

# Urban Regeneration Trajectories in the Historic Centre of Porto, Portugal

## The role of EU Urban Policies in Bairro da Sé.

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**Abstract.** The European Commission underlines the major impact of urban areas on the sustainable development of Europe, as they possess the power to solve a number of challenges that currently threaten the European populations. Since the 1990s the European Union, together with Portuguese urban policies, have influenced the processes of spatial development within the city of Porto, and one might ask if the urban regeneration actions that have been deployed actually brought-about the anticipated changes. While the challenging territory of the historic centre of Porto has been the stage of several urban interventions since the late 1970s, this case study aims to identify the different strategic and financial instruments that were supposed to play a key role in the spatial transformation of the area. However, the urban regeneration process has seen irregular trajectories and various authors emphasise that past and existing problems have not been effectively tackled and solved. Among the reasons for such state of affairs could be political strategies leaning towards more neoliberal urban policies, the presence of a fragmented legislative framework, or erratic planning choices associated with constant adjustments from within the main urban regeneration actors. Reflecting upon the different events and interventions that have been taking place since the early 1990s in the historic district of Bairro da Sé, it is possible to characterise the urban regeneration trajectories in the historic centre of Porto, based on descriptive insights of the spatial dynamics and its relations with EU and national urban regeneration policies.

**Keywords:** area-based approach, urban regeneration, integrated urban development, EU urban policies, cohesion policy, historic centre, Porto.

## 1 Introduction

European urban centres have a major role to play in shaping our futures. Most people in the European Union (EU) live in cities, towns and suburbs, which are in turn comprised of not only different risks, but also a wide variety of resources and opportunities. In fact, urban settlements have represented important hubs of economic growth, innovation, culture and creativity. Urban change can then be driven forward by embracing

creative ideas, mobilising citizens, gathering adequate resources, and making use of urban governance opportunities, including cooperation, sharing and learning.

When investigating the different shapes and forms that urban policies have taken in the last 50 years, one will come across an intricate set of ambiguous terms that reflect different theoretical definitions, which on occasion were used interchangeably. This issue becomes even more complex when trying to use these keywords in an interchangeable way between different languages (see Mourão in this book ?). In this chapter it is assumed that urban regeneration implies, in its nature, a multidisciplinary and multidimensional, integrated approach which can translate into a myriad of forms that can be combined to give response to a wide variety of interconnected problems affecting areas in decline.

It is unquestionable that from around the second half of the 20th century and onwards, regeneration strategies gained a prominent role in urban policies in Europe, acting as a mechanism to reverse urban decline and emerging as an alternative to the widespread *demolish-and-rebuild solutions*. At the same time, old towns began to be seen as a valuable resource for the implementation of regional policies relating to heritage and regeneration as a way to contribute to the EU's integrated sustainable urban development goal. Currently, while the situation of historic city centres has improved in many European contexts, others still struggle to find the right balance. Urban regeneration interventions and its characteristics still play an important role in current urban policies and possess the ability to tackle the new contemporary challenges that steer urban development. While the EU lacks formal competences to intervene in urban matters—in order to respect the subsidiarity principle—, a myriad of tools have been implemented to act across European urban areas as a way of achieving broader political and strategic objectives, in particular under the Cohesion Policy. These will be examined more closely below.

The following case study addresses the urban regeneration process in the historic centre of Porto that has been a site of experimentation in the field of European urban policies, in particular those of the EU regional policy. The aim is to investigate how such processes were addressed in Bairro da Sé, one of the oldest neighbourhoods of an area classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, which has been through a process of decline and a slow turnaround. The qualitative research presented is based on a literature review that comprises of a mix of official documentary sources including the analysis of legislation, planning documents, evaluation reports and institutional documents, and the review of academic literature produced at both national and European levels. The study starts by exploring the context in which EU policy has addressed the general field of urban affairs by carrying out a brief review of some key milestones and by emphasising the role of EU urban policy in the development and support of urban regeneration strategies. Finally, we analyse two specific urban interventions which we consider relevant in order to shed light on how the EU and local level have interacted: the 1993 intervention under the Urban Pilot Project scheme, and the 2006 Action Programme under the 2007-2013 ERDF period. To grasp a more detailed picture of the dynamics in play, this was complemented by informal discussions with local experts, field observations (including unstructured dialogues with local people), information

from newspaper articles, and when appropriate (and according to the public data available) the analysis of quantitative data. This study mainly focused on the outcomes of the urban regeneration of the historic centre of Porto in terms of physical transformations and economic revitalisation. For more detailed information regarding other Europeanisation aspects of urban regeneration, such as urban governance or spatial planning innovation, see among others Alves and Branco (2018), Breda-Vázquez et al. (2009), Igreja (2021), Igreja and Conceição (2021), Lobato and Alves (2012), Oliveira et al. (2013), Queirós (2015) or Rio Fernandes (2011).

## 2 Urban regeneration and the urban dimension of EU policy

The field of urban policy is not directly referred to in European Union (EU) legislation, while under the principle of subsidiarity the most effective decision-making level to deal with it is the one closest to the territory. However, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the EU increasingly turn its attention towards cities as they concentrated a multitude of problems related to poverty, crime and urban decay. Gradually, the EU began to recognise cities for the important role they could play in the urban development of Europe. Despite not having formal competences in the urban-related policies, more than 30 years ago the EU started the process of building a more explicit discourse regarding cities and urban development. This complex and long journey has been promoted by different EU institutions and through the implementation of a great number of instruments, resulting in the development of what is referred to as the *urban dimension of EU policy*<sup>1</sup>.

