founding member.⁸ The UEC is a non-profit environmental organization with close links to different academic institutions, but also to grass-roots organisations and local/regional administrations; it notably runs urban gardening projects in different neighbourhoods of Brussels.

Robson (2002) defines action research as involving “action (solving concrete problems in real situations) and research (trying to further the goals of science)”. This implies intense cooperation between researchers and their subject matter through experiments or pilot projects that facilitate the direct engagement with problem solving. Especially in the context of urban adaptation, academic involvement in place-based partnerships for co-creating sustainability transitions is increasingly seen as both a means for fostering both the social relevance of scientific work and the sustainability of urban forms (Trencher et al. 2013).

Table 3 provides an overview of the four urban renovation projects in which we engaged as BO. In all projects the involvement of the UEC resulted from informal discussions with the respective municipality about on-going NC programmes that led to a formal project proposition of the UEC for the neighbourhood. Two of these projects were funded by the NC and the other two by the regional environmental agency. We have selected these projects for action research because all of them are directly related to Brussels’ urban renovation programme and involve different levels, actors and dimensions of urban renovation, i.e. configurations that imply a need for all types of bridging activities.

The four action-research projects can be characterised in more detail through the mediation challenges they represent. The multi-level challenges arise from confrontations between top-down regional planning and bottom-up local adaptation involving one or several issues such as mobility (Bockstael, Bloemenhof), housing (Bloemenhof, Zinneke), green spaces (Bockstael, Bloemenhof, Abbaye), water (Abbaye) and the economy (Zinneke). In all four NCs multiple types of actors intervene, including regional administrations and local residents or NGOs; the municipalities in charge of the NC appear as intermediate actors in all projects. Finally, all four projects address different dimensions of urban renovation and include the adaptation of the physical environment (modification of grey, blue or green infrastructures) and intangible interventions (activation, organisation, participation of concepts or people).

Table 3. Overview of action-research projects and mediation challenges

⁸ www.urban-ecology.be

| Neighbourhood / project name | Multi-level | Multi-actor | Multi-dimensional |
|--|---|---|---|
| Bockstael / “Opération Tournesol” | Regional plan for circular path combining active mobility and parks ↓ Appropriation of green space at neighbourhood level | Regional/national agencies for transport, environment, infrastructure, public works ↓ Ville de Bruxelles (municipality) ↓ Local residents and NGOs | Construction of bridges, cycle paths, access ramps and green spaces ↓ Activation of users in conception and implementation of local green spaces |
| Bloemenhof / “Aux abres, citoyens” | Restructuring of large area (“Porte de Ninove”) ↓ Improvement of a local square (“Place de Ninove”) | Real estate developers, regional planning agencies, planning companies ↓ Ville de Bruxelles (municipality) ↓ Local residents and NGOs | Reconfiguration of mobility infrastructure and green spaces; construction of new residential towers ↓ Organisation and reaction of residential population |
| Zinneke / “Procédure Bernaerts” | Regional plan to delocalise used-car economy ↓ Stimulation of local economy | Regional development agencies ↓ Molenbeek (municipality) ↓ Real estate owners and entrepreneurs | Transformation of industrial buildings and renovation of public space ↓ Development of concepts for local economic activities |
| Abbaye/ “Opération Diogènes” | Regional concept of “watershed solidarity” ↓ Reconfiguration of rainwater drainage at neighbourhood level ↓ Rainwater collection in households | Regional water utility ↓ Forest (municipality) ↓ Regional NGOs ↓ Local households | Public works related to pipes, drains, fountains ↓ Participatory mapping of water flows and local needs ↓ Activation of residential population for rainwater collection |

The main lessons from our engagement as BOs can be summarised by two recurring obstacles and the bridging activities that could contribute to overcoming them. Perhaps surprisingly, we observed no case in which actions with different scales, actors or dimensions are completely inconsistent and per se conflictual – interscalar collision seems to be rare in Brussels. But we identified serious obstacles related to asynchronicity and the translation across different elements of the urban renovation projects.

The future’s not ours to see

Perhaps the principal challenge we encountered in all four projects are chronological disparities. Asynchronicity can stem from the timing of interventions at different scales. In three of the four projects the regional interventions were still in a planning phase and no physical interventions were expected to materialize before 2017. The precise starting dates of the implementation of the mobility circle (Bockstael) and the roll-on roll-off

infrastructure (Zinneke) lie even further in the future. Moreover, each type of actor works according to its own rhythm: while the regional administrations planned several years ahead and were slow to react to new developments, local actors tended to focus on rapid action and immediate change. Finally, the lifecycle of a project involving the adaptation of the physical environment is typically much longer compared to actions directed at people. Each of these asynchronicities renders the coordination of visions, agendas and actions extremely complex and creates considerable uncertainty as to their mutual fit. A frequent risk is that bottom-up initiatives are put on stand-by or taper out as local actors do not have the capacity to follow up on the protracted procedures of top-down projects. This is arguably one of the reasons why the NC programme managers are wary of linking top-down and bottom-up projects in order to avoid the interdependencies that would make both types of projects riskier.

