

A mural of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue dress with a pattern of small black birds, is painted on a weathered, textured wall. The woman is looking down and to the right, with her hand near her face. The wall has a honeycomb-like pattern and some peeling paint. In the top right corner, there is a blue circular logo with the text 'BREAKING ISOLATION' and 'URBACT NETWORK OF EUROPEAN CITIES TACKLING SOCIAL ISOLATION' below it.

**BREAKING
ISOLATION**

URBACT NETWORK OF EUROPEAN CITIES TACKLING SOCIAL ISOLATION

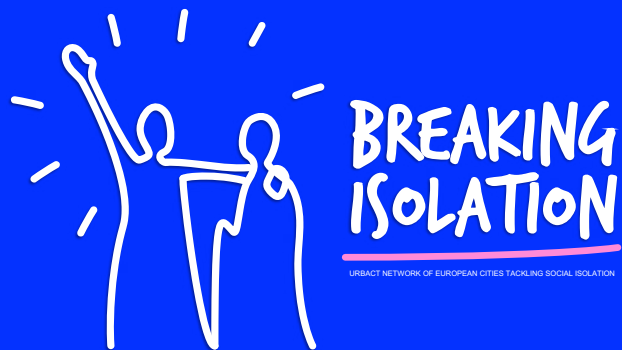
SOCIAL ISOLATION: A DISCREET EPIDEMY

Baseline Study
by Christophe Gouache

URBACT



Co-funded by
the European Union
Interreg



Breaking Isolation Action-planning network

URBACT BASELINE STUDY

URBACT IV | Co-funded by the European Union
Interreg

By Lead Expert, Christophe Gouache with the help
and support of Nicolas Castet and the partner cities

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Cover picture by Christophe Gouache (Street Art
mural by Alice Pasquini in Pombal, Portugal)

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SOCIAL ISO- LATION: WHAT'S THE SITUATION?

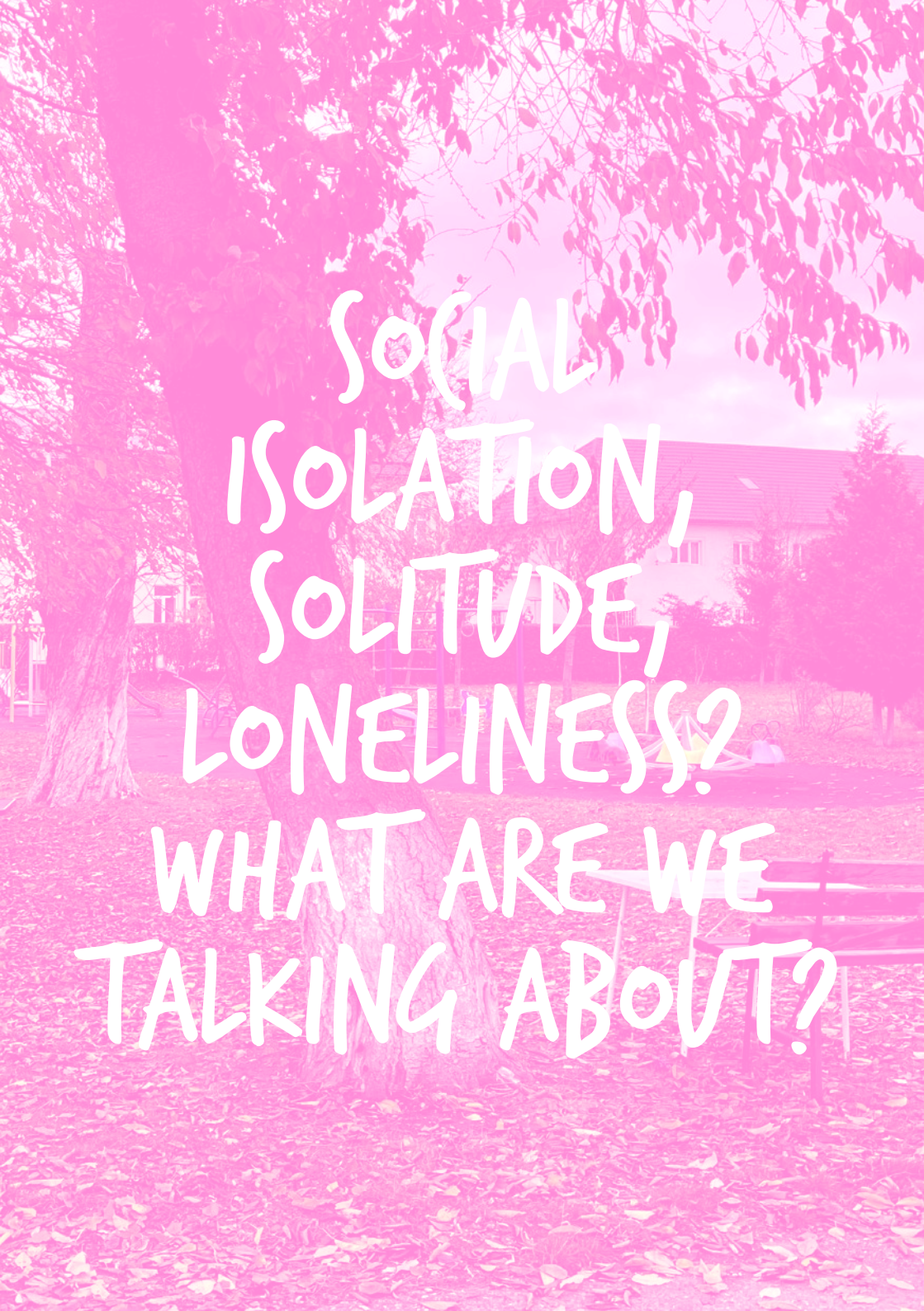
It is well known that humans are, by nature, social creatures. Cities, communication technologies, transport systems, cultural practices, etc. are made to support, stimulate, facilitate, enable our need for social interactions and exchanges. Yet, in our supposedly more and more 'connected' world, more and more people feel isolated. And are isolated.

If it's in our nature, by default, to be social, then what happens when one does not meet, share, talk with his/her fellow human? What happens when one gets truly isolated, left alone? What happens to our society when more and more people get isolated, feel left out, abandoned, unfit for society?

In this first chapter, we will try to clarify what we mean by social isolation (in comparison/link with solitude, loneliness, etc.), then see that, throughout Europe, the situation varies from one region to another, then we'll explore what are the profiles of isolated people and whether we can identify factors, causes and typologies, etc. then, we'll see if social isolation should be regarded as a personal, private issue or considered a public problem and finally we'll look into the effects of social isolation on individuals and on society.



Nature walking groups to enable socialization (Tøndermarskens Naturekskole, Tønder, Denmark)



SOCIAL ISOLATION, SOLITUDE, LONELINESS? WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

Social isolation, solitude, loneliness? What are we talking about?

Social isolation, loneliness, solitude... all the same? Well, not precisely, but the different concepts are clearly linked and overlapping.

'Social isolation typically refers to solitude that is unwanted and unhealthy. Loneliness is a subjective feeling of isolation. A person can be socially isolated but not feel lonely. A person can also feel lonely when they are surrounded by people'. (Tulane University). A person can be part of a group or of a community and still feel lonely because he/she is not feeling integrated.

This feeling of loneliness can have plenty of causes: from the feeling of being different from others (because of gender, race, religion, age, style, mental state, culture, social status, education, etc.), the feeling of 'not fitting', of not being able to be understood by others, not being concerned/interested by what is said/discussed, of not being able to express views/feelings, etc. Reasons leading to the feeling of loneliness can be numerous. Even though one can feel lonely, it does not necessarily mean that the person suffers from social isolation (as he/she might still

have social relations).

As Benoit Calmels (Deputy General of the French National Union of Social Action Community Centers) explains 'The majority of [French] people imagine that social isolation means 'living alone physically with no one around'. Yet isolated people often live in the middle of many other people'. (Serres, J-F.)

Of course, there is a correlation between the feeling of loneliness and the fact of being socially isolated. Feeling lonely can happen to everyone, including people with active social relations, yet, about a third of socially isolated express feeling lonely on a regular basis. This shows that there is a clear link between the weakness of social relations and the feeling of loneliness and that isolated people suffer more from loneliness than others.

Solitude is the state of being alone (not a feeling but a fact) and can be described as a form of social withdrawal, a state of seclusion, either desired or not. Solitude can be temporary but can also be on the long run, especially when combined with social

isolation.

To avoid misunderstandings, within the Breaking Isolation, we have decided to adopt the following definition of social isolation: **‘Social isolation is a situation in which a person finds himself/herself, as a result of relationships that are permanently insufficient in quantity or quality, in a situation of suffering and danger.’ (Serres, J-F.)**

This definition highlights key notions: the first one being that the person who is socially isolated suffers. This means social isolation is not a desired situation, it’s a source of suffering, which can be dangerous for the person itself.

The second key aspect of this definition is the principle of ‘permanent’ lack, or in other words, the long term deficiency of social relations. Indeed, social isolation is not a short, temporary situation in which one finds himself/herself for a period of a few days or a few weeks. It lasts over months and years.

Finally, the lack of social relations is both a lack of quantity and of quality. This means that the person suffering from isolation, has very few relations (or even none) and often of very poor quality (or even none).

Quantity describes the number of people you interact with, talk to, spend time with. It can include close relations (family and friends) but also mundane relations (with a neighbour, the shop next door, the postman, the doctor, the pharmacist, etc.).

Quality describes the value of the social relation: good time spent, good laugh, deep conversations, joyful moments, happy time. Quality can be measured in multiple ways and especially with the following questions: with whom do you enjoy spending time? Who do you trust and care for? Who can you share your problems with? With whom are you happy to share time with?

When it comes to social isolation, both dimensions, quantity and quality, matter. Indeed, if one has very limited quantity of relations, he/she can find himself/herself at a higher risk of isolation in case of loss of these extremely limited relations (relation break up, separation, death of the relative, etc.). If one has very limited quality of relations, he/she finds himself/herself only with superficial and/or dull relations (lacking depth, lacking emotional engagement), which are rather poor in terms of psychological/emotional benefits/value.

For example, what we observed, discussing with nurses in the City of Agen (France) – and it revealed to be also the case in all cities of the network –, is that many elderly people are taken care of by many professionals who come over at their house... one delivers meals, one delivers medicine, one cleans the house and so on... so, elderly people experience several daily/weekly social interactions in terms of quantity, but they end up being all rather poor and quite unsatisfactory in terms of



Daycare center for people with mental disabilities, Social Cooperative Onlus A B, Lavoro Anch’io, Isernia, Italy



Youth Centre,
Skofja Loka, Slovenia

quality because of their shortness (usually only lasting a few minutes) and because of their 'lightness' in terms of subjects of conversation (small talk)). This means that an elderly person receiving home care can still feel lonely and suffer from social isolation despite professionals paying him/her a visit.

As conclusion, we can simplify the concepts as follow:

- Loneliness refers to a subjective feeling of being lonely, not integrated, not part of a group or of society: 'I feel lonely'.
- Solitude is the state of being, factually, alone. 'I am alone'
- Social isolation is a condition in which a person suffers from a long term lack of social relations both in quantity and quality

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A PRIVATE ISSUE OR A PUBLIC PROBLEM?

Social isolation? People's fault?

Social isolation could be regarded as a private issue, an individual problem. In other words, a problem that does not concern society nor governments.

'People who are isolated are isolated because they don't want to talk to people or join with others in any way. They isolate themselves' one could hear.