This political process was combined with a set of more operational actions associated mainly with the implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy. With the particular support from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), these contributed not only in testing innovative ideas and new strategic scenarios, but initiated actual transformation processes within the European territories. Within the framework of the EU regional policy, and co-financed under the so-called Article 10 measures of the Structural Funds, the EC launched in 1989 an innovative scheme called Urban Pilot Projects (UPP) to find effective solutions to clearly defined urban problems. Among the most innovative elements introduced by the UPP was the *integrated area-based approach* to the urban regeneration of deprived neighbourhoods, and the development of local partnerships comprised of public and private stakeholders.

The UPP facilitated the exchange of practices across Europe, and while designed to promote innovation and test out new ideas, its projects led to the development of alternative solutions to deal with: i) socio-economic deprivation; ii) poor land-use planning; iii) neglected historic centres; iv) poor links between research and development activities; and v) derelict industrial wasteland.

Encouraged by the successful outcomes of the UPP and influenced by the experience of other European countries in regeneration strategies, the EU introduced in 1994 the

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<sup>1</sup> For a more comprehensive understanding of this process and a review of the key political and operational milestones, see among others Atkinson (2015), European Commission (2020), McCann (2015) or Medeiros Ed. (2019).

URBAN Community Initiative (URBAN). This particular tool was intended to support urban issues through the regeneration of areas with high levels of unemployment, a decayed urban fabric, bad housing conditions and lack of social amenities. Local stakeholders such as public authorities and social partners had to be involved in the preparation and implementation of the projects that, much like the UPP, had to tackle urban transformation in a holistic, integrated and participatory way. Together, the UPP and URBAN projects paved the way for a more explicit urban dimension within EU policy and several authors point out to the role it played in stimulating domestic institutional and policy change as part of the Europeanisation process (see, among others, Carpenter (2006), Dukes (2008), Igreja and Conceição (2021)).

At the same time it can be argued that the field of urban regeneration within the EU was introduced especially through these two operational instruments that mirrored the principles of an integrated area-based approach to urban regeneration (combining physical, socio-economic, environmental and cultural dimensions). Moreover, it encompassed an idea of urban development which should take into consideration ongoing territorial strategies, along with the creation of public-private models of governance and the use of mechanisms of public participation.

Ultimately, the lessons learned from the UPP/URBAN experience led to the decision to mainstream the urban dimension into the Cohesion Policy during the 2007-2013 programming cycle. In particular the 2006 ERDF reform (see Article 8 of the Regulation (EC) No. 1080/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the European Regional Development Fund) gave Member States the possibility to design, plan and implement custom-made, integrated and innovative development programmes in their towns and cities. This should not only help the implementation of direct actions promoting the sustainable urban development of deprived neighbourhoods (URBAN-type actions), but contribute to the dissemination of multi-level governance schemes and cooperation networks (European Commission, 2008).-During this programming cycle, specific support to urban regeneration was given through the Joint European Support for Sustainable Investment in City Areas (JESSICA) programme. This financial tool, besides restating the framework for action based on citizen participation, a vertical and horizontal integration of different stakeholders and integration of sectoral policies, allowed for greater access to loan or equity capital from international banking institutions, as well as a stronger leverage effect by attracting sizeable amounts of private funding.

In 2010 the EU was facing the effects of a global financial, economic and social crisis with implications for the future of European citizens, its territory and environment. The informal ministerial meeting of urban development ministers hosted by the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union marked a more explicit recognition of the strategic importance of an integrated urban regeneration approach to achieve a smarter, more sustainable and socially inclusive urban development across Europe regions:

it comes out that “urban regeneration” may have a truly strategic role to play in the future of urban development in Europe, and come to represent an opportunity to help to address the challenges of European cities from this multiple perspective, and particularly to address them in the

existing urban fabrics. (Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2010, p.1)

The Toledo Declaration, resulting from the above-mentioned meeting, was relevant since it strengthened the common understanding among member states that within the broader vision of sustainable urban development were embedded the principles of integrated urban regeneration. Simultaneously, with the *mainstreaming* of these principles into the EU Cohesion Policy in the 2007-2013 period, local actors were given more freedom to choose whether to concentrate resources in a selected area (a place-based approach), or to adopt a more holistic, territorial approach (e.g., the development of city-wide visions). Evidential signals indicated that area-based approaches could provide more efficient outcomes when embedded in local, metropolitan or regional policies.

Turning to the 2014-2020 programming cycle, ERDF regulation introduced different adjustments, including new instruments to support Integrated Sustainable Urban Development at a more strategic level: the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) and the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD). The first allowed funds to be brought together from different priority axes being integrated in multi-dimensional and cross-sectoral actions and foresaw the complementarity with place-based initiatives, including urban regeneration actions. The second was spatially more focused and supported local development strategies led by local public-private partnerships. Despite the apparent strengthening of opportunities for promoting urban development within the 2014-2020 programming cycle, different authors raised attention to the difficulties experienced domestically in taking full advantage of the funds and tools (Atkinson & Zimmermann, 2016; Tosics, 2016; van der Zwet & Ferry, 2019). In particular, expenditure in integrated actions for sustainable urban development was made compulsory (see Article 7), urban authorities were explicitly asked to be involved, and it opened up space for innovation and experimentation, in particular through the Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) initiative. The latter intended to inform future policies such as the Cohesion Policy programmes for 2021-27.

