

ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

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Neighbourhood meeting in Sidon - Zouitini

The importance of involving local communities in urban regeneration and city planning is now universally accepted. If done well it can lead to more appropriate and sustainable development solutions and stronger communities. Less well understood is how best to put this into practice in any particular situation. But an increasing number of tried and tested methods are now available and new experience is being gained constantly.

Action Planning is one approach which has become increasingly popular in the US and Europe in recent years. Instead of relying on traditional bureaucratic planning procedures, Action Planning involves the organisation of carefully-structured, collaborative events at which all sections of the local community work closely with specialists from all relevant disciplines. Events can focus on an individual site, a neighbourhood or an entire city and will typically last four or five days¹⁰. Benefits of this intensive approach include the creation of shared visions for a community's future, and strategies for implementing them. Events can also provide a valuable catalyst for overcoming inertia and help empower communities in a great variety of ways.

Most events so far have taken place in relatively stable communities, but recent experience in Berlin and Belfast has shown that the method can achieve remarkable results in areas facing serious cultural conflict. For example, a Planning Weekend held in the heart of the Loyalist community around the Shankill Road in Belfast in 1996 has led to significant inward investment from the United Kingdom, Europe and the international community. And an event one year later that focussed on the Crumlin Road "peace line" achieved a significant degree of consensus across both communities, and is now being promoted as a model for creating community-led neighbourhood regeneration.

On the other hand there is always a danger (experienced recently in Bosnia) of community participation exercises rekindling hostilities that have lain dormant, with a negative outcome. The main lesson from recent experience is the importance of agreeing the nature of the activity and the basic ground rules with all parties in advance. This minimises any fears that others may be using the activity to gain territorial advantage. It is also important to ensure that events are locally-shaped and "owned", and not imposed

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from outside, even though the expertise and facilitation skills may come from elsewhere.

The question facing the Lebanon Task Force planning team was whether such an approach would work in the Lebanese context and, in particular, whether it was capable of tackling the formidable problems faced by the vulnerable communities living in and around Beirut's City Centre, where much of the social infrastructure has been lost or damaged. There has been little, if any, public participation in planning in Lebanon, and introducing the concept, particularly in such a volatile area, requires sensitivity.

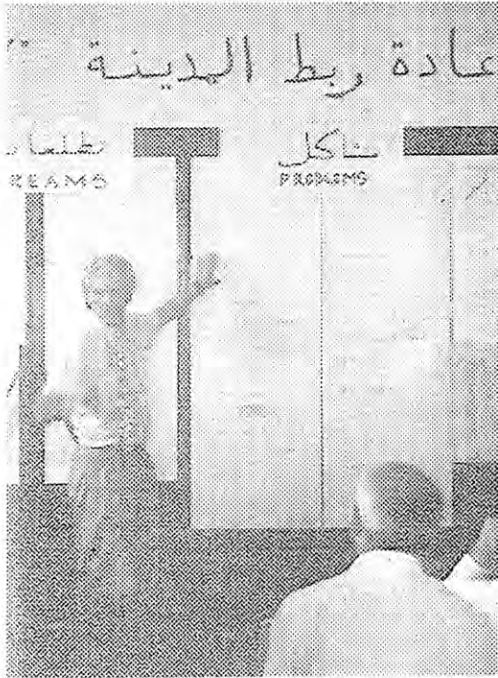
Initial discussions in Beirut met with an enthusiastic response, both from independent professionals and from the Solidere company and government representatives. There was a strong feeling that a major Action Planning event, focussing on the physical, social and economic 'reconnection' of the city, could release an untapped wealth of local resources, reinvigorate the reconstruction process, and provide a new sense of vision for knitting the city together again. It was also felt that such an event, if carefully planned and monitored, could act as an important pilot for introducing community planning processes into the Lebanon and the Middle East more generally.



Based on experience in introducing Action Planning in European countries, detailed proposals for an event were drawn up with the following features:

- An intensive week-long programme of workshops and other collaborative and participatory working methods focussing on the five peri-central neighbourhoods of Beirut;
- An International Team of professional facilitators - multidisciplinary, multi-faith, neutral and independent - incorporating a small Core Unit with previous Action Planning experience;
- A Local Team from Lebanon to shadow the international team and to include local facilitators;
- A Local Steering Group to help develop the proposal and carry out preparatory and follow-up activity.

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John Thompson conducts an Action Planning workshop in Beirut, July 1997

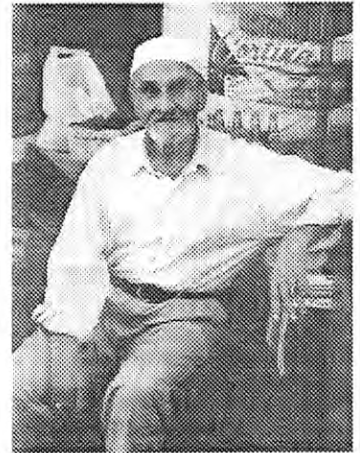
Initially it was thought that the event might coincide with the 1997 Task Force, but it soon became clear that this would be over-ambitious, and that the Task Force could instead provide an opportunity for undertaking preparatory work and holding some exploratory participatory activities.

In Beirut, therefore, an initial workshop was held in July, attended by over one hundred people from the local neighbourhoods. As a result, a local Steering Group has been formed to prepare the ground for a series of neighbourhood-based activities that will lead up to a large-scale participatory event on "Reconnecting the City" (scheduled, at the time of writing, for December 1998). In Sidon, a similar, but much smaller, workshop was held in order to define the needs and aspirations of local people, and to feed these into the urban design proposals being generated by the Task Force.