Indeed, one could argue that social isolation is related to personal difficulties to cope with life situations (loss of a loved one, unemployment, depression, etc.) and/or an individual choice (deliberately rejecting others) and that, therefore, it does not call for policy responses, as it is people's own problems.

This could have, potentially, remained the case if social isolation had concerned a limited handful of individuals in episodic ways but in the last decades, throughout Europe (but also globally), social isolation

has rapidly grown and turned into a societal situation concerning millions of individuals, of all age and for long periods (even permanent).

Social isolation shall therefore be seen as a growing threat for society's social cohesion – which is often referred to as the glue of society—.

In this perspective, social isolation should not be seen as a private, personal issue anymore but considered as a public problem to work on.

Social isolation: a societal problem

The World Health Organization's special Commission on Social Isolation and Loneliness

In November 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) decided to launch a special Commission on Social Isolation and Loneliness.

'Social isolation and loneliness are widespread, with an estimated 1 in 4 older people experiencing social

Youth Centre also used by elderly (BLOK) Skofja Loka, Slovenia



isolation and between 5 and 15 per cent of adolescents experiencing loneliness [...] The WHO Commission on Social Connection (2024–2026) aims to see the issue recognised and resourced as a global public health priority. The Commission will propose a global agenda on social connection, working with high-level Commissioners to make the case for action, marshal support to scale up proven solutions and measure progress. (World Health Organization)

European policies?

At European level, many policies and strategies prove the importance of addressing social matters and in particular, reduce social isolation (or rather improve social cohesion).

Here are a few notable examples:

1. European Pillar of Social Rights

The European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2017) is a set of rights and principles aimed at

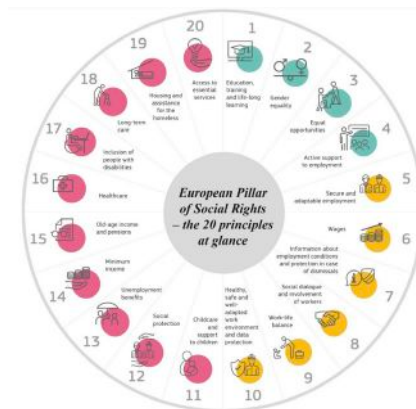


Figure: European Pillar of Social Rights

ensuring fair and well-functioning labor markets and welfare systems. It includes principles (esp. in Chapter III) related to social protection and social inclusion which directly help combat social isolation.

2. Europe 2020 Strategy

Even though the Europe 2020 Strategy was meant to be a 'strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth', it emphasized social inclusion as one of its key targets and aimed to reduce poverty and social exclusion, which contribute to social distress and isolation.

However, the assessment report produced in 2019 highlights progress regarding employment but also: 'with regard to the poverty and social exclusion target, more limited progress has been made so far concerning the target of lifting 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion (leading to isolation) remains an unsolved problem throughout Europe.'

3. Horizon 2020 Programme (or Horizon Europe)

Horizon 2020 (or its new version, Horizon Europe) is the EU's research and innovation funding program. It supports projects addressing societal challenges, including social inclusion and

combating social isolation. Through funding research and innovation in areas such as healthcare, digital technologies, and social sciences, the EU aims to develop policies and interventions which might (eventually) contribute to tackle social isolation. For example, the call Horizon-CL2-2024-Transformations-01-01 is specifically looking for: *'Policy recommendations from socio-economic impacts of loneliness in Europe'*.

4. Active Ageing Index

The Active Ageing Index (AAI) is a tool developed by the European Commission to measure the extent to which older people can participate in various aspects of life. It assesses factors such as employment, social participation, independent living, and social connectedness, providing insights for policymakers to address social isolation among older adults.

5. European Social Fund

The European Social Fund (ESF) is the EU's main financial instrument for promoting employment and social inclusion. It provides support to various projects across Europe targeting vulnerable groups and addressing social exclusion, including efforts to combat social isolation.

6. European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing

The European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing is a European Commission initiative focused on promoting innovation in aging-related issues. It aims to develop and deploy innovative solutions to improve the quality of life of older people, including strategies to prevent and address social isolation in older adults.

7. EU Fund for the European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)

FEAD is a European funding program focused on providing assistance to the most vulnerable and socially excluded individuals in Europe. It supports actions such as providing food aid, basic material assistance, and social inclusion activities, aiming to alleviate the effects of poverty and social isolation.

Joint Research Center and Loneliness

The Joint Research Centre (JRC), in collaboration with the European Parliament and the European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion, studies loneliness in the EU within the framework of the pilot project "Monitoring Loneliness in Europe". The project aims to develop a better understanding of different aspects of loneliness, including a wide range of individual, social, and contextual factors that contribute to it. It seeks to explore

the consequences of loneliness and its impact on individuals and communities in different EU countries. Multiple key publications of the JRC will be useful for increasing the knowledge and expertise on the topic within the Breaking Isolation network.

Policies to fight against social isolation?

It is important to note that while policies exist at European level they are often indirectly tackling social isolation (by focussing, for example, on developing social cohesion or social equality). At national levels, even though nuances may exist between countries, we also rarely see explicit policies targeting social isolation as a public problem. Similarly to EU policies, strategies and plans mostly focus on improving social cohesion.

While improving social cohesion is obviously a good thing to prevent social isolation, it responds only partially to the isolation issue. Indeed, if better cohesion helps prevent isolation, it rarely offers any solution to those already isolated. Taking people out of their isolation requires more proactive and direct answers than just promoting social cohesion as a whole, especially because pretty much any public action can be 'improving social cohesion' either directly or indirectly (promoting sport, enriching cultural agenda, improving employment, etc.).

In conclusion, finding policies at EU or national levels which deal with our challenge is possible, yet, nearly

none of them, directly and explicitly, aim to fight against social isolation.

This does not mean that social isolation does not matter, but every public problem has to compete, on the political agenda, with plenty of other burning public problems (such as climate change, inflation, energy production, water scarcity, etc.), and social isolation is not necessarily considered 'politically-interesting enough'. At least, in the 10 cities of the Breaking Isolation network, we know that this challenge matters...

‘We should take better care of each other. And for many who feel anxious and lost, appropriate, accessible and affordable support can make all the difference.’

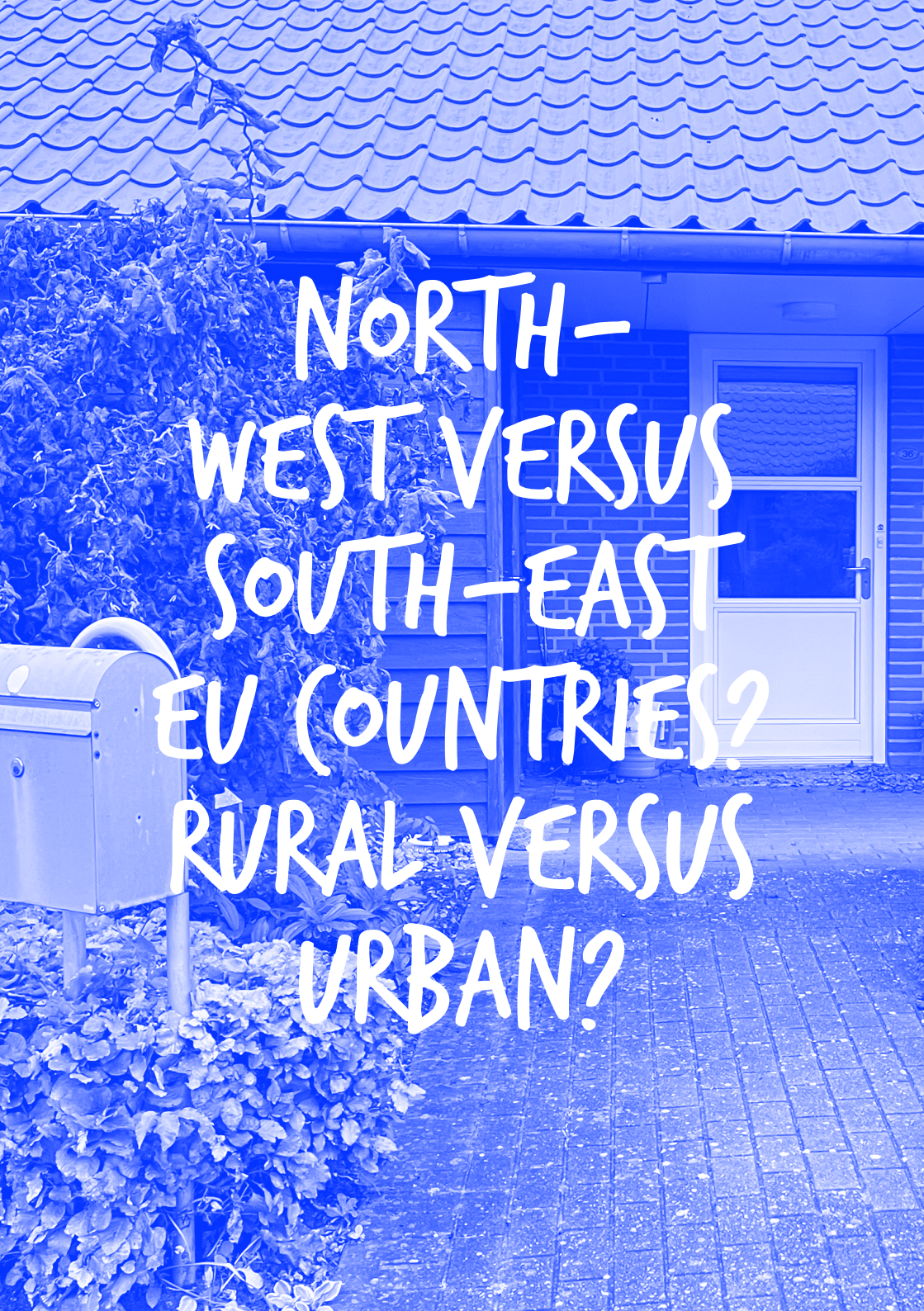
President von der Leyen, SOTEU 2022



Walking groups,
Pombal, Portugal



Association of parents and friends of children with disabilities, Serres, Greece



NORTH- WEST VERSUS SOUTH-EAST EU COUNTRIES? RURAL VERSUS URBAN?

Nort-West versus South-East EU countries? Rural versus urban?

When it comes to social isolation, it is interesting to analyze whether or not we can see relations between the countries' wealth but also between rural and urban areas.

According to the Wealth Health Organization, at international level **'rates in low- and middle-income countries are comparable or higher than in high-income countries'**. (WHO). Yet, in Europe some differences can be noted: **'Eastern and Southern Europeans appear lonelier and more socially isolated than Western and Northern Europeans'** (JRC).

Still according to the Joint Research Center, **there is some evidence that welfare systems in Europe impact the levels of loneliness among older adults. In particular, the absence of loneliness is more likely in the Nordic, Anglo-Saxon and Continental welfare regimes, and less likely in the Southern and Eas-**

tern regimes (Nyqvist et al., 2019).

According to findings of the JRC, when measured in the general population, a higher degree of urbanisation is linked to somewhat higher levels of loneliness (JRC, 2022). In Breaking Isolation, this observation seems to be confirmed: 'People, in villages, know each other. There are few people, so they often go and check on their neighbours' comments one civil servant. While in cities, because of density and higher turn over of the population, 'neighbours don't know each other much', comments an elected official.