This set of tools (ITI and CLLD) remains unchanged for the 2021-2027 period and Member States will have to allocate at least 8% (in contrast to the previous 5%) of their ERDF investment funds in jobs and growth goal to urban sustainable development (see Article 11 of the Regulation (EC) No. 2021/1058 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on the European Regional Development Fund and on the Cohesion Fund). Moreover, additional resources from the ERDF shall be used to finance a new tool: European Urban Initiative. This initiative was launched to boost building capacity and local knowledge, to encourage innovative solutions and develop transferable and scalable innovative solutions to urban challenges within an EU context.

### **3 Case study: Bairro da Sé do Porto**

Since the accession of Portugal to the EEC in 1986 that Porto has been a site of experimentation in the field of European urban policies. For this reason, the city offers a good

example of the above-mentioned evolution of the urban dimension of EU policies, that took place through a set complementary tools. On the one hand, structural and sectoral investments directed mainly to enhance infrastructure and boost the economy, in the light of a strategic move to empower the role of the city as core of the metropolitan area. Whilst on the other hand, a strategy of active participation in pilot programmes and community initiatives supported by EU funding such as the European Poverty II and III programmes, and later on, the Urban Pilot Project, URBAN I and II or European Capital of Culture (Igreja & Conceição, 2021).

Although with varying levels of intensity, the old town centre in particular has seen a sequence of different strategic and financial efforts, both and international, that were supposed to play a key role in the spatial transformation of the area. However, the urban regeneration process has seen irregular trajectories, sometimes struggling to brought-about the anticipated and needed change. To better understand the reason for such events, this section makes a brief reflection upon the development that has been taking place since the early 1990s in the historic district of Bairro da Sé. By investigating key interventions it is possible to illustrate the urban regeneration trajectories in the historic centre of Porto and its relations with EU and national urban regeneration policies.

### **3.1 The decay of the historic centre of Porto**

According to the most recent 2021 census, the city of Porto has around 231,828 inhabitants, which places it as the fourth most populated city in Portugal (after Lisbon 545,923, Sintra 385,654 and Vila Nova de Gaia 303,854). However, Porto has had, and still has, a prominent role in the Northern region of Portugal and is the centre of the second biggest urban conurbation of the country named Metropolitan Area of Porto (1,736,491 inhabitants). The importance of Porto and its metropolitan area in the development of the country extends from its role in economy and politics, to education and knowledge, culture, external relations, as well as health and living conditions.

The old centre of Porto is situated roughly 5 kilometres upstream from the mouth of the river Douro and its primitive urban structures date back to the first century BC and the early Roman occupation. It was built up around three levels: the lower riverside area with the port (Ribeira) which allowed trading activities to be carried out, the higher ground area (Morro da Sé) that contained housing and was ideal for defensive purposes, and a middle level that served as access routes between the first two. Focusing on the higher ground area, its current main urban features were the result of the city's continuous expansion during the Middle Ages. At the time, the area around the cathedral (Sé) was the heart of the city's medieval renaissance which included the construction of new structures with different functions and importance (e.g., convents, inns, churches, administrative buildings and squares), as well as defensive walls and watchtowers. From then on, the Sé neighbourhood, together with all of the old urban centre started to experience a gradual loss of attractiveness. This was accompanied by inhabitants moving towards the outskirts of Porto and subsequent social marginalisation and physical deterioration of the old town.

The consequential need for intervention that became evident particularly during the last century led to the designing and implementation of different spatial planning tools.

Among them were multiple renewal plans (e.g., the 1916 proposal by Berry Parker and 1937 proposal by Giovanni Muzio), a regulatory plan (Plano Regulador approved in 1954), a city improvement plan (Plano de Melhoramentos approved in 1956), and a new masterplan under the coordination of Robert Auzelle (1962). Although the early renewal plans were not fulfilled, what followed was the Sé area being subject to several demolitions, first towards the end of the 1930s (to create clear space around the cathedral), and in the 1950s (to create road connections between the Luís I bridge and the Baixa). However, soon after in the 1960s, recognition of the problems concentrated in the historic centre stimulated a debate between two opposing perspectives of intervention: one based on the concept of redevelopment by clearing out degraded areas, and the other that can be allied with the concept of integrated urban regeneration. The latter was supported by architect Fernando Távora and embodied into his 1969 Study for the Urban Renewal of Ribeira-Barredo. Some of its principles would come to be adopted by the central government office created in 1974 to implement urban interventions in the riverside area (Comissariado para a Renovação Urbana da Área de Ribeira/Barredo, CRUARB), which later (1982) expanded its operating area to include the entire old town. The CRUARB kept in close contact with the local context and its approach mixed social and physical goals, through the acquisition of degraded buildings, the designing and implementation of refurbishment projects, and the provision for rental housing.

### **3.2 Public intervention and the European project**

The work of the CRUARB (which in 1994 was transferred from the central state to the municipality) can be considered pivotal in avoiding the demolition of the historic centre of Porto. Although it never had large budgets at its disposal, with the addition of Portugal into the European Economic Community in 1986, Porto had the opportunity to take advantage of structural funds and other financing schemes. Consequently, the municipality became involved in different European initiatives and it was in this context that new local partnership structures were created, such as the Fundação para o Desenvolvimento da Zona Histórica do Porto (FDZHP) in 1990. The FDZHP overlapped in part with the target area of the CRUARB, however, it focused primarily on social care activities to fight poverty and the segregation of underprivileged social groups. The complementarity of these two agencies may be seen as a relevant area-based initiative in the city centre, since it mirrored a local level network approach that encouraged institutional cooperation, created space for interaction and helped the production and sharing of knowledge. Given its unstable situation (see ), the old centre of Porto participated in early EU initiatives such as the European Poverty II programme (1985-1989), followed by the Poverty III (that ran between 1989-1994 and was managed by the FDZHP) and the Urban Pilot Project (that ran between 1993-1998 and was implemented by the CRUARB).