From these two exercises, as well as from experience in Germany, Russia and the Czech Republic, it is clear that Action Planning is a methodology with the ability to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers. This is because it is based on listening, and stimulating local creativity, rather than imposing preconceived ideas, and because the format is inherently flexible, and can be tailored to local requirements. Whilst the outward expression of the human predicament may manifest itself in widely differing shapes and forms, within every community it is the same basic aspirations that are seeking to be fulfilled.

Through the work carried out in 1997, the foundations have now been laid for introducing a new approach to planning in Beirut, creating constructive frameworks for the reconnection of the city. With the support of the Lebanese Government, the private sector, and professional and voluntary organisations, this pioneering initiative could be a stepping stone for introducing similar projects throughout the Middle East.

1. For more information on action planning see *Action Planning: how to use planning weekends and urban design action teams to improve your environment*, edited by Nick Wates, published by The Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture, 1996. Price £10.00 + postage (£1.00 UK & EU, £2.50 overseas). German and Chinese translations are also available.



ACTION PLANNING

Results of the Neighbourhood Meeting at Zouitini



Meat-seller in Sidon, outside the Khan al Franj

BH to supply text on meeting procedure etc.

ACTION PLANNING: RESULTS OF THE ZOUITINI MEETING

PROBLEMS

- 1 *Environment*
 - lack of cleanliness in the streets and in tap water
 - disposal of sanitary waste in the sea causes both water pollution and smell
 - lack of cleanliness in general
 - lack of environmental protection
 - lack of garbage cans and clearing of them
 - noise and lack of cleanliness
 - protect the environment for the sake of the children
- 2 *Renovation / Restoration*
 - renovate the whole Zouitini area
 - renovate the entrances of the old city
 - renovate the land castle
 - renovate the sea front
 - renovate the old city; particularly the southern side
- 3 *Employment*
 - provide employment for our area
- 4 *Health*
 - children's health (+ mentions)
 - poor man needing financial support for treatment
- 5 *Infrastructure*
 - need to improve the sewerage system
 - improve electricity lines
- 6 *Public gardens*
 - lack of public garden
 - need to restore Zouitini garden
 - restoration and lightening of Zouitini garden
- 7 *Streets / alleys*
 - need to restore the street and alleys of the old city
 - lack of cleanliness
 - need to pave streets
 - cleanliness in the old streets
- 8 *Economics*
 - lots of economic problems
 - poor economy
- 9 *Housing*
 - leaks in the roof
 - need to restore houses
 - houses not fit for living
 - need for housing restoration
 - renovating the roofs of houses
 - humidity in the houses, and no sunlight
 - fixing up the housing
 - rats in the houses
 - fix roof
 - bad housing conditions
- 10 *Codes & Regulations*
 - binding laws
 - building new on top of old
- 11 *Public institutions*
 - schools
 - public library
 - public toilet

DREAMS

- 1 *Environment*
 - cleanliness
 - environmental pollution
 - protect the environment
 - water pollution
 - beautify the city
- 2 *Renovation / Heritage*
 - houses and old houses - preserve our heritage
 - we want Sidon to be the most beautiful city
 - we want buildings that look beautiful on the outside
 - renovate old houses
 - we want to see the old stone all over the city
 - build the old city
 - dig all sites to reveal the heritage
 - encourage the presentation of the heritage
 - we need tourists
- 3 *Employment*
 - provide employment for our sons
- 4 *Infrastructure*
 - hope to have sewerage system
 - tap water
- 5 *Gardens*
 - hope to have a garden for the children
 - green areas
 - build public gardens and provide garbage cans
- 6 *Streets*
 - renovate streets
 - plant greenery
 - provide lighting in the streets
- 7 *Economics*
 - provide economic stability
- 8 *Housing*
 - restore the house or provide money for restoration
 - plaster the facades of houses
 - repair leakage in houses, and provide financial support
 - I dream of owning a house, as I rent and the owner wants it back
- 9 *Codes & Regulations*
 - deal with illegal construction
- 10 *Public Institutions*
 - provide public beaches and public sports facilities (recreation)
 - build public library
 - build technical schools
 - provide public toilets
 - schools
 - recreational facilities
- 11 *Coordination*
 - we would like to have better coordinated municipal services, and people to keep the city clean

SOLUTIONS

- 1 *Environment*
 - survey of garbage quantities house-by-house
 - a plan to be agreed between municipality and community
 - plan should include garbage tip
- 2 *Garbage*
 - need a place for garbage treatment
- 3 *Economics*
 - solutions are in economic life
- 4 *Housing*
 - need support from Hariri Foundation to restore our houses
- 5 *Establish Institutions*
 - cooperation between social and humanitarian institutions
- 6 *Municipality*
 - should help in restoration
 - should coordinate between directors, ministers, and people from the community
 - provide equipment, machinery and labour
 - public works should be 24 hours - 3 shifts
 - change the people in charge
 - the municipality should tax people for throwing garbage out at the wrong place and time
- 7 *Hariri*
 - the solution is through government and Mrs. Bahia
 - cooperation between government and Hariri Foundation
 - the municipality should work with Mrs Hariri and trained professionals
- 8 *The Prince of Wales's Institute*
 - your support and encouragement
- 9 *Local community*
 - cooperation between people in the community and the municipality
- 10 *Awareness*
 - we need awareness raising through the media and advertising
 - cooperation with the municipality to provide awareness
 - heritage awareness
- 11 *Education*
 - educate the children for cleanliness
- 12 *Tourists*
 - take care of tourists and foreign visitors
- 13 *Foreign*
 - provide foreign assistance