The Joint Research Center also mentions that *'a better availability and accessibility of facilities in the neighbourhood (in terms of e.g. services, social sites, or leisure-time facilities) and more access to green spaces are mostly linked to lower levels of loneliness in older adults and possibly general population* (Buecker

et al., 2021b; Lyu and Forsyth, 2021).

'A better walkability of the neighbourhood (especially when measured subjectively) is also mostly linked to less loneliness in older adults, even though some studies do not find statistically significant links' (Lyu and Forsyth, 2021). These aspects may be useful elements to be considered when developing the future integrated actions plans of the Breaking Isolation cities.

While urban planning and urban facilities may play a role on social isolation, it could be also interesting for

the Breaking Isolation network to analyse and eventually carry on Test Actions on the potential impact of public space design and urban furniture. Indeed, during study visits, we came across, apparently anecdotal elements, but which caught our attention such as: face-to-face benches right outside the entrance of residential buildings (allowing neighbours from the building to sit and discuss together) in Roman, Romania or pedestrian areas and squares in Serres, Greece (combined with many café terraces which become highly social-life spots in the city).



Facing benches at the entrance of residential buildings
Roman, Romania



Retirement home
Tønder, Denmark



Liberty Square
Serres, Greece



OLD PEOPLE? NOT ONLY, EVERYONE CAN BE ISOLATED

Old people? Not only, everyone can be isolated.

As the World Health Organization claims, 'people across all age groups and all regions of the world are affected by loneliness and social isolation. Current global estimates suggest that 1 in 4 older adults experience social isolation and between 5 and 15 per cent of adolescents experience loneliness.' In France, a study has shown that 10 years ago, 2% of young people age 18 to 29 were socially isolated. In 2023, 13% of the same age group is considered isolated. That's more than 1 young adult out of 10...

Even though everyone can suffer from social isolation, the Tulane University highlights that certain groups face challenges that increase their risk for isolation and loneliness:

- Immigrants. Language barriers, cultural and economic challenges, and limited social ties can contribute to social isolation for immigrants.
- Marginalized groups. LGBTQIA people, people of color, and others who routinely face discrimination and stigma can feel socially isolated.
- Older adults. Older people often

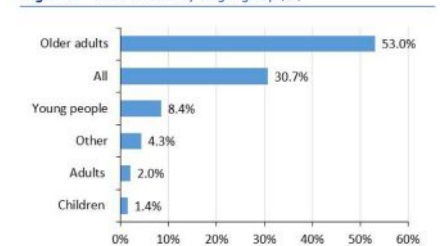
live alone. Hearing or vision loss can contribute to their social isolation.

Joint Research Center's findings on loneliness show that most interventions tend to be focussing on older people (more than half of interventions), while interventions dedicated to young people are about 8-9%.

Cities of the Breaking Isolation network should, in regard to the literature, avoid focussing specifically on older people only but rather develop interventions which benefit to all age groups, including young people.

Which groups do interventions target?

Figure 2 – Interventions by target group (%)

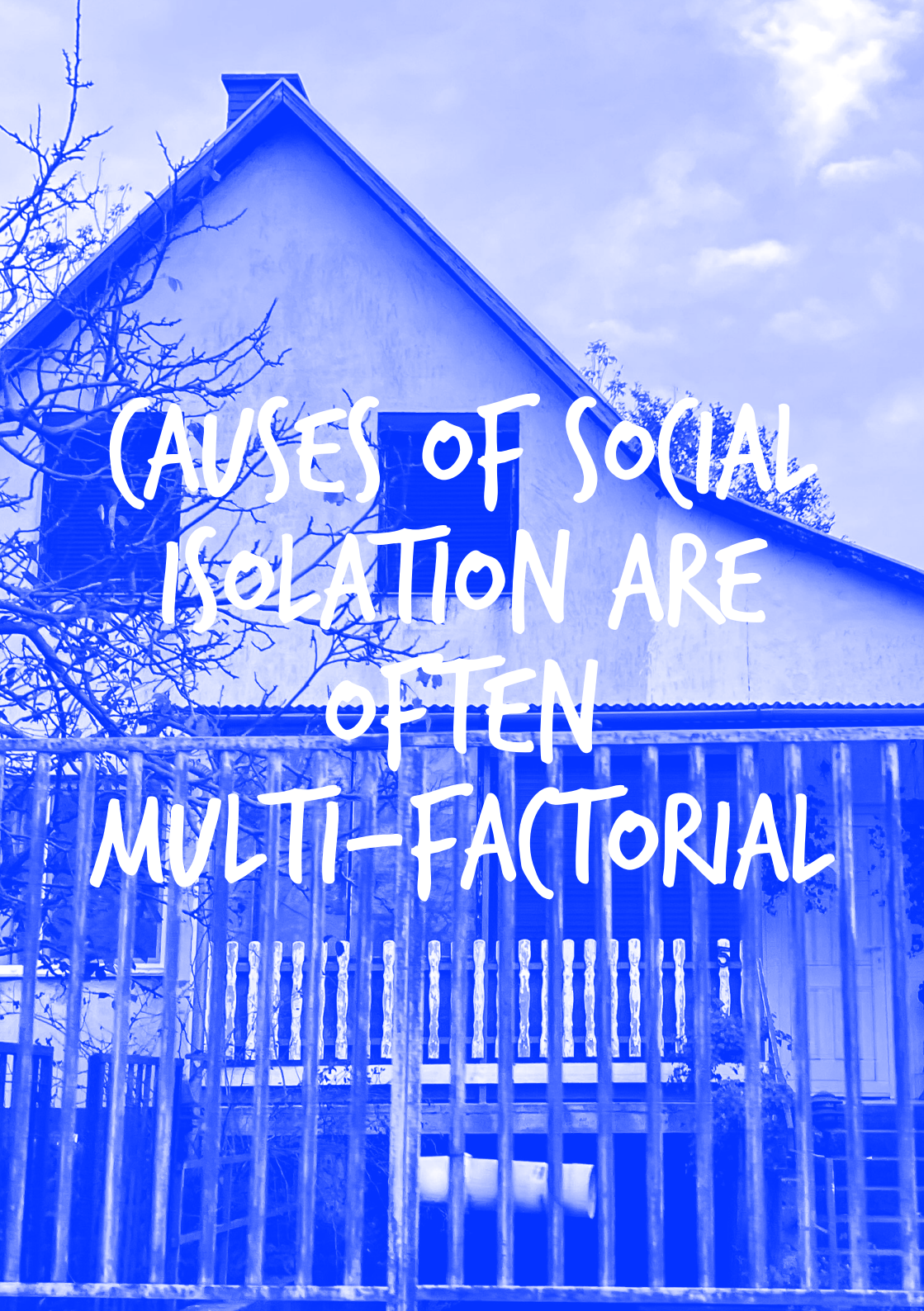


Note: each age group may include different age brackets. Hence, it is impossible to associate a precise age group to each target group. N=345 (some interventions included in several categories).

Joint Research Center, Mapping of loneliness interventions in the EU, Fairness policy brief, 6/2023



Migrants integration center
Isernia, Italy



CAUSES OF SOCIAL ISOLATION ARE OFTEN MULTI-FACTORIAL

Causes of social isolation are often multi-factorial

Anyone can suffer from social isolation. Yet, specific factors increase the risk of finding oneself in social isolation. Browsing through scientific literature and crossing findings with the interviews conducted with practitioners in the 10 Breaking Isolation network's cities of the network allow us to identify about 10 groups of causes.

Warning: it is important to note that the listed causes are not necessarily leading to social isolation, but, when combined, they tend to increase the risk of experiencing social isolation.

In no particular order, here are the 10 causes identified within Breaking Isolation:

- Death of a loved one or couple break up: even though this situation is commonly experienced in most people's life, the situation can provoke, for some people, severe distress, depression and isolation.

- Mental health issues: this category gathers all forms of mental illnesses and/or mental particularities (either

from birth or appearing in later stage of life) such as autism, asperger, bipolarity, schyzophrenia, etc. People living with those mental conditions often suffer stygma, discrimination and experience social exclusion.

- Physical impairments and long physical illness: physical handicaps (permanent or temporary) may reduce some people's ability to move and go out of their homes, often provoking a form of seclusion.

- Unemployment and pension: in a society where almost everything is built around work, people who are in situations of unemployment and/or pension may suffer from a feeling of uselessness, loss of confidence, and social inactivity. Moreover, unemployed people often face stygma and shame, while pensioners may experience a brutal break of nearly all of their social life (colleagues, clients, etc.) from the day of their retirement. Some people, in this category, find no more 'reason to wake up everyday'.

- Poverty: besides the strong social stygma and shame of being poor



in a society still largely focused on wealth-making, people living in poverty are focused on securing their primary needs (food, housing, water, etc.) and have little resource to dedicate to mundane socialization (going out, bar, restaurant, cinema, etc.).

- Intimate partner violence (domestic violence) often isolates victims. Indeed, perpetrators of domestic violence tend to isolate the victim from their own family and friends, and in some cases, the victim ends up isolating herself/himself because of fear to get outside the house and speak up about her/his situation.

- Remote location: living far from family and friends, either abroad or hundreds of kilometers away often increases risks of social isolation.

Similarly, living in a low density rural area, with no neighbour around, can increase the risk of isolation.

- Addictive use of social media: while social media can connect people and especially those who don't see each other often, addictive use of social media can reduce the amount of time that people spend outside and in real social environments that require direct face to face interaction. Addicted users may end up preferring digital interactions rather than having to manage real-world ones. Indeed, *'social media usage can help alleviate social isolation by connecting individuals because of their physical environment with others online. It can also facilitate the formation of support systems for individuals with rare or stigmatizing conditions. However,*

social media usage may also have negative impacts on social isolation by substituting social media usage for face-to-face social interactions, or by exposing individuals to unrealistic or distorted portrayals of connections' lives, leading to feelings of social isolation.'(Regis College). When it comes to *'young adults with high social media use seem to feel more socially isolated than their counterparts with lower social media use'*. (Primack, B. et al.).

- Addictions to drugs, alcohol and gambling: addictive behaviours, in general, tend to increase risk of isolation. When addictions are related to drugs, alcohol and gambling they tend to be even worse for social relations. Indeed, those addictions often modify reactions, mood, etc. (but also financial and health complications) and may lead to anti-social behaviours.

- Lack of social skills: not everyone is equally equipped with social skills when it comes to: empathy, attention, self-regulation or self-control, fluency, pertinence, concentration, open-mindedness, emotional stability, humor, etc. Those lacking of social skills often experience difficulties making new friends, maintaining relations, communicating with unfamiliar individuals (new people, strangers), etc. and might find themselves socially isolated.

According to the Joint Research Center, when designing policies to combat loneliness, the complex interrelation of factors of social isolation need to

be kept in mind.

'Indeed, addressing individual risk factors in isolation will not be enough to tackle loneliness, and more holistic solutions will be needed.' (Joint Research Center, 2022).



After school activities and work-shops dedicated to Roma kids, Pombal, Portugal



Residency and care center for people with mental disabilities Pombal, Portugal

WARNING SIGNS? HOW TO IDENTIFY A SOCIALLY ISO- LATED PERSON?

Warning signs? How to identify a socially isolated person?

According to the Tulane University's findings, following symptoms associated with social isolation are warning signs of unhealthy social isolation:

- Avoiding social interactions, including those that were once enjoyable
- Canceling plans frequently and feeling relief when plans are canceled
- Experiencing anxiety or panic when thinking about social interactions
- Feeling distress during periods of solitude
- Feeling dread associated with social activities
- Spending large amounts of time alone or with extremely limited contact with others.