**Fig. 1.** The advance stage of physical and social decay in Bairro da Sé in the late 1990s.  
Source: Câmara Municipal do Porto (1998).

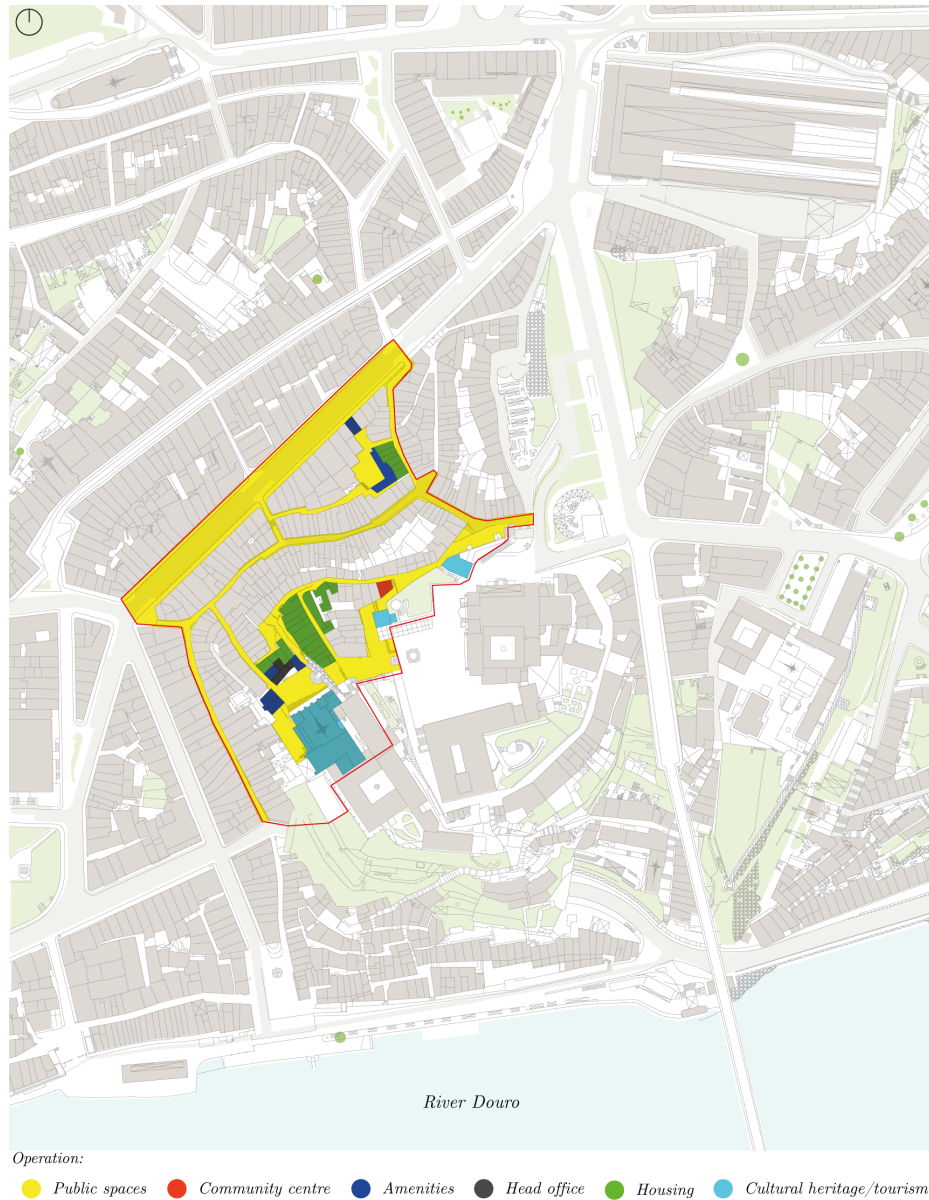
As regards the Porto UPP area-based programme, it met the needs of CRUARB to enjoy a larger budget and implement a series of inter-related and inter-dependent actions which sought to positively integrate the local community, attract local stakeholders and create an altogether welcoming neighbourhood. The careful selection of such actions aimed at improving physical conditions while generating socio-economic spin-off effects that would encourage a slow, but progressive, process of regeneration. The Porto UPP put in place a network of partnerships (including local public institutions, residents, religious bodies and private stakeholders) and tried to answer the following four strategic orientations: i) cultural promotion and heritage conservation; ii) improvement of the urban environment; iii) social support; and iv) economic and tourism promotion (see Fig. 2.).

The most visible physical effects of the project included the creation of a new public square, the refurbishment of various buildings (housing, restaurants, offices, a community centre for the elderly, among others), the restoration of monuments, and street renovations (including underground utilities, street lighting, drainage and decoration). In turn, the intangible effects included a modernisation plan for the retail sector (involving technical assistance for owners in collaboration with Porto's Retailers Association), the establishment of a community day care centre (with the cooperation of a local pensioners association), the creation of a tourist information centre and additional tourism and

cultural promotion with support from Porto Major Seminar. Such operations, which encouraged the establishment of partnerships, also represented the *indirect* influence of the UPP in respect to innovative governance models. Another intangible outcome of the Project was related to the creation of a multidisciplinary technical unit present on site to promote civic engagement and a collaborative working experience between all stakeholders.

After 5 years of implementation (2 years longer than initially planned), there was a general feeling that the mission of the project had been accomplished (see for instance the official published report CMP (1998)), and taking into account the experimental nature of the Project, there are some aspects worth noting:

- Despite the determination to address, in an integrated way, a wide range of intricate urban problems, the project was predominantly driven by physical actions and the socio-economic revitalisation of the area was not achieved as expected;
- While the aesthetic and structural features in some parts of the neighbourhood were improved, it was insufficient to catalyse the expected socio-economic change (take for example, Viela do Anjo, where drug use and trafficking remained prevalent);
- As part of the wider city council strategy, the UPP was complemented by alternative tools that supported specific fields not eligible for funding, in particular housing (for instance, buildings in Aldas street);
- Given the extent of degradation in the area, the improvement in the quality of physical assets accomplished through the project was disproportionate to meet the needs of Bairro da Sé and there was a mismatch between the level of transformation in public and private spaces;
- Despite the completion of a survey which identified 87 buildings in need of urgent intervention and 125 dwellings to be rehabilitated, upon conclusion of the project there was weak immediate continuity and eventually the overall process of revitalisation slowed down;
- The joint action between institutions (CRUARB and FDZHP) promoting different activities in the same place, opened up space for new governance practices with positive results.



**Fig. 2.** The delimitation of the Porto UPP intervention and its key actions. Source: author.

### 3.3 The UNESCO award and a new stage of urban regeneration policies

Meanwhile, in 1996, UNESCO classified part of the historic city (90 hectares) as World Heritage. The urban, architectural and aesthetic character of the area—in other words,

its tangible values—were the key points that justified this classification, while the social aspects of the area only played a marginal role (Mota Santos, 2002). The UNESCO award, together with the publicly financed urban regeneration actions during the 1990s, contributed on the one hand to create value and focus attention on the historic centre, whilst simultaneously helping to improve its declining social and physical condition. However, the stigma in relation to the *problematic* historic centre (see Fig. 1) associated with drug use, trafficking, prostitution and other illegal activities persisted and was coupled with a widespread physical state of dereliction and a precarious socio-economic reality<sup>2</sup>. In fact, during the years that followed the conclusion of 1993 UPP, the condition and conservation of buildings in the area worsened considerably, including buildings collapsing or catching fire, events that were regularly reported by the media. As a consequence, in 2002 an emergency plan (Plano de Emergência para o Bairro da Sé) was developed and implemented over a five-month period as an effort to tackle the most urgent needs of the neighbourhood. Although this plan brought some hope for Sé residents, ultimately it came to an end and the overall process of revitalisation began to lag. In part, this was related to the progressive strategical and political change that was witnessed in Porto as a consequence of multiple aspects.

Firstly, during the 2001 European Capital of Cultural events, attention moved away from the regeneration of the old centre to the so-called Baixa (the part of the city developed during the 16th century). The new strategy included intervention in public spaces, cultural and public facilities, a programme for the revitalisation of local businesses, housing refurbishment strategies, and several actions linked to transport infrastructures. While this intervention was able to upgrade the cityscape by introducing new urban dynamics, the general physical decay of the housing stock remained a serious issue (Balsas, 2004). Secondly, there was a gradual change of political attitudes and direction after the election of a new Mayor (a coalition between PSD and CDS-PP, which were included in the EU European People's Party) in late 2001. The new political agenda not only reflected the desire to be dissociated from the works carried under the 2001 cultural event (which in their view failed to produce good results), but emphasised the transition towards entrepreneurial models of intervention. Thirdly, the approval of new national legislation concerning urban regeneration (DL N.104/2004) led to the creation of a new agency (PORTOVIVO) responsible for driving the urban regeneration process in the city. This encompassed a more entrepreneurial model that acted as a way of tackling urban regeneration with a lighter governance structure in which exclusive legal competences were granted to facilitate administrative procedures, including the approval of building repairs, the expropriation of properties, the acquisition of the right to use public areas, and the chance to establish contracts with the private sector (for more detailed information see Relvão Calmeiro in this book ?).

This new model led to the dissolution of the CRUARB and FDZHP, and received contradictory criticism. On the one hand, some authors stress it mirrored a strategy

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<sup>2</sup> This process has been addressed by different authors that stress the existence of different, interconnected reasons contributing to such outcomes, and the way in which a new attitude towards the old town was introduced in the 2000s (see among others, Alves and Branco (2018), Balsas (2004), Queiroz and Portela (2009), Queirós (2015), Rio Fernandes (2011))

“based on privatisation, deregulation and marketization, in which area-based initiatives do not address issues of social inclusion and cohesion but rather issues of economic global competition” (Alves & Branco, 2018, p.466). And moreover, the complexity of the context led others to believe that the dynamics that changed the city centre were unrelated to the efforts of PORTOVIVO, whose operating model was thought to be financially unsustainable and therefore would eventually need to be modified in order to rely less on public funding (Neto, Pinto & Burns, 2014). Whilst, on the other hand, others highlight the pioneering role played by PORTOVIVO in introducing innovative approaches which asked for the involvement of private stakeholders and succeeded to promote economic development (Costa, 2011; Sequeira, 2011).

As a consequence of surveying the condition of the city centre and developing strategic intervention documents in the initial years of its partnership, PORTOVIVO established that of the 285 buildings in the Sé area, 34.4% was publicly owned and the remaining 65.6% were under private ownership. Moreover, 118 were in bad state of conservation and 62 vacant (PORTOVIVO, 2006). It is against this background that a strategy was drawn up with the following objectives that could provide a new image for the neighbourhood: i) closer spatial and functional connection with the city centre; ii) the renovation of housing stock; iii) improve living standards; iv) achieve a social balance by attracting new residents; and v) promote economic revitalisation.

At the same time, the EU commitment to mainstream the urban dimension into the Cohesion Policy during the 2007–2013 period gave cities and regions a more active role, and in Portugal this was combined with a new policy framework for cities called *Política de Cidades POLIS XXI* (for more detailed information see [Relvão Calmeiro in this book ?](#)). The policy envisaged a decentralised, bottom-up approach, with the ability to tackle multiple territorial scopes, and make use of public-private financing sources, including allocations from the Structural Funds. Among its operational tools, the urban regeneration partnerships (*Parcerias para a Regeneração Urbana, PRU*) played a particularly important role in what specifically concerned the promotion of an integrated approach to urban development in Portugal.

Against this backdrop, PORTOVIVO developed an urban regeneration strategy for Bairro da Sé that was subsequently implemented mainly through two programmes: i) an action programme partially funded by the ERDF under the POLIS XXI urban regeneration partnerships tool; and ii) a resettlement programme financed by the European Investment Bank. The first—which we will discuss in more detail—can be seen as part of the national response to the mission of the Community to mainstream the urban dimension of its regional policy, because the PRU was a mandatory prerequisite in order to access European funding.

The partnership that was established consisted of four public institutions and three private stakeholders that would work together as part of an integrated intervention called *Programa de Acção para a Reabilitação Urbana do Morro da Sé\_CH.1*—herein after referred to as Action Programme. Each partner had a specific operational role, apart from the municipality of Porto which was the key promoter, and PORTOVIVO that occupied a managing role. The Action Programme included multiple actions designed to be structural, symbolic and able to have a spill-over effect on other complementary activities. Therefore, each action would simultaneously contribute to different

goals: economic growth, cultural promotion, social development, enhance public spaces and the built environment, and support the implementation of the Programme (see Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** The delimitation of the Action Programme and its key operations. Source: author.

The two most relevant operations of the Action Programme were the creation of a student off-campus residence and accommodation for tourists. These were expected to attract new residents and contribute to economic revitalisation—while also improving the physical dimension—however several issues were encountered beyond the control of the partnership. The private investors went into insolvency, which led to the EC withdrawing its financing, and both operations were eventually interrupted. In fact, construction never started, and the process has been on standby for such a long period of time, it has in turn led to a further worsening in decay of the area.

As a whole the partnership failed to achieve some of its objectives in the designated time, yet the public partners were able to fulfil their commitments. All the immaterial actions supporting both economic revitalisation and the built environment development (e.g., establish an office to support entrepreneurship, and a technical local team to support building owners) were also completed. Finally, the intervention on a nursing house (also carried by the municipality) improved the living conditions of elderly residents by increasing the recreation and cooking areas, and provided better organisation and fruition of the space. When assessing the outcomes of the Action Programme, it should be noted that among official reports, evaluations and academic literature, there were some discrepancies:

- The Action Programme, in combination with the Permanent Resettlement Programme and renovation works were carried out by the owners, contributed actively to improve the built environment;
- The intervention on public spaces (carried by the municipality) was successful in bringing about change to the area, and therefore increasing the liveability standards and additional support to housing and economic activities;
- In general terms, the attempt to integrate actions was partially achieved while there was modest investment in operations supporting social development. By contrast, a much greater weight was given to actions promoting public spaces and urban environment enhancement, which were (supposedly) also linked with measures fostering economic development (Chamusca, 2021);
- The struggles to integrate all the multidimensional objectives were likely because the strategy relied mostly on two major projects that would work as a catalyst. However, due to the fact that they were suspended, it undermined the final outcome of the intervention;
- A key aspect of the implementation of the project was the involvement of multiple actors, institutions and services, as well as the active participation of local residents. Some authors have stressed that new practices were introduced and succeeded in fostering pro-active action by owners (Costa, 2011). However, others have argued that the partnership model saw little real involvement from local residents in both the design and implementation stages of the Programme, and that PORTOVIVO dominated the process (Chamusca, 2021).

### 3.4 The alignment with EU urban sustainable development tools

Since the official end of the Action Programme in 2015, it should be noted that the place-based approach to develop the Sé area is not the same as it was before. Although there have been more comprehensive urban development strategies which include Bairro da Sé, they cannot be compared to the previous area-based, integrated initiatives. Thus, one should not expect the same amount of energy or financial resources to be invested in the area in the future, but rather hope that actions realised in contiguous areas will have spill-over effects and give an impetus for further improvements. For this to happen, we argue that the management of the historic centre must play a central role in supporting and monitoring a long-lasting regeneration strategy. PORTOVIVO assumed the role of managing the historic centre in 2008 and began developing a Management Plan in which Bairro da Sé was included as part of the strategy to protect the built heritage. This would not only be achieved by repairing the building ensemble, but also by integrating the neighbourhood in the wider revitalisation strategy for the city (thus pursuing a new economic and social balance). The above-mentioned Action Programme represented the main instrument to put the Management Plan aims into practice in the Sé area, and since some of its projects were suspended, it is still considered an ongoing programme.

In 2021, an updated version of the management and sustainability plan for Bairro da Sé was adopted, which represented a very important commitment from the city council to create a strategic framework that will come into force over the medium and long term (CMP, 2021). The plan envisages a strong articulation with other active instruments, in particular those of the 2012 Operação de Reabilitação Urbana do Centro Histórico (an intervention tool under the urban regeneration national legal framework Decree-Law No.307/2009 of October 23<sup>rd</sup>) and of the 2021 Plano Director Municipal (Municipal Director Plan). Consequently, it establishes that interventions foreseen in previous programmes shall be executed, including the Bairro da Sé projects from the 2007 area-based Action Programme. The plan goes further and stressed that “the postponed project with the greatest negative impact on the Historic Centre of Porto revitalisation process is undoubtedly the creation of a student residence in the *heart* of the Morro da Sé” and emphasises the importance of realising this objective in order to meet the initial goals of regenerating the neighbourhood.

Concerning the wider urban development strategies, during the 2014–2020 programming cycle, new instruments were introduced with a possible indirect influence on the Sé area. For example, within the mandatory urban development plan of Porto (Plano Estratégico de Desenvolvimento Urbano), the inclusion of a specific tool which proposed a strategy to consolidate the ongoing regeneration processes the historic waterfront area and in the city centre (Plano de Ação de Regeneração Urbana). In the meantime, it is hoped that the 2021–2027 Regional Operational Programme will continue to strengthen the implementation of previous instruments, fostering spatial development with initiatives such as the renovation of housing stock, the regeneration of industrial and contaminated areas, and the refurbishment of public spaces. However, it remains uncertain as to what extent the Sé area might benefit from specific actions with the support of the EU.

## 4 Concluding remarks

The case of Bairro da Sé should be regarded as a long-term urban regeneration process in which multiple interventions, political ideologies, actors, synergies and funding sources have been in play during the last 30 years. Despite such a diverse collection of elements, this case reveals a number of continuities, which make it very interesting. Moreover, the relevance of this case in order to study the particular influence of the European Union in urban policies in Porto, establishes an understanding that it was the stage of multiple initiatives supported by EU funding (Poverty II and III, Urban Pilot Project, and mainstreamed tools within the ERDF).

With varying levels of acceptance, it seems consensual that the various interventions in Bairro da Sé supported by the EU have triggered, in different modes and to different extents, the improvement of physical and socio-economic conditions. Although the influence of the EU in urban policies in local contexts goes beyond urban transformations, in this chapter we did not focus on the *Europeanisation* of urban policies, spatial planning or governance (for such analysis, see, for example, Chamusca 2021, Igreja 2021, Igreja and Conceição 2021).

Whereas it is a common practice to examine other cases in order to replicate the *best practices* that have contributed to answer similar problems, this does not mean that the issues will be solved automatically when deploying the same *recipe*. In fact, even though in many circumstances the results of an area-based intervention are stronger when supported from the ongoing processes in other contiguous areas (Carpenter 2006), in the case of Bairro da Sé it seems that regardless of a coinciding regeneration of the city centre, the decline of Sé remains that much more intense. Furthermore, while in some cases place-based actions have turned a “vicious cycle into a virtuous cycle, particularly through creating the conditions for change in the future” (ibid., p.2160), the case of Sé seems to be affected by a set of persistent conditions that undermine its *full* regeneration. This is a clear indication that Bairro da Sé retains a special character and possessing a thorough knowledge of the local context is fundamentally vital to achieve any effective form of urban regeneration.

In time, different surveys have been conducted in the old centre of Porto, mostly focusing on its physical characterisation. Simultaneously, some authors have stressed that many officers working on the UNESCO world heritage site regeneration enjoy an in-depth understanding of the intangible aspects of the area—its people and history—given their continued involvement in the process (working initially for CRUARB/FDZHP and after for PORTOVIVO). In contrast, other scholars have argued that there has been a continuous lack of knowledge regarding the urban history of the local context, which when coupled with excessive attention geared towards housing stock restoration has been detrimental to interventions in urban routes and public spaces (Queiroz and Portela 2009). In spite of criticism, the recent management and sustainability plan of the historic centre (CMP, 2021) emphasises the importance of studying

both past and more recent trends that have led to the existing problems, while also recognising that it is a phenomenon that goes beyond the spatial limits of the old town, and therefore must be contextualised within a wider territorial scope.

There are some specific characteristics of Bairro da Sé which seem pertinent to consider in order to understand the trajectory of its regeneration: i) the urban structure of the Sé area is characterised by a steep slope, with dark, narrow streets and the small alleys which are *hot spots* of illegal activity. This gets more complex with the fact that there are more pleasant, alternative routes nearby; ii) the socio-economic structure of the neighbourhood has been characterised by a fragile work force, there is also a growing elderly population; iii) the rental market plays a significant role in the neighbourhood; iv) there has been an extensive building stock requiring costly interventions, which in general is incompatible with the financial status of the tenants and landlords; and v) the long-lasting stigmatisation of Bairro da Sé adds an additional challenge to achieve a more mixed and balanced social structure, while the real-estate market struggles to be as dynamic as in other areas of the city centre and the housing market has not been successful in revitalising the area.

It is not easy to identify one single cause to explain why the long-term development of Bairro da Sé has been so challenging. Identically, it remains difficult to identify where the area-based interventions (UPP and Action Programme) might have failed to provide the necessary urban change. Nevertheless, it is possible to point out some key factors that have been at play in determining the trajectory of Porto's historic centre. Examined under the lens of the urban regeneration interventions, such a trajectory has not been linear due mostly to the shift from a model in which the public sector had an almost exclusive role, to a model that, notwithstanding the public financial resources available, encouraged and became more dependent on private investments (Alves & Branco 2018, Queirós 2015, Rio Fernandes 2011). The two area-based initiatives analysed clearly underline this trajectory, which has been further shifted towards a wider, city-based approach.

It must be noted that the regeneration of Bairro da Sé cannot be regarded as representative of the development of the city centre as a whole, as the aforementioned change has produced disparate results within different areas of Porto's city centre (e.g., the Cardosas block or the Mouzinho da Silveira and Flores streets). Furthermore, evidence supports the belief that in Bairro da Sé one model was not able to immediately solve the issues that the previous model had left unsolved, which we consider to be due to the particularities of the local context. Above all, the issue that seems to have really caught the attention of the academic community and the general public has been related to the changing of the housing policy model adopted in Porto's city centre—and in particular, the Sé area. It is worth noting that although housing policies are a field in which the EU has no direct competences, the Portuguese case seems to have been significantly influenced by it (Allegra et al, 2020). Regarding Bairro da Sé, despite the fact that the EU financial support for place-based interventions did not cover direct aid to housing, both projects found complementary fundings to allocate to housing actions.

There have been different interpretations of population trends in the neighbourhood, its links with housing policy, and the overall process of urban regeneration. Bairro da Sé, like the whole historic centre, developed with the industrial revolution and this led

to an intricate problem of overcrowding and the issue of a decaying built environment. Successively, there was a generalised fall in the population of the area that is sometimes explained as the result of a “trend towards migration of Porto’s residents to neighbouring municipalities where new centralities were born” (CMP, 2021, p.56). On the grounds that action needed to be taken in many buildings, and the “lack of investment in the recovery of private housing, which was hampered by the freeze on rents” (ibid.), public institutions carried out “requalification to secure affordable housing in order to maintain less resourceful families in the city centre” (Alves & Branco, 2018, p.475). In some cases, there was a *forced* relocation of many families to social housing blocs located away from the old town, which Lobato and Alves (2012) refer to as “selective depopulation”. As previously mentioned, this publicly-led model gradually changed, and the state came to embrace a model that promotes market-led initiatives and financialisation.

More recently, the gentrification process of the historic centre, and its links with tourism, has caused enormous controversy. While some authors deny that a balanced and well-managed gentrification process is an issue, and instead argue that it is in fact necessary to introduce new life into the area (Queiroz & Portela, 2009), others maintain the opinion that it ends up disregarding issues such as the displacement of tenants and the increasing commodification of housing (Alves & Branco, 2018). Other views suggest that while new economic activities and city users are inevitable and even desirable to revitalise Porto, “the sheer scale and the speed of change in city centre neighbourhoods, in which floating city users become the main driver of urban change” is becoming problematic (Carvalho et al, 2019, p.6). Moreover, it is interesting to consider the statements put forward in the management and sustainability plan (CMP, 2021) regarding this topic:

Gentrification of the [... historic centre ...] is a scenario that some intend to identify as a reality, but which also needs to be studied and demonstrated. [...] Oblivious to the truth, there are also some detractors who seek to undermine the image of Porto, its Historic Centre, its Urban Rehabilitation and its municipality, and attempt to make us believe that it is tourist pressure that is preventing access to housing in the Historic Centre [...] (CMP, 2021, p.60)

Under these circumstances, it becomes very apparent that the regeneration process of the historic centre of Porto has many factors at play which hamper its analysis and thus the formulation of conclusions. The scope of this study was not to form an evaluation of the EU-led area-based initiatives, but rather to examine how the urban regeneration trajectory of Bairro da Sé was and continues to be influenced by it. We found that both area-based interventions contributed positively to improve the physical aspects and other material assets. However, attempts to develop an integrated approach were inadequate for the scale and particularities of the issues that characterise the area. The socio-economic dimension in particular seems to have played a minor role. In the UPP this was mainly tackled with the creation of social services and a revitalisation plan for the retail sector that showed little signs of change, while the goal of the Action

Programme to revitalise the Sé area was weakened by the suspension of the two main projects. Over time, this must certainly have been undermined by the population and housing issues, and the oscillating role of local authorities in the implementation of measures to overcome it. Regarding the solutions for housing, the recent management and sustainability plan for the historic states that:

Without new government housing policies that place rehabilitated housing on a sustainable plan for the majority of the population, there will be no local policies, nor proactive measures that can reverse the trend of population loss. (CMP, 2021, p.57)

The regeneration of Bairro da Sé—and the whole historic centre of Porto—is a long-term process which requires a continuous action and investment, particularly in housing. While there has been a change from mostly public intervention, to a mixed funding approach, and more recently to a broader sustainable urban development approach, we ponder as to how best could the EU still contribute to achieve the desired long-term regeneration? Allegra et al (2019) have highlighted the recent “growing momentum for the emergence of housing policy as a primary concern for EU policymaking” (p.16), and we wonder if this could play an active role in Bairro da Sé. Meanwhile, the Portuguese post-Covid-19 recovery plan, developed under the Next Generation EU extraordinary funding package (Plano de Recuperação e Resiliência, 2021), comprises of different measures directly and indirectly linked to housing which could be of value to the neighbourhood. Under the resilience dimension, support is foreseen for the relaunching of the national housing policy (including actions to tackle structural deficiencies) and the proposal of the plan to face climate transition introduced a long-term strategy for building renovation. While the Municipality of Porto has announced its involvement in the PRR which includes financing for the above-mentioned housing actions, it is still unclear if Bairro da Sé will be a target of these investments. Having said this, the future developments within the area are worthy of further monitoring and investigation.

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