A potential solution to the problem of asynchronicity that we experimented with in our action research is to adjust the lifecycle of bottom-up projects by presenting them as *“potentially temporary interventions”*. We experienced this as a way of maintaining the momentum in bottom-up initiatives that thrive on the motivating factor of rapid transformation without committing decision makers at other scales of governance to definite arrangements that could be potentially incompatible with long-term projects. The adverb *“potentially”* is not trivial because many projects ultimately turn out to be compatible with long-term developments but would probably not have seen the light of day if they had been conceived of as permanent interventions from the outset.⁹

Lost in translation

A second obstacle we were confronted with consists in the translation of narratives across scales, actors or dimensions. For instance, it was challenging to translate a relatively abstract discourse on watershed solidarity into meaningful concepts at the level of a individual house, as was done in the NC Abbaye. A similar difficulty also arose in the Bloemenhof neighbourhood where the implications of a masterplan spanning several hectares had to be translated into a narrative at the scale of a relatively small square. When such translations involve different scales of urban planning, we experienced the NC project managers to be effective translators, arguably because most of them have a professional background in architecture or urbanism. But they are arguably less equipped to translate across scales, actors or dimensions when it comes to social or economic issues on which they have less knowledge.

In order to improve the communication across scales, actors or dimensions, we experienced it to be necessary to include knowledgeable translators in the team of the BO. The competences required for translation differ according to the project at hand and encompassed urbanism and planning competences (Bloemenhof, Bockstael), hydrology (Abbaye) and economics (Zinneke). While we believe that this has helped to translate narrative across scales and actors, we found it to be considerably more difficult to translate across different dimensions of urban renovation projects, which arguably adds to the difficulties of project managers to combine projects directed at the physical environment with those directed at people. Where it was possible to translate across scales and actors, this led to a more effective articulation of the interests of all involved actors, which can be a precondition of successful negotiation and constructive communication.

⁹ Two well-known examples of rather enduring temporary interventions in cities are Paris' Eiffel Tower (1889) and Brussels' Atomium (1958).

5. CONCLUSION

Numerous city-regions are under strong pressure to adapt to new social-ecological conditions and especially to structural regional change. This has spurred considerable interest of both decision makers and academics for place-based policies such as the “City Deals” in the UK, the “Empowerment Zone Program” in the US or the “Neighbourhood Contracts” in Belgium. In this paper we have focused on urban renovation in Brussels and employed methodological triangulation to illustrate some inherent tensions in urban renovation policies as well as the mediation roles they engender for bridging organisations.

While the literature on the governance of social-ecological systems increasingly recognizes the central roles of BOs in transition processes, our paper provides a more nuanced understanding of BO activities and their contribution towards urban sustainability.

First, our research differentiates between three types of bridging activities and develops the notion that urban renovation policies not only create tensions between different scales of governance, but also between heterogeneous types of actors and between multiple dimensions of urban interventions. These tensions give rise to the need for multi-scale, multi-actor and multi-dimensional mediation.

Second, we used our empirical material to portray how the main BOs in our case study, the local project managers, have performed these different mediation roles. We notably identified a potential mediation trilemma: the strategies that BOs developed for mediating between multiple scales and between multiple actors appeared to have exacerbated the disconnection between multiple dimensions of urban renovation. More specifically, in many programmes the BOs have attenuated conflicts between different levels of public administrations by building a consensus on physical investments, whereas they mediated the tension between public administrations and community-based actors by empowering the latter in investments directed at people. The combination of these two mediation strategies, however, appears to have exacerbated the apparent disconnection between urban renovation investments directed at the physical environment and those targeting people.

Finally, we presented lessons from action research in which we experimented with potential solutions to the mediation challenges. We identified two main drivers for multi-level, multi-actor and multi-dimensional tensions: asynchronicity and communication barriers. Promising mediation strategies to overcome these tensions in urban renovation programmes include the wider use of temporality and conceptual translations. These strategies should, however, be considered as ad-hoc tools requiring further testing in different governance settings to ensure their external validity.

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