On top of those signs, interviews conducted with field actors (health-care professionals, local police, nurses, social workers, etc.), during the Breaking Isolation Network's study visits in all 10 cities and countries highlighted the following behaviours of some isolated people :

- Being suspicious of new people and/or strangers

- Not letting anyone step inside their home
- Closing curtains and/or shutters of their home
- Neglecting personal hygiene
- Neglecting their home (accumulating mess, reduced cleaning)
- Neglecting their health (stop going to the doctor, not doing medical check-ups)
- Neglecting healthy food habits (proper nutrition, weight excessive loss or gain)

It is important to note that the behaviours described above may not strictly be attributed to social isolation, indeed, they may also reveal mental health disorders such as depression, diogenes syndrome, or other troubles.

An other difficulty is that socially isolated people don't necessarily identify themselves as socially isolated, indeed they often deny their situation (because of shame) and tend to convince themselves (and sometimes people around them) that their isolation is actually their choice, that they've decided to iso-



Social daycare center for elderly
Fot, Hungary

late and stop socializing. The problem is, then, that the less a person socializes, the less the person is able to trust social relations. This leads to a growing distrust towards everyone, even sometimes familiar/close relatives. And, inevitably, this reinforces even more the isolation of the person. Sometimes, this situation makes the isolated people become more and more 'sour' or 'cantankerous' when interacting with others.

As the situation deteriorates, the isolated person may become socially non-existent, meaning that he or she has no relation whatsoever anymore but also no one that care or worry for her/him. This extreme situation can lead to sad ending such as the one that took place in 2020 in the City of Agen, Lead partner of the Breaking Isolation Network, where a woman, 67 of age, was found dead in her apartment after 2 years. This story clearly demonstrates that the person had absolutely no relation with anyone and/or no one that would care and/or worry for her... Of course, this is the extreme end of the phenomenon but it is, unfortunately, less and less extraordinary. We therefore, need to better identify people suffering from social isolation, as early as possible.

How to know whether someone (or yourself) is socially isolated or not?

One of the finding of the study visits in our 10 network cities is the difficulty to recognize/assess social isolation. Crossing literature review findings and field observations, we tried to come up with 10 questions which could allow determining whether someone could be socially isolated or not. Those 10 questions try to measure the two aspects of social isolation, meaning both quantity and quality of relations:

1. Do you have family and/or friends that you're close to?

Yes - no

Are you satisfied with this level?

2. How often do you talk to them? (Either by phone or physically)

Everyday, once every couple of days, once a week, once a month, less...

Are you satisfied with this level?

3. How often do you get to talk to other people (either neighbors, shop owners, postman, doctor, others)?

Everyday, once every couple of days, once a week, once a month, less...

Are you satisfied with this level?

4. How often do you spend time with people (either friends, colleagues (outside of work), family or others)?

Everyday, once every couple of days, once a week, once a month, less...

Are you satisfied with this level?

5. How often do you invite/have people over to your place?

Once a week (or more), once a month, every couple of months, once a year, less than once a year

Are you satisfied with this level?

6. When was the last time you joined a cultural event (either concert, event, exhibition or other cultural activity)?

Last week, last month, last year, several years ago

Are you satisfied with this level?

7. When was the last time you took part to a social event with friends and/or family (either birthday, wedding, etc.)?

Last week, last month, last year, several years ago

Are you satisfied with this level?

8. According to you, how many people can you count on/rely on?

None, one, a couple, more than 5

Are you satisfied with this level?

9. From your point of view, how many people care for you?

None, one, a couple, more than 5
Are you satisfied with this level?

10. How many people can you talk to about your problems/difficulties (to confide to)?

None, one, a couple, more than 5
Are you satisfied with this level?

These 10 questions could potentially allow us to better diagnose someone's situation and could be eventually tried out as a 'testing action' within the breaking isolation network.



Social daycare center for elderly,
Jumilla, Spain





SOCIAL ISOLATION KILLS

Social isolation is psychologically harmful.

Social isolation is not just a situation in which a person find himself/herself lonely but a situation of (conscious or unconscious) suffering due to the long term deficiency of social relations. One could think, naturally, that this suffering resembles a long-term depression, but it can actually lead to mental illness. Indeed, a study conducted on a 10 year period with over 12 000 people demonstrated that **loneliness is associated with a 40% increased risk of dementia.** (Sutin AR.).

Social isolation might even kill you, prematurely

While social isolation is almost always looked at through its psychological effects, studies show that it might also have severe physical effects. This might appear rather surprising but recent findings suggest that deficiencies in social relationships are associated with an increased risk of developing **coronary heart disease and stroke** (Valtorta NK et al.). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the risk of heart stroke and disease is increased by 30%. Moreover, studies indicate that **the influence of social relationships on the risk of death are comparable with well-established risk factors for mortality such as smoking and alcohol consumption and exceed the influence of other risk factors such as physical inactivity and obesity** (Holt-Lunstad J.). WHO estimates the risk of early

death from social isolation to rise by 25%.

How is that possible?

According to Julianne Holt-Lunstad and her co-researchers, *'social relationships are linked to better health practices and to psychological processes, such as stress and depression, that influence health outcomes in their own right; however, the influence of social relationships on health cannot be completely explained by these processes, as social relationships exert an independent effect. Reviews of such findings suggest that there are multiple biologic pathways involved (physiologic regulatory mechanisms, themselves intertwined) that in turn influence a number of disease endpoints'*.

In other words, quantitative and qualitative social relations are key for the well-being of people, both in terms of psychological and physical well-being. During study visits, we exchanged with people who took part to socialization activities and all said: 'if we were not here, we'd be at home, alone, watching TV. Here, we socialize, talk, share, laugh, play. We keep our brains active. We dress up, we get ready to go out. We have something to do'.

Social isolation not only kills prematurely, but *'also have significant impacts on social cohesion and community trust'* (EU Commission, 2022).



University of Seniors,
Pombal, Portugal

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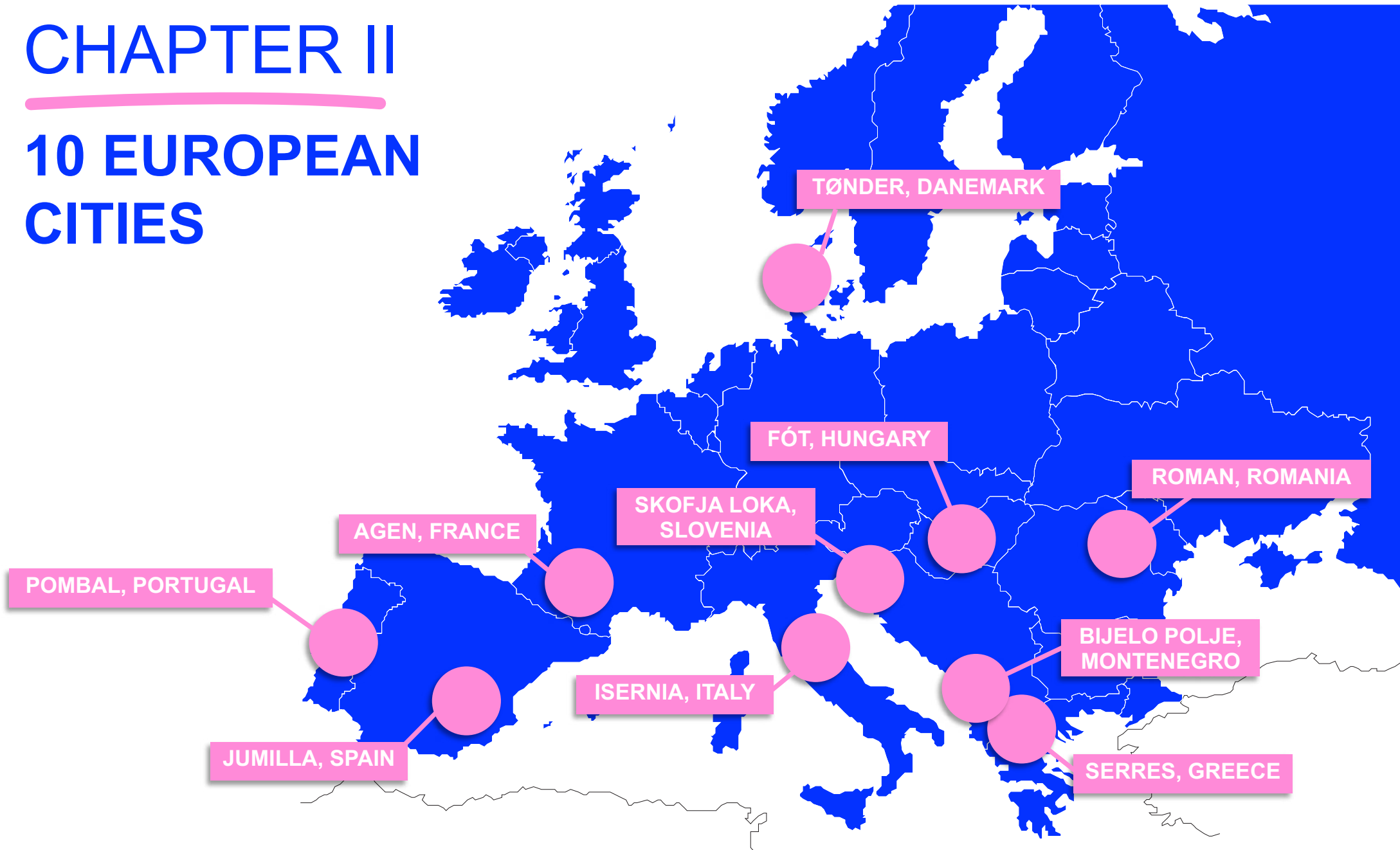
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CHAPTER II

10 EUROPEAN CITIES





STUDY VISITS AND CITY PROFILES

10 study visits, in 10 European countries in 4 months: An non-exhaustive review of practices

Study visits are an integral part of the URBACT journey and in particular of the initial activation phase. Study visits allow the Lead Expert and Lead Partner to go to every city within the network and assess their existing practices, current challenges, past experience, inspiring cases, etc. They allow Lead Expert and Lead Partner to take a picture of the situation in each city before starting testing actions and co-creating Integrated Action Plans.

Study visits are important because they are also the occasion to meet with local stakeholders/potential ULG members, civil servants and elected officials (including mayors). Meeting with the people of the project, behind the project and around the project, allow Lead Expert and Lead Partner to better assess the strength of every city (or potential risks and weaknesses).

Study visits are very intense, dense and rich in terms of rhythm but primarily in terms of quantity of information we gathered, people we met, pictures we took, notes we wrote, etc. Just to give some numbers: we met over

400 people throughout the 10 cities, I wrote, as Lead Expert, about 250 pages of notes and took 1155 pictures... Not only it is impossible to share everything we've seen, discussed and captured, but it would not be digestible anyway. So, in the following section of the Baseline Study, I tried to focus on sharing only the highlights of what I have seen in each city as most interesting practices, in other words, the things that caught my attention.

This means that the following city profiles are not an exhaustive review of what every city does but what I considered, as Lead Expert, particularly worth sharing with everyone.

Note: When conducting the study visits, we got, together with the Lead Partner, Nicolas Castet, confused by the different names given to similar or sometimes different services. In particular, Social Centre, which depending on the country either refer to a community space for socialization or to the centre where a person can receive its social allowance/social benefits. To avoid confusion, social centres which are community space for socialization, are referred to as 'socialization centre' in the following city profiles.

Agen, France



Country = France
Region = Nouvelle Aquitaine
Province = Lot et Garonne
Area = 11,49 km²
Population = 33 299 hab
Population density = 2 898 hab/km²

The City of Agen (Fr), Lead Partner of the network and responsible for proposing the topic of social isolation, has several public services and interventions which – directly and indirectly – tackle social isolation but also a great number of very active local NGOs/associations who deliver precious social activities. It is important to mention that France is amongst the highest country in terms of social spending and welfare. Here is a highlight of a few cases.

SOCIAL CENTRES (CENTRES SOCIAUX)

The City of Agen manages 3 public social centres: Maison pour tous St Exupery, Maison Montesquieu, and Maison pour tous de La Masse. Social centres can be found in many cities all over France, but what are they for? On paper, social centres are meant to be community centres, open to everyone, which offers social, edu-

cational and cultural activities proposed by volunteer citizens.

The objective is to respond to the needs of the inhabitants and to stimulate social cohesion and community harmony. In theory, they are supposed to be supported by cities but co-managed by inhabitants so as to make them actors of the social centres. In practice, social centres offer plenty of activities, from small crafting workshops (knitting, painting, photography, etc.), but also games, sport activities and cultural outings. Thanks to this agenda, dozens of people come every week or even every day to the social centres.

In Agen, the 3 social centres are in 3 different neighbourhood so as to cover a larger geographical area but also offer activities to 3 rather popular neighbourhoods. Social centres prevent social isolation for many people, including retired and/or unemployed people. However, due

to their 'social' dimension, in France, they are often perceived by most of the population (at least the ones who know of the place – many don't) as reserved to vulnerable people or, in general, 'people with problems'.

Despite their image, social centres are a precious resource to fight and/or prevent social isolation and in particular when they propose activities outside the walls of the centres, directly in public space, such as the Ludotheque (toy library) which takes place every wednesday morning in July and August on a public square in the city. Kids and parents can participate for a few minutes or for hours and play together in public space with the support of a 'game squad' (game moderators) from the social centre.

Social centres are good tools to prevent social isolation and could definitely be taken to the next level (esp. in reaching out to more people and empowering them).

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT ACCESS CENTRE (MISSION LOCALE)

Missions Locales, as they are called in France (meaning 'Local Mission'), are centres dedicated to the NEETs youth from age 16 to 25. NEETs? It's an acronym to designate people who are «Not in Education, Employment, or Training». Youth Employment Access Centres (or Missions Locales) are therefore meant to provide to young people either opportunities of training or of accessing jobs. But besides accessing training or employ-

ment, the Missions Locales play a key role in ensuring that the young people don't enter in social isolation.

By listening to them, spending time advising them, making them meet with other young people, etc. we reduce their risk of isolation. We often see young people as a very social group, with plenty of friends, activities, etc. but, in reality, 'many young people have no friends nor buddies' explains Eric Bacqua, the President of the Mission Locale of Agen. Amongst the youth who go to the Mission Locale, some dropped out of schools, many have no diploma, no work experience, a couple got out of jail, some just don't know what to do... And when you take in consideration that some of them have no relation with their families, you can see that they cumulate several factors of risk of isolation (see page 35). Regarding numbers, the Mission Locale of Agen, receives about 1000 young people per year.

Even though Youth Employment Access Centres are mostly meant to break social isolation through employment and training, they also organize group activities meant to stimulate social links. Further work with them could be considered within the Breaking Isolation network.

FAMILY HELP AND SUPPORT ASSOCIATION - AFDAS (ASSOCIATION FAMILIALE DÉPARTEMENTALE D'AIDE ET DE SOUTIEN)

The AFDAS is an association, created



The Mission Locale of Agen helps young people avoid isolation by finding trainings, internships and jobs but also collective socializing activities Agen, France





Family Help and Support Association - AFDAS, Agen, France

37 years ago which offers multiples services: a 'ressourcerie' (recovery center and second hand shop), a solidarity grocery store (and food bank), social activities and events, and a children daycare center. The association has 52 employees and 6 300 beneficiaries. The food bank benefits 1800 people (including 300 families who receive emergency food support). Besides from benefiting from 'cheap' objects from the second hand shop and food bank, people also come to the association's centre to socialize. Every morning, people can come for a Welcome Coffe (they organize about 190 Welcome Coffee per year). The concept of the morning coffee is to reduce the stigma of coming to a second hand shop and food bank.

'About a fourth of our beneficiaries of the food bank are socially isolated: we have freshly retired people age 65-70 with quite low pension, we have more and more young people including students, undocumented, young migrants, new people arriving to Agen age 30-55, some people living isolated with no neighbours around, single-parents, etc.' explains Sylvie Lagouarde, deputy director of AFDAS.

'BUILDING CARERS' OF AGEN SOCIAL HOUSING (AGEN HABITAT)

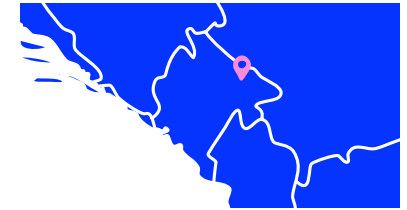
While social housing (apartments and houses with reduced rents for people with low income) is rather a common practice which can be found pretty much everywhere throughout

Europe, in Agen, a particularly interesting practice stroke Nicolas Castet (Lead Partner) and I (Lead Expert): the 'Building carer' ('Agent d'immeuble' in french). Translating the concept is quite tricky as it is not a classic job... But what we could call a 'building carer' is a person who combines different roles: the roles of custodian, janitor and 'concierge' but also of a social caretaker who is looking after its residents. To simplify, 'building carers' take care of both the building and its residents. In Agen, there are 10 'building carers' who each care for 150 apartments. They check if everything is alright regarding facilities/commodities and check if residents have special needs/requests.

'It's a plus if the building carer is a handyman but what matters the most to me is that they have great social skills and know their residents' explains the Director of Agen Habitat, Jean Bizet. Part of their job is to check if everyone is fine: one month after the arrival of a new resident in an apartment, they (including the director) do a courtesy visit to verify that the resident is well settled and has no special need or issue.

'We ask them if they have family and/or friends, etc.' comments the director, and 'our building carers are checking on people: they give phone calls to the residents they have not seen for a while or directly knock at their doors, they check if the mails are regularly taken from the mail-boxes, they take news from those

Bijelo Polje, Montenegro



Country = Montenegro
Region = Center of the north-eastern region of Montenegro
Area = 924 km²
Population = 15 447 hab
Population density = 17 hab/km²

The municipality of Bijelo Polje is offering a couple of services to directly and indirectly prevent social isolation, mostly targeting elderly people and, until now, to a rather limited number of people. It is important to take in consideration that Montenegro has the lowest GDP amongst the 10 countries of the Breaking Isolation network. This means that in comparison with France, Italy and Denmark (which all have very high social welfare), Montenegro has lower social spending capacity. However, interesting practices have been seen and are highlighted below:

MULTIPLYING PROXIMITY SOCIALIZATION SPACES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE HOME FOR ELDERLY BIJELO POLJE

Established in 2010, the Home for Elderly Bijelo Polje, at first sight, seems rather classic. A large building, 200 beds, a regular section and a specia-

lized one dedicated to residents with dementia, and one for geriatrics. First element that you can't miss when going there is that the building next door is a hospital. Of course, in case of need, residents don't have to go far and can be quickly taken care of. But what is particularly striking is to be found inside the walls... in the architecture itself of the building.

Indeed, in order to limit the construction costs, they decided to design rooms so that each bed room would host 2 residents together. Of course, you are never really alone since you have a permanent roommate (so that necessarily reduces the risk of isolation) but what is more interesting is that in between each two rooms, they've installed small living room units. Instead of having only a single vast common area (which they also have), residents socialize in those small living rooms which are connecting two bedrooms, so 4 people together. So instead of having

one or two socialization spaces like you would find in most retirement homes, at the Home for Elderly Bijelo Polje, you have dozens of living rooms. This very unique feature offers small socialization units, instead of huge, coldy and impersonal spaces. Residents socialize, on the couch, with their direct neighbours, watch tv together, discuss, etc.

Besides this architectural feature, residents, of course, benefit from a lot of social activities which include: family visits (encouraged by the nursing staff), dining together, occupational therapy, but also going out to take part to cultural events of the city (Films, Jazz Festival, Literature Festival, Folklore festival, etc.), visits to children kindergarden, Chess tournaments (organized by a NGO), barbecue outside in the garden, live music, inter-city visits with other nursing homes, hair-dressing, tailor, etc.

Obviously, not everyone takes part, 'we have 5-6 people, out of the 150 residents we have at the moment, who are isolate themselves totally, they refuse to socialize, to talk to their roomates or take part to activities. Of course, we provide psycho-social support to try to get them out of their isolation and push them, gently, towards activities, making sure we don't put any pressure on them' explains the director.

TELECARE SERVICES

In 2021, the Municipality of Bijelo Polje supported the Home for el-

derly in Bijelo Polje to take part in a cross-border EU project to develop and establish telecare services for elderly people living at home.

The service offered daily 24h service and regular home visits. During the project, 15 people from Bijelo Polje (Montenegro) and 15 people from Novi Pazar (Serbia) benefited from the service. Elderly people were equipped and trained to use a dedicated tablet and smartwatch.

Services were provided by a joint team of psychologists, sociologists, and doctors who monitored their vital functions on daily basis through the smartwatches worn by the beneficiaries. The 30 elderly people were identified by the social centers of the two partnering municipalities. In total, 150 homes visits were provided to the 15 elderly people of Bijelo Polje.

The idea? To provide social support, to avoid social isolation and distress, and eventually reduce the needs for hospital visits (thanks to the supervision of vital functions). 'If a participating elderly person did not call us, we would, in any case, call them every day. Participants could also discuss with one another using the tablet. And we did home visits twice a month.' explains the project coordinator, Slobodanka Prebiračević.

During the project and its evaluation, cross-border meetings were conducted on a regular basis with Novi Pazar in Serbia. In the end, the project proved its added value for all elder-



Telecare services, Bijelo Polje, Montenegro



Nursing home of Staracki Dom, Bijelo Polje, Montenegro



Social centre for elderly,
Bijelo Polje, Montenegro

ly people, and in particular with the lowest rate of social relations (the more isolated ones).

At the end of the project, of course, it was a bit of a struggle because the 15 elderly people passed from a video phone call a day to none... This project is interesting for the Breaking Isolation Network as it highlights the benefits of light interventions such as quick phone calls from the Telecare Center, but also, the other way around, the possibility for elderly people to contact the Telecare Centre in one click (with the tablet or smartwatch), and get someone to see and talk to.

DAILY CARE CENTRE FOR ELDERLY

Downtown Bijelo Polje is a place which also helps breaking social isolation: a small social centre for elderly people. Opened in 2021, the space is accessible to everyone, 'even though, until now, only women come' explains a civil servant. Indeed, 12 women come everyday from Monday to Friday to socialize. What do they do? Read, talk, knit, play games, sing, dance, story telling, etc. 'They also, sometimes, organize themselves some trips to the sea side' comments a civil servant. The place offers a nurse, ensuring psycho-social support and a lunch. Eating together appears as one of the key socializing moment. The place being still quite recent, members mostly heard of it through mouth-to-ear. First members convinced their friends or their

neighbours to come, and that's how this group came together.

'This project saved me as I was really socially isolated', comments a member. 'My husband died in June 2023, and I was alone, felt really depressed, then I joined the 'team' a month ago' explains an other participant. 'We are like family here', 'we care for each other' add others. 'What is also important is that I am preparing myself to come here, I dress up, like I would do to come for work' explains a new member who retired some months ago.

This small social centre, inspiring as it is, seems to lack of number of people and also of men. 'We should try to motivate single men who do not have partners to come here, but they are afraid to join all of us women' jokes a member.

Should this place host more people, be bigger then? 'Well, I think it's better to multiply this type of places, I think, rather than make a single big one' suggests a member. 'An other issue is the diversity of people, we are all educated women so maybe this can be a barrier' adds a member.

This small social unit definitely prevents social isolation by providing a convivial friendly space for people, and it's definitely worth exploring, in the Breaking Isolation network, how it could be extended, opened up, or replicated.

Fót, Hungary



Country = Hungary
Region = Pest
Province = Dunakeszi
Area = 37,40 km²
Population = 21 400 hab
Population density = 561 hab/km²

The Municipality of Fót has the particularity, in comparison to the others cities of the network to be a suburban city of Budapest. This is an important element because a lot of people from Fót work and/or study in Budapest but also go there for a lot of cultural and social activities. This dimension is important to be taken into account when analyzing existing practices and offers from Fót. In particular, 'rich people of Fót and poor ones, who live both in segregated districts don't necessarily participate to the community life' explains the Chief of Staff.

HEALTH CARE FOR SMALL CHILDREN AND PREGNANT COUPLES

Within the interesting practices from Fót, there are the health care services for small children and pregnant couples. Indeed, the nurse service is a place where 'families can share their problems' explains Ildikó Laczkó, the

representative of nurse service. 'We have 7 nurses who each follow about 200 kids from age 0 to 6, we follow about 160 families. The objective of the service? To make sure parents and especially single parents are not isolated. 'Indeed, sometimes, single parents can be at risk of social isolation, even though, until now, most of our single parents still benefit from the help of their own parents and/or friends.' explains Ildikó. 'But we have some mothers who experience loneliness in their own homes... Because their husbands come home from work and spend the evening on their phone on Facebook'.

In order to support young mothers/parents, there are two clubs: one which takes place at the municipality library and one in the cultural centre. The first one is a sort of shared playground and the second one focuses, every week, on a specific topic. There are about 25 people per club, and they meet weekly.

Regarding social isolation, nurses do what they call a 'mood test' in which they try to assess the psychological well-being of parents. Even though it is not focussed on evaluating social isolation, this could be a potential experimentation within the Breaking Isolation network...

'More and more people addicted by social media, and this increases the risk of isolation, we see it more and more even within families' expresses Ildikó. Clearly, this question of addictive use of social media, already identified within the causes of isolation, see page 35, will need to be taken into account within the network.

CENTRE FOR SENIOR CITIZENS CLUB (TERÜLETI GONDOZÁSI KÖZPONT IDŐSEK KLUBJA)

Created 42 years ago, the Senior Citizens Club gathers about 40 elderly people from Fót. Almost all of them are women, and mostly widowed or divorced. Nearly all of them live alone.

In the Senior Citizens Club, elderly members socialize. Opened from Monday to Friday, from morning to lunch, members come to chat, play cards, do gym, do music, danse, have lunch together, etc. but also go out together on trips, as well as shopping, exhibitions, etc.

How to join the centre? 'I joined the club 10 years ago, at that time I was told about the club by a friend and her son', says a member. 'Me, I joined 18 years ago, I'm the oldest member, the

club was recommended by a former work colleague of mine' comments another one. A few came to the club on the recommendations of their nurses, sometimes of staff from the municipality.

Here, 'we also have some cross-generational programme, including cake preparation with children from the kindergarden, secondary school students who come and help our members, etc.' comments an employee. 'We have beauty programmes to take care of ourselves, once per month we have the priest, and a policeman who come to give information, share advices, etc. We have literature day, many things' explains an employee. In total, the place is managed by 5 full time employees, and a couple of volunteers (esp. in charge of transportation, lunch, etc.).

Do members meet outside the club? 'Yes, we celebrate birthdays, some of us gather for the new year party, etc.' comments a member.

The Centre for senior citizens club is clearly, both because of its longevity (and members who've been there for more than 15 years) and its number of members prove to be an efficient place to prevent social isolation. Could this place be replicated, multiplied? This could be explored within the Breaking Social Isolation network.



Nursing services,
Fót, Hungary



Senior Citizens Club,
Fót, Hungary



HAJRÁ FÓT!

Gyere, és sportolj az FSE-ben!



FÓT SPORTEGYESÜLET



Fót Sports Association (Fót SE),
Fót, Hungary



SPORTS AS A SOCIALIZATION LEVERAGE (FÓT SPORTS ASSOCIATION, FÓT SPORTEGYESÜLET)

When working on social isolation, one might forget that, often, sports, can play a big role, besides being healthy, for community building and socialization. 'Through sports, people get a healthier body, a healthier mental state, a mood boost (reducing depression and/or burnout), but also make friends.' explains Sándor Szkala, deputy director of the association.

The Fót Sports Association gathers 14 different sports (from fencing to handball, football to basketball, judo to athletics, tennis, etc.), and 90% of its members are amateurs, including about 700 young people below 19 years old.

Besides the sports clubs, the association itself proposes plenty of socialization activities which includes summer camps but also family events. 'We also have a walking group of about 50 people, including 15 who walk together every weekend, for 2 hours, each time somewhere different. They are between 40 and 70 years old', explains Sándor.

'We also have a senior football team of about 50-60 people, and we always party together after games... Clearly, in this case, the socialization part is key. Even the players who don't play anymore (because they're too old) still come to the games and the parties. When we play at home, we cook all together after the games.' adds the

deputy director, who is part of this senior team.

This sports association highlights the importance of indirect solutions to prevent social isolation, whether it be sports, or culture, or anything else as a matter of fact, as long as it brings people together.

Isernia, Italy



Country = Italy
Region = Molise
Province = Isernia
Area = 68,74 km²
Population = 21 594 hab
Population density = 314 hab/km²

The Municipality of Isernia has several interesting practices which directly or indirectly help tackle social isolation. In particular, it covers quite well a large spectrum of profiles of people at risk of isolation, from elderly to disabled person to migrants, etc. Here is only a small sample of cases:

SOCIALIZATION CENTRE FOR ELDERLY (CENTRO SOCIALE SABINO D'ACUNTO)

The socialization centre for elderly of Isernia, created about 30 years ago, gathers around 175 members with about 30 to 50 of them coming everyday. 'I don't like the term of 'old people or elderly' because you can come to the centre as early as 55 years old, so you're not old' comments the president of the centre. The place is open every day from 15:30 to 20:00. 'And some days, it's also opened for dance class' adds the president, Sara Ferri.

The place is owned by the municipality of Isernia but the centre is run entirely by a team of 7 volunteers. Activities are self financed, thanks to the membership fees. 50€/year if the member lives in the municipality and 60€/year if the person lives outside the municipality (in the province).

In practice, the place is equipped with furniture given by the municipality, but 'we also get some furniture by our members who donate stuff'.

In terms of activities, the centre offers different classes and leisure activities such as billiard, card playing, computer science, danse, tai chi, art, movies, karaoke, bal, lacework, etc. Classes are given by volunteers. For example, 'we have an english class, given by a retired english teacher. She is a widow and when she came to us she was feeling depressed, so we gave her the chance of giving english class at the centre' explains Sara Ferri.

When asking our traditional question 'If you were not here in this place, where would you be and what would you do?' members replied: 'we'd be at home in front of TV', 'doing nothing at home'. 'Here, we go out, we socialize. We meet new here.'

Once more, this socialization centre, similarly to the ones we came across in other cities, confirm its added value regarding the prevention of social isolation. So the questions we could ask ourselves are: How do we open up these places even more to new people? How do we multiply these centres and in particular to all age range, not just elderly? How do we bring in people who are isolated and don't naturally show up? How do we make sure it does not only gather people who are (and were) already very social? Those are a few questions that will be interesting to explore within the network and especially UR-BACT local groups...

COOPERATIVE SUPPORTING PEOPLE SUFFERING DISCRIMINATION (IL GECO)

The cooperative Il Geco, created in 2016, was founded by 9 associations (NGOs) who decided to team up to offer to people who suffer discrimination a better chance to integrate in society. Today, about 30 to 40 NGOs gravitate around the cooperative.

The mission of the cooperative? To create/find jobs for people and to alleviate people in need. In practice?

We develop all sorts of support for migrants, rom people, LGBT people, etc. 'One of the first project was to create a care centre for migrants, combined with a residency' explains a member of the cooperative. 'It is fundamental to accompany people who need rescue with all sorts of support: from offering them instruction, finding companies wishing to employ migrant workers, providing voluntary work, supporting families in need, etc.'

They are about 50 people working on different projects. There is 1 president (full time worker) and about 40 employees, freelancers and external providers (like the canteen), ranging from: cultural mediators, psychologists, lawyers, social workers, guardians, interpreters, italian teachers, doctors, etc. The cooperative is financed, for the most part, by the State Aid Ministry of Interior.

'One of the most visible thing we do is to offer housing. In Isernia, we have 82 migrants living in our residency (15 of them are 16 years old, the oldest is 50, and the average around 20 years old) and about 300 living in our 5 different housing centres in the region'. 'Migrants stay about 6 months in our residency and we help them find a job and get all their papers in order.' comments a team member. In the residency of Isernia, the building is composed of 5 floors with two apartments per floor. Each apartment hosts about 6 to 10 people in shared rooms.

'When I arrived I was very isolated,



Socialization centre for elderly (Centro Sociale Sabino D'Acunto), Isernia, Italy



Il Geco Cooperative, Isernia, Italy



Theater Association (Compagnia CAST), Isernia, Italy

because of language, of different culture, but thanks to this cooperative, I've been able to socialize, to make new friends. I'm now in a school to be a chef', comments a migrant supported by the cooperative. 'This place has become my new family' adds another.

Regarding LGBT, we mobilize associations to offer psychological support, legal assistance with lawyers, mutual help groups, etc.

Whether it is for migrants or LGBT or Rom people, 'the work of the cooperative is appreciated because we do a lot of activities and events outside, in public space, we push our beneficiaries to socialize with people outside the centre, in the city. 'People who used to insult me, have later on apologized, and became friends of mine. They were racist and are not anymore' explains, with a lot of wisdom, a young migrant. 'In case of need, we are strong on taking legal courts/ fights to combat discrimination.' adds the president.

Il Geco is without any doubt a very inspiring case for taking people out of isolation (in particular people who are at risk of isolation because of discrimination).

THEATER ASSOCIATION - (COMPAGNIA CAST)

CAST was created in 2001 as a theater association. They offer theater classes to kids, teens and adults. About 50 to 60 people benefits from

their classes at the moment. 'We also give classes to mentally disabled people of the cooperative Il Geco' explains the director.

Does CAST only for theatre amateurs or does it also touch people who are isolated? 'Actually, we do have a good number of members who come take theater classes with us following a recommendation of their psychologists to socialize!' answers the director. 'Here, we offer a safe zone, without judgements, so it is a good place for people to open up. Theater opens you up. Last Sunday, we had a meeting in which we asked members why they do theater... and most of them answered because they were shy...' explains the director.

'When you do theater exercise, they are so strange and ridicule that it helps everyone feel ridicule but also find ways of expressing things in different ways... onomatopoeia exercises help develop invented language and ways of communicating even if you don't understand words, sounds and gestures help' comments XXXXX.

The CAST association has also carried experimentations with neurology center to practice theater with patients suffering parkinson and alzheimer (and results showed that people felt better), but also theater with prisoners, etc.

The association is not directly targeting social isolation but can clearly help in getting out of isolation, in developing social skills, reconstructing

Jumilla, Spain



Country = Spain
Region = Murcia
Province = Altiplano murciano
Area = 972 km²
Population = 26 596 hab
Population density = 27 hab/km²

The Municipality of Jumilla, Spain, is a rather rural municipality with one main town (Jumilla) and 9 villages. Most of the land of the municipality is composed of agricultural lands and mountains. The study visit in Jumilla was limited to the main town, which already held a good number of promising practices when it comes to break social isolation.

SOCIAL LABORATORY

The Social Laboratory was started in 2010 as an experiment of social services. The aim? Developing self-development.

Since its launch, about 11 groups have been constituted. The beneficiaries of the programme are people of all ages, with an average age of about 50 years old. The beneficiaries can join groups of 8-10 people and engage in the programme for at least one year. These groups include both

beneficiaries and social workers. Each social worker is in charge of 20 people and offer the beneficiaries to join a social lab based on their profiles and readiness.

The social workers bring different topics based on the needs of the group. The main objective of the group is self-development, and the dynamics of the group play a crucial role in achieving this objective.

But what are those groups doing? 'All sorts of activities, for example, we had a group of 10 people who prepared a theater piece based on the life experience of a woman who was part of the group. The play focused on gender violence and was shown in front of an audience of 200 people' explains the social worker.

There is a social lab specifically for beneficiaries with toxicomania issues, although this topic is not explicitly discussed or brought forward as

the element which unifies the group.

'Groups meet every week for a period of 4 months, but we also have some groups who last more than 20 sessions. Each session lasts for 2 hours' describes the social worker.

During the sessions, the activities vary based on the agreed programme. They typically start with a calming moment, such as mindfulness meditation. Then, depending on the group, the activity is different. For example, we used the Tree of Life, Arbol de Vida, in which, session after session, beneficiaries are invited to reflect, create, and share: their current situation (earth/ground), then their emotions (solitude, sadness, etc.), their personal strengths/skills (trunk of the tree), their personal history (roots of the tree), their wishes and hopes (fruits of the tree), etc. Background music is played during the sessions. 'As the sessions go, we see some people who start to open-up and share their stories (for example of domestic violence)' explains a social worker.

The lab emphasizes both tasks and process, with activities and punctuality being important, as well as the level of participation and the feeling of safety within the group. At the beginning of the process, participants write a letter to themselves expressing their wishes for the process, which is shared at the end of the programme once trust has been built among the members.

'The social workers sometimes introduce small conflicts within the group to observe how members react and solve problems, as it is a crucial part of the learning process' comments the social worker.

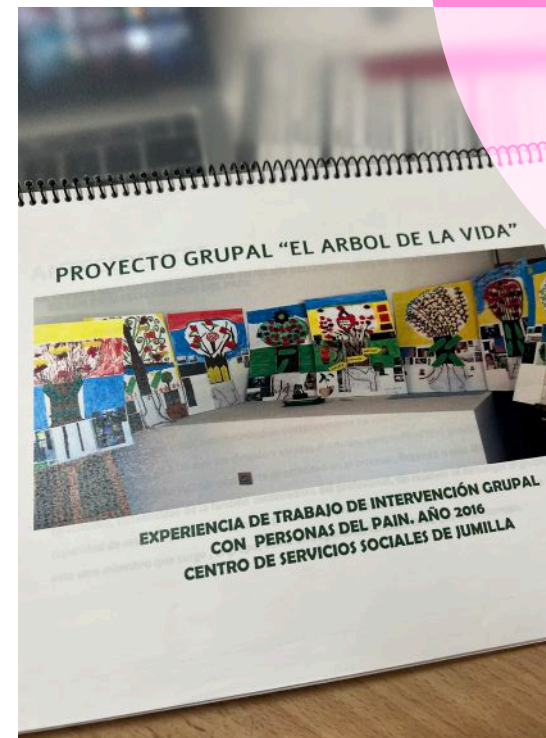
'Social labs can fail' adds the social worker, but, what is interesting is that it is a collective process and experiment. 99% of the time, support provided by social public services are individual, here there is a group dynamic, and a socialization dimension... which makes this case particularly relevant and inspiring for the Breaking Isolation Network.

DAYCARE CENTRE FOR ELDERLY (CENTRO DE DIA DE PERSONAS MAYORES JUMILLA)

When we entered the place, we saw groups of men playing dominos, then a group of women lacing, and a mixed group doing memory games... Plenty of people all over the place. One common feature? Grey hair.

We are in the Daycare Centre for Elderly of Jumilla. A place created 50 years ago and established to provide leisure activities for elderly retired individuals aged 60 and above.

So what are people doing here? They socialize. There are 25 workshops run by tutors, with two types: volunteer tutors (16) and paid tutors (9) funded by the social action Murcia institute. The volunteer ones (often retired people) offer workshops on things they love and master (either because it's their





Daycare centre for elderly (Centro de día de personas mayores Jumilla) Jumilla, Spain

passion or because of their past professional experience) and paid tutors offer professional/more specific services, such as Pilates, Zumba, yoga, tai chi, memory stimulation, cognitive stimulation, and music therapy.

At the beginning of the year, people can register for workshops. 'All rooms are utilized constantly' comments the director.

What is particularly striking is the number of people everywhere. It resembles a bee hive. 'Well, we have a total of 3500 members, with 1000 active members.' explains the director. The centre is opened from Monday to Sunday from 9:00 to 20:00, excluding Saturdays. No wonder this place looks so incredibly lively. 'Many come a couple of times per week, but we also have approximately 250 people who come at the center daily', explains the director. They participate in workshops, engage in game activities, etc. 'Many individuals stay before and after their workshops to socialize over coffee/tea or breakfast' she adds.

There must a very big team to run such a place? 'We are 4 employees of the municipality. 1 director, 1 social worker and 2 janitors.' responds the director. 'Besides the workshops which are self-managed either by volunteers or by contracted teachers, and which are totally free for members, services such as the bar, hairdresser, feet doctor, and trips are not free, though they are offered at low prices. The bar is operated as a

private business. The centre is managed by two bodies, us, the public service, and a board consisting of six elected members of the centre.' explains the director.

The centre is fully funded by regional funds. The budget for the center is €120,000 per year, not including Human Resources costs.

Is this a place to prevent social isolation? Well, it is its main focus. Socialize and enjoy. Besides workshops you can follow, you can come and chill for a beer at the bar, but also play snooker, cards, dominos, or participate to the dozens of special events and activities they propose, from concerts, to films, and finally, trips (of one day or of a week – those are organized by external private companies –). 'The center aims to prevent social isolation by encouraging people to leave their homes and interact with others.' comments the director, before adding 'some people come here and only play dominos, for them, it's their primary social activity, outside the centre, they don't necessarily have social activities'.

How could we bring this centre to a next stage (knowing it is already very impressive as it is)? 'We could use extra Human Resources, eventually get additional space, and offer a greater variety of workshops' responds the director.

The Centro de Dia de Personas Mayores de Jumilla, might be the most impressive social centre we've

met in all 10 cities, both in terms of number of participants as well as number of activities and workshops.

This place is, without a doubt, a very inspiring case for the Breaking Isolation network.

SUPPORT TO KIDS & ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES

Studies have shown (see page 35) that people, regardless of their age, who suffer from mental health issues but also physical impairments/disabilities, might experience (if eventually combined with others factors) social isolation. Developing dedicated services and support for them is therefore clearly necessary. In Jumilla, a series of organizations offer such support. We could cite, in particular the Mental Health Association of Jumilla (ASAMJU), the Association for the Physically Disabled of Jumilla (AMFIJU) and the Association of Parents of Children with Disabilities (ASPAJUNIDE), and the Mental Health Centre. All organizations help people accessing their rights and social benefits, and in parallel, offer psychological support, social support, treatments (cognitive and/or physical stimulation), and for some, occupational therapy. 'In the case of mental disability, it is both the person suffering from the disability and the family who takes care of him/her who are subject to social isolation' explains a social worker.

'Kids suffer from social isolation because of their cognitive disability. Kids

before we take them in charge, often went to normal schools where they suffered social isolation, solitude, had no friend and experienced bullying, harassment and marginalization. So not only they have their disability but their also suffer from self esteem and self confidence' explains a professional.

'It's very frequent that parents are isolated. When cognitive fragilities of kids are discovered, parents' projects and hopes are often broken, their expectations for the future are completely modified. 'Some families are also isolating themselves to the avoid social stigma of having a disabled kid... Parents sometime divorce, stop going out, stop taking care of themselves, sometimes stop working' describes a professional.

While, most of the time, sessions and support is given at individual level, interesting practices are done at collective level, and in particular 'match making is organized between families to develop peer to peer support between people who live the same experience' comments a social worker. This, obviously, is an inspiring practice for the network and also echoes some practices seen elsewhere such as the self-help groups in Tønder, Denmark.



Association of persons with physical disabilities (AMFIJU)
Jumilla, Spain

Association of Mental Health of Jumilla (ASAMJU)
Jumilla, Spain

Pombal, Portugal



Country = Portugal
Region = Centro
Province = Região de Leiria
Area = 626 km²
Population = 51 170 hab
Population density = 81 hab/km²

The Municipality of Pombal has dozens of interesting practices and cases regarding a whole variety of people at risk of social isolation (from mentally disabled people, to teenage mums, to elderly people, to victims of domestic violence, etc.). While some of them can also be found elsewhere, we will share only here the ones we believe to be particularly inspiring, promising (which does not undermine the other cases of course).

VILLAGES 65+ (ALDEIAS 65+)

Aldeias 65+ Project, launched in 2015, aims to promote moments of conviviality and sharing; develop social and personal skills; combat social isolation and social exclusion; promote active and healthy ageing. It is aimed at the elderly (people aged 65 or over), who do not benefit from Home Support Services or Day Centre, residing in the Parish of Pombal.

In Villages 65+, 'we have 11 groups of about 10-15 people. Many of these participants have no transportation, so we help bring them to our gatherings. During these gatherings, they have the opportunity to talk and share stories, as well as participate in crafts that stimulate their motor skills. Some of our participants have never learned to read or received an education, so we also try to provide educational opportunities. These gatherings are particularly important because many of these individuals live in isolation in the surrounding villages.' explains the president of the parish.

Due to limited human resources, each group of participants only gathers once a month for about 2 hours. 'However, during these gatherings, our participants are able to express their needs, including any medical needs they may have. Sometimes we are even able to bring in nurses or doctors to provide information and assistance. Additionally,

we have found that some of our participants continue to meet outside of our workshops.’ comments the group facilitator.

‘Twice a year, we bring all 11 groups together for a special event. This allows them to have a convivial moment, where they can enjoy eating, dancing, and singing.’ add the president of the parish.

Since the study visit took place when a group was gathered, we asked participants, why do they come? ‘To leave the house’ one said, ‘to break isolation’ an other one added, ‘to spare time with friends’, ‘to stimulate our brain’ added an other participant.

‘Interestingly, our participants have taken the initiative to celebrate each other’s birthdays, with someone always bringing a cake.’ comments the president of the parish. When asked if they would like to come more often, their answer is a resounding yes. ‘However, we are currently limited by the lack of human resources available to organize more frequent activities’ explains the facilitator.

‘As the president of the parish, my dream is to create a space that caters to the needs of both the elderly and the young. Social isolation is even worse in the city compared to our rural area, and I believe that by having a center where isolated people can gather, we can promote intergenerational interactions and combat loneliness. This center would be a community space that belongs to the

neighborhood and would be open to everyone on weekends’.

The Villages 65+ is not only interesting because it helps preventing the isolation of elderly people who don’t live inside the city but in surrounding villages, but also because it creates links and relations which survive outside the sessions of the group.

SPORTS FOR ALL (DESPORTO PARA TODOS)

Sports for all is a programme which enables elderly people to meet up to three times a week (for about 45 min.) to do sports collectively. Activities are done both indoor and outdoor (when the weather allows it). It includes hydrogymnastics (once a week) and gym or hiking (twice a week). The programme was launched 20 years ago and some of the members participate from the beginning.

The programme currently has 283 members, and during the study visit, there were 100 people walking! Joining the programme is often through friends or communication from the city. Twice a year, the group organizes trips, usually around Christmas and June, where approximately 100 people participate in a trip to Lisbonne or other places. Additionally, in December, there is a Christmas lunch where everyone comes together.

It is important to note that the subscription to the programme is completely free for the participants. And the cost for the municipality? 2



Villages 65+,
Pombal, Portugal



Sports for all,
Pombal, Portugal

employees who are sports coaches.

Why do people join? We asked participants:

'to remain young' says a participant, 'to socialize' adds another, 'to live above 100 years old' laughs another one, 'to avoid resting at home' responds another, 'to participate' simply says another, or 'to maintain fresh air in the brain' concludes another.

What is absolutely fascinating with this case, is that it's rather simple but it's been working for 20 years! Through this sports programme, participants clearly avoid social isolation and remain active, both mentally and physically!

SENIOR UNIVERSITY

Launched in 2007, the Senior University is meant to provide life-long learning to elderly people.

As of 2023, the organization has 130 participants (70% women and 30% men), with most of the teachers being voluntary. The Senior University offers 24 different classes, including: English, French, Portuguese for foreigners, German, Italian, Pilate, gym, dance, yoga, computing-digital literacy, Health general-nurse teacher, Reading club, Knitting, Painting, 'Tuna choir' (singing and playing), Geography, History of art, Restoration of furniture, Theater, and Arts and crafts.

Besides the weekly classes, the uni-

versity also organizes yearly international trips and small trips throughout the year. They have afternoon gatherings based on national events, with approximately 100 people attending. Additionally, they hold gatherings outside where people dance and the music class performs.

The average age of the participants is 65, ranging from 55 to 91 years old. The organization is run by a general coordinator and volunteers, with only one half-time employee working in administration. Each class is held once a week, lasting about 1 hour and 30 minutes, except for painting, which lasts for 3 hours. There are 15 volunteers involved, and the annual fee for enrollment is 100€. The maximum capacity for classes is 20 individuals. The University operates from September to June, and there has been a gradual increase in participants over the years.

From 2007 to 2018, the classes were held in a school, but in 2018, the University of Seniors moved to a new location (renting costs are supported by the Municipality).

The Senior University is a highly interesting case, in particular because besides providing life long learning, 'the University is primarily offering a socialization space' explains a volunteer. Learning is a bonus.

EDUCATIONAL CENTER FOR SENIORS OF POMBAL

In fact, this project aimed at people aged 65 and over, who are not institutionalized, autonomous and live in the municipality of Pombal, is a pilot and innovative project, free of charge for its participants, which develops a set of activities and dynamics that promote an active, healthy and happy ageing, every day of the week, with a focus on health and valuing lifelong learning, namely by stimulating cognitive and physical-motor skills and raising awareness of the adoption of healthier habits and lifestyles.

The most interesting thing about this project is that, although the initiatives take place in the city, the overwhelming majority of seniors live in rural areas, which shows that the participants recognize that the project has a huge positive impact on their quality of life. Another important aspect that distinguishes this project from the Senior University is the fact that the participants have low levels of education and literacy, or have never even been to school, and find in this project the opportunity to develop their personal and social skills while, at the same time, helping them to reduce loneliness and combat social isolation.

On the other hand, the activities developed in this project are scientifically validated by Ageing@Lab - International Laboratory for Studies on Ageing, the result of a partnership between the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, the Municipality of Pombal and

the National Association of Social Gerontology.

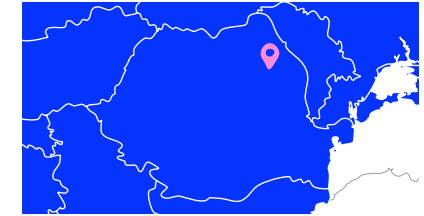
It should be noted that the «Educational Center for Seniors of Pombal» project began in January 2023 with a target of 30 participants, which was quickly surpassed, with 117 seniors currently enrolled (December 2023). The highly positive results achieved, coupled with listening to the interests and needs of the participants, led to the need to incorporate more activities into the project, namely trips, learning a foreign language and yoga, the highlight is the formation of a senior choir that has already performed for the higher education community, at congresses and at the opening of various initiatives of the Municipality of Pombal.

Recently, this project was distinguished as a Good Practice in the central region of Portugal.



Educational center for seniors of Pombal and Ageing@lab, Pombal, Portugal

Roman, Romania



Country = Romania
Region = Western Moldavia
County= Neamț
Area = 29,78 km²
Population = 58 600 hab
Population density = 1 617 hab/km²

Romania has one of the lowest expenditure on social protection amongst the countries of the network. Plus, most of its social spending is dedicated to old people. This may explain why in Roman, even though we came across interesting public services, we also saw a lot of NGO actors provide a lot of interesting social work support, and in particular church organizations. Below is a selection of highlighted cases:

MURIALDO CATHOLIC CENTRE

Murialdo Catholic Centre is offering a wide array of support and activities for children, all aiming to foster growth, education, and community.

Their flagship Summer Together Festival programme accommodates 500 kids for a week, engaging them in diverse activities such as art, theater, team games, and training sessions that emphasize values like to-

getherness, love, and friendship. The Centre also create sport events and championships like football, tennis, etc.

Their after-school program, started in 2008, offers an affordable alternative for parents, with 70 children actively participating and another 20 on a waiting list. This program encompasses study sessions, playtime, workshops covering various subjects, and monthly outings.

'Our main mission is to be a father, brother, and friend to these kids, offering guidance and support.' explains the priest.

The center boasts an extensive list of activities, including a listening center where psychologists, pedagogists, and non-strictly-Catholic priests offer individual sessions to over 100 children per month. Scout groups, initiated five to six years ago, have grown to 200 members, ranging from elementary to university levels, all led by de-

icated volunteers.

'We also launched a new initiative which includes workshops of drama, photography, graphic design, and more, involving 14 children in its initial phase.' describes the priest. The center also addresses societal issues conducting conferences on drugs, health, and parenting, etc.

Despite their impressive work, staffing remains modest with two full-time and two part-time employees, complemented by external professionals like a part-time psychologist and two full-time priests. Volunteers, numbering around 20, provide invaluable support.

The Murialdo Catholic Centre is an inspiring place to prevent social isolation of kids and stimulate sense of community, all that we a handful of strongly motivated people and a rather little budget (14 000€/year).

SOCIALIZATION CENTRE FOR ELDERLY (CASA VÂRSTNICULUI)

Established in 2009, the Socialization Center for Elderly People was initiated by a group of 20 retired individuals with the aim of providing free time activities and leisure opportunities for pensioners and their families. With a membership of 333 elderly individuals, the center provide a socialization space to those who often experience loneliness due to having children living away or being widowed.

Activities at the center include day

trips, parties for birthdays, celebrations for important dates such as Mother's Day and the International Day of Older Persons, chess competitions (including tournaments organized during city days), conferences or lectures by doctors, ophthalmologic consultations, and a New Year's Eve party with 150 participants.

The center promotes a sense of community: 'we are just like a family' says a member.

The centre operates Monday to Friday from 9:00 until 13:00. The place is owned by the Social Department of the Municipality. 'The centre relies only on volunteers and we manage the place, including cleaning.' explains the president.

During the study visit, we asked our traditional question, why do you come here?

'Because we feel lonely at home, here it's more like a family' comments a member, 'we relax here, we play', 'we socialize' claims an other, 'we share memories', 'we have a purpose', 'they are even some couples which formed here' laughs a member.

Awareness about the center spreads through word of mouth, Facebook, flyers/posters in public spaces, and the local newspaper. The Social Department of the Municipality plays a significant role in promoting the center, contributing to the ongoing increase in membership.

In addition to on-site activities, the centre organizes external events



Murialdo Catholic Centre,
Roman, Romania



Socialization Centre for Elderly (Casa Varstnicului), Roman, Romania



Melchisedec Episcopal Socialization Centre, Roman, Romania



such as parties at restaurants. The strong sense of community is evident in the centre's support system in times of difficulties for its members, 'If one of our member goes to the hospital, we go to pay them a visit, and we do the same in case of funerals' proudly explains the president.

The socialization centre for elderly of Roman is an inspiring place of a self-organized group which focusses on bringing people together, and therefore preventing isolation.

MELCHISEDEC EPISCOPAL SOCIALIZATION CENTRE (CENTRO DE SOCIALIZARE EPISCOPAL MELCHISEDEC)

Created in 1882, the Melchisedec Episcopal Foundation (Orthodox Church) offers medical, educational and social support to communities, in particular poor people. In 1948, the Foundation got stopped during the communist era, and re-started again in 1990. Everything they offer is self-financed.

If we only focus on the social support, the Foundation proposes 4 main activities:

- a day care center for kids at risk
- a socializing center for old people
- a social canteen
- a project for delivering food to old people

The Day Care Center hosts 13 kids for after-school activities, from homework to sportive, educational and/or religious activities, facilitated by a dedicated educator. Kids can

also benefit from a logopede (nun), a psychologist and a social worker. 'All our kids are at risk of social isolation, either because they're near to drop out of school, or because they have some cognitive disabilities' explains the bishop.

The Social Canteen has 12 beneficiaries with low income who receive at a warm meal everyday. 'People come and pick the food' describes the bishop. 'We also offer some socialization activities such as trips together (once or twice a year), and some want to give us back by cleaning up the place for example', explains the bishop.

The Socialization Centre is dedicated to elderly people. At the moment, we have 16 beneficiaries. 'Most of them feel alone and have lost their wife or husbands. They're former educators, engineers, nurses, etc. They come here once or twice a week to meet and socialize' comments the bishop. 'The beneficiaries are found by word of mouth. Although we advertise it, it's often par parrainage'. Beneficiaries also visit different museums, do trips to monasteries, visit different medical institutions, they volunteer both here and outside the institution.

Finally, the Episcopal Foundation also delivers food at home to 24 beneficiaries from 45 to 'until god takes them' explains the bishop. Even though it's a light interaction, volunteers usually spend about 10 min. with the person to have a little chat, ask if the person has special needs, etc.

Serres, Greece



Country = Greece
Region = Central Macedonia
Province = Serres
Area= 600.479 km²
Population = 74.004 hab
Population density = 8,1 hab/km²

The Municipality of Serres is located in Northern Greece, close to the Bulgarian border. The Municipality of Serres consists of an urban center and 23 villages. Interestingly, several interesting cases were to be found not only in the main city but also in surrounding villages. Not being able to showcase everything, here are a few interesting cases:

PARENTS, GUