

The Interreg N-power project promotes empowerment as a way to better integrate social and environmental, but also economic objectives of Neighbourhood renewal. In this context, it understands empowerment as giving more opportunities and power to citizens to implement their ideas for their neighbourhood. Hence, they are encouraged to participate in public debate and local decision-making, to better organize themselves collectively as a neighbourhood community and to develop and implement their own projects that will have positive effects both for them personally and for the neighbourhood.

Capacitation through offering citizens opportunities for learning, developing their skills and capacities, their social and cultural capitals, for developing personal and collective projects is thus a central component of the model promoted by the Interreg N-power project. Seven Cities from the Euregio Meuse-Rhine are partners of this project: Liège, Seraing, Verviers, Eupen and Genk (Belgium), Heerlen (Netherlands) and Aachen (Germany).

They benefit from guidance and funding in order to implement a pilot empowerment project in a specific neighbourhood.

These pilot projects are to be used as an opportunity for the local authorities to test innovative empowerment approaches in the context of Neighbourhood Renewal and therefore to develop their skills and capacities in this matter.

Pilot 1: City Center, Genk

Pilot 2: Nomadland, Genk

Pilot 3: I wirte in the city, Liege

Pilot 4: Around the pound, Liege

Pilots 5 & 6: Parc Marêts & Morchamps, Seraing

Pilot 7 : Pré-javais district, Verviers

Pilot 8 : Park Loten, Eupen

Pilot 9 : Aachen North, Aachen

Pilot 10 : Gebrookerbos, Heerlen

The N-power project is financed within the context of the interreg V-A Euregio Meuse-Rhine programme (Total project budget = 4M. €). The coordination is ensured by the University of Liege -LEMA (Local Environment Management and Analysis). The other partners are the Cities of Genk, Liege, Seraing, Verviers, Eupen, Heerlen and Aachen, The university of Hasselt and Zuyd hogeschool.

GENK

city Centre

The area-oriented operation (Neighborhood development) has been a structural part of urban policy in Genk for some time. In this context, the start of the N-Power project was an additional opportunity for the city of Genk. Both pilot projects were chosen because they fit in seamlessly with the city's vision to further expand the area-oriented operation in all neighborhoods, including the city centre.

The general objective was the implementation of the area-oriented operation in the city center of Genk. The district manager started on various fronts for this. Since citizen participation is crucial in the approach, she started with neighborly chats, block conversations and home visits. Also the newly recruited neighborhood worker (RIMO vzw) played a crucial role in this. On the other hand, she brought the professional partners together in a neighborhood team, which is responsible for coordination and promotes cooperation. A central place was sought to anchor the sustainable implementation of the area-oriented operation in the center. This so-called neighborhood office is the operating base of the neighborhood manager and the neighborhood worker, but it is also a place where neighborhood initiatives such as "Tekstiel" have found a place. The participative approach resulted in a number of citizens' initiatives such as the atmospheric garden, the gift market, the health walks...

Since greening the city center is very important for both residents and the city council, a system of green adoption was developed in consultation with the green service of the City administration. Citizens can use this system to create a facade garden or adopt and maintain a piece of greenery. The theme of poverty and vulnerability was also tackled. For example, in the vicinity of the Nieuwe Kuilenweg, where many vulnerable children live, a series of 9 workshops was set up. All workshops aimed to bring children in vulnerable situations into contact with meaningful and reinforcing leisure activities with a focus on talent development. After the N-Power project, the area-oriented operation will be continued within the regular framework of the urban administration.



GENK

Nomadland

The general objective was to connect LABIOMISTA (a former Zoo transformed into an experimental laboratory of artist Koen Vanmechelen) with the Nieuwe Kempen district. An extensive participation process (2 neighborhood talks, 6 conversations with associations/organisations in the neighbourhood and an inspirational visit to Parckfarm in Brussels) showed that there was a lot of interest in the neighborhood for the realization and management of an accessible, small-scale neighborhood place. The ambition was to create a central neighborhood place as a connection between the neighborhood and LABIOMISTA.

With a combination of the following functions: accessible meeting for local residents and gardeners, small-scale activities and workshops, breeding ground for ideas linked to LABIOMISTA and the neighbourhood, starting place for the walking group, home base for the neighborhood group LABIOMISTA, limited catering function for the visitors of LABIOMISTA; ... All these functions were given a place on NOMADLAND (the undeveloped green area between the allotments, the district and Labiomista) where the local residents built three gypsy wagons. The management of these wagons is taken over by the friends of Nomadland, who started a new non-profit organization for this purpose.



I write in the city

Supported by the City of Liège's Public Reading Department and based on two neighbourhood libraries, this pilot project aims to encourage the participation of the public in Saint-Léonard and Droixhe, two neighbourhoods that are close to each other and considered to be disadvantaged. The objective was to allow the inhabitants to reappropriate their neighbourhood and to develop conviviality through artistic practices, writing and the development of public spaces.

Different methods were used such as workshops with artists (photographers, writers, street artists), or immersive workshops in a school. The aim of these different methods was to encourage free speech and self-determination of the inhabitants' projects. Partnership practices were also developed with local actors and will implement tools to strengthen citizen participation in these neighbourhoods.

Various concrete achievements have emerged from the workshops: a free billboard in the Saint-Léonard neighbourhood, a sensitive map of the same neighbourhood, signs for the Droixhe and Saint-Léonard libraries, the redevelopment of the Droixhe schoolyard, a fresco on a library wall, etc.

These different actions have contributed to changing the image of these neighbourhoods, to putting colour back into the city and to increasing the sense of pride of the inhabitants of places suffering from a negative image.



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LIÈGEAround
the pond

The aim of this pilot project is to get the inhabitants of Droixhe, a disadvantaged district of Liège, to participate in the redevelopment of a green public space, the park of the pond located in its centre. This park, a large wooded area rich in biodiversity and featuring a pond with a water fountain, has been badly damaged over the years and underused by the inhabitants.

Thanks to an external partnership, the involvement of neighbourhood associations and the joint work of several city departments, workshops were organised so that citizens could express their wishes for this place. Themes chosen by them as priorities (security, cleanliness, pond, nature, leisure) were identified with corresponding actions. This stage was followed by a vote to arrive at a redevelopment and reappropriation project in line with the destination of the site (to remain a green space) and within the budgetary limits of the project.

In a second phase, the management of this space was the subject of a day of reflection and very rich exchanges between the City, the associations and the citizens. At the end of the day, a charter for the co-management of the park and the convivial space was drawn up by all the parties.



SERAING

Parc Marêts & Morchamps

In Seraing, two pilot neighborhoods have been given special attention: the Centre neighborhood and the Morchamps neighborhood. In addition to a population facing common challenges (security, civic-mindedness, social inclusion), these two neighborhoods also have a park in their heart. This element is central in the deployment of both areas and in the daily life of the citizens. In order to make these parks attractive and thus encourage encounters and a new sociability between the inhabitants, the two parks have been renovated and redesigned. The aim was to ensure their sustainable maintenance, a better social appropriation of the places and to reinforce their role as integrator and creator of social cohesion. This includes the placement of playground equipment for children, the renovation of street furniture, the securing of the sites, and the creation of sports areas for young people. These investments were made in a process of consultation with the citizens and associations of the neighborhoods concerned. This had the effect of uniting certain groups around the N-POWER project.

It is on the basis of these exchanges and the creation of links between the actors that another aspect of the N-POWER project was born: the call for citizen projects. In a dynamic of empowerment, that is to say of co-design, co-implementation and co-management, associations and citizens were supported in the elaboration of projects (events, activities, investments, etc.) having for objective the improvement of the living conditions of all. As a result, 4 projects have now been launched. These projects are characterized by their inclusive dimension and today bring together a large number of very different participants. Also, the agents of the city of Seraing and some members of local associations are being trained in social work on field in order to effectively manage the perception of the physical and psychological changes taking place in the parks among the citizens and to allow new behaviors. It is already possible to see these modifications, the new street furniture has not been defaced, the playgrounds have been greatly appreciated and are used daily by the residents. Verbal aggression also seems to be less frequent.



VERVIERS

Pré-javais district

The pilot project in Verviers focuses on the Prés-Javais neighbourhood. This part of the city was originally home to the wool workers, the growing industry in the region during the 19th and 20th centuries. Nowadays, it is a very multicultural neighbourhood, with various associations working towards social cohesion in collaboration with the Social Cohesion Plan.

Since 2018, bottom-up projects were implemented that make sense to both the inhabitants and the city administration. The first step was to find out what the citizens wanted to do to improve life in their neighbourhood, and how they wanted to get involved. The first big project was the potluck picnic in the park, with food and music brought by the neighbours. A big demand amongst the citizens of all ages was to bring more colour to the streets. In association with the homework school "la Page", three summer camps (stages) were organized to paint benches and trashcans on a small square, decorate poles in a street, and integrate some mosaic on the outside walls. A participatory mural painting was also created, soliciting testimonies of inhabitants to revive the soul of Prés-Javais.

Both parks were improved by placing new urban furniture and games. The final bigger project of N-Power in Verviers was supposed to lead to a temporary occupation of the future neighbourhood house. However, since the recent floods, the project was reoriented in two ways: lobbying inside the city administration to develop such a project in the future, and working at improving the social cohesion and empowerment of the citizens in these difficult times. Help for the citizens was organized on site, as painting a small mural painting to support the victims of the floods. In December, a big neighbourhood fête is organized to help the inhabitants see some brightness and joy regardless of the hard situation they are going through.



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Park Loten

After the initial exchange of ideas and the neighborhood survey for the redesign of Park Loten, all the needs and requirements of the participating neighborhoods were collected and evaluated. This was followed by 3 participation workshops with a landscape planner and a moderator, which also aroused keen interest among the neighborhood residents.

However the feeling of «moving and changing something together» was clearly noticeable. It became quickly clear that, beyond that, the residents were only sparsely motivated to take responsibility for their own commitment and that social cohesion should be strengthened due to the extreme diversity in the neighborhood. During the creation of an action plan with social designers from Aachen, a missing identity of the Bergviertel was “diagnosed”, which must always precede social cohesion.

Therefore, action plan was designed with the identity-creating goal, which initially requires a lot of energy. For this purpose, the low-threshold, non-binding and sociable offers (a musical picnic with DJs in the park, a joint fruit harvest,...) were most useful, as many people from the neighborhood were reached who then wanted to take on more responsibility for organizing various actions independently. This is how formats were created that are now completely organized by the neighborhood residents (e.g. classic flea market – every last Sunday of the month, leaf collection campaign with leaf baskets, etc.) At the same time, the branding of the word / figurative mark “Bergdrittel – a third is more than a quarter” was worked on in order to initiate a feeling of belonging (with stickers, postcards, tattoos, etc. – distributed in all letter boxes in the district). The subsequent call for a professional photo shoot in the neighborhood was followed by 30 people.

Since the park already hosted a number of sporting initiatives before the restructuring, new sporting impulses followed like an outdoor table tennis table, the enlargement of the basketball field to its original size and an area expanded to play football. A joyful sports festival will be organized for dynamising Park Loten and bringing people together. Another empowerment potential lies in the neighborhood mobile. This waffle cart, converted by the neighborhood and the municipal building yard, is used to implement the ideas of the neighborhood residents on a mobile basis. This mobile can be driven with a moped driver's license and is therefore accessible to many neighbors.

To be continued...



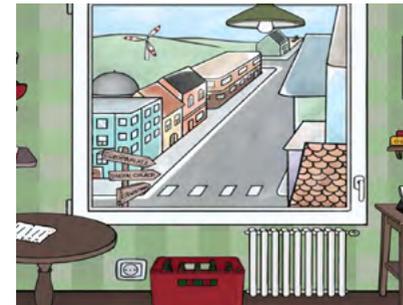
AACHEN

Aachen North

The aim of the pilot project was to raise awareness of the digital transformation and ecological challenges within the socially disadvantaged target groups of Aachen North. For this purpose, the population was analyzed with the help of the Department of Economics and its subdivision of statistics. It was found out, that many young people live in that district. It also became clear that the older ones in particular have a problem with the German language, which makes access enormously difficult. Therefore, several projects were implemented to improving the competencies of the inhabitants in the digital and energy field.

A serious game was developed “the energy game” in order to gain access to the young people, and allow them to understand the challenges of energy nowadays and pass it trough to their older family members. Unfortunately, the implementation was suboptimal and user numbers fell short of expectations. The impact of the energy game missed the main objective.

A workshop was organized in a school in order to lean student to program. After a week they managed to realize a remote control device and some student have discovered new talents. The aktiontag aims at brainging people, social facilities and SMEs together that are from the quarter Aachen North and make them do good things on a voluntary base at social facilities without any financial compensation. This project was very successful and immediately all attending parties requested continuation.

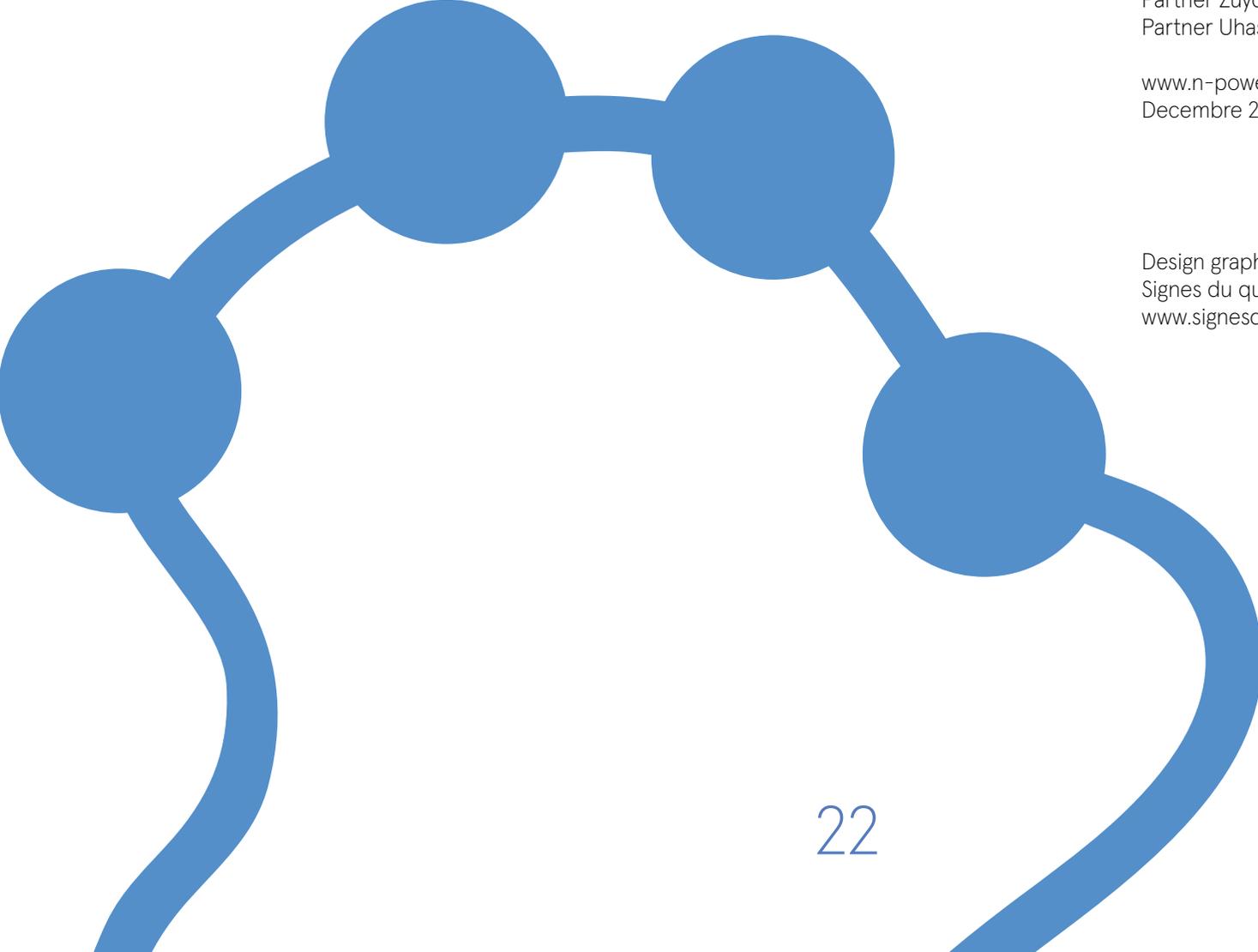


Gebrookerbos

Shrink areas such as Parkstad Limburg are lagging behind the rest of the Netherlands in social and economic terms. The demographic developments (such as dejuvenation and aging) are added to this. Migration from this region in combination with (long-term) lower population growth has created a demolition task. There are after all, more buildings than users. This development has resulted, among other things, in open spaces in the landscape, where, for example, houses, schools or business premises have been demolished in residential areas. Citizens could give new impetus to open and vacant spaces that have become vacant as a result of demolition. These open and vacant spaces offer opportunities to increase the quality and vitality of shrinking areas as well as the economic independence of citizens. This requires a more bottom-up approach to the problem: involving and activating residents and entrepreneurs who feel involved in these places and want to get to work on this themselves. A redefinition of the relationship between citizens, government and market is necessary.

In 2014, this philosophy was the starting point for the municipality of Heerlen to enter into a partnership with the Open University and knowledge center Neimed. Together they initiated and realized the Gebrookerbos implementation project from 2016 to 2020. The aim of the Gebrookerbos working method is to promote open and to give vacant spaces a new impulse that contributes to the quality of life on a socio-cultural and socio-economic level. These citizens' initiatives focused on three themes, 'urban agriculture', 'recreation' and 'natural encounter', which, according to the municipality of Heerlen, were previously regarded as promising in this shrinking area. The intended result of Gebrookerbos was that citizens' initiatives would also scale up a shrinking area into a high-quality and dynamic area in which various stakeholders worked together on an equal level to give new meaning to empty spaces. Citizens' initiatives would improve the quality of life of residents in Heerlen-Noord through networking and would thus also (literally and figuratively) claim space to deal with area development in a different way. Gebrookerbos offered the right support to facilitate the process of realizing initiatives accelerated. Another result of Gebrookerbos was that through this method an acceleration chamber was created. Through this acceleration chamber, various actors worked with together to make the citizens' initiative possible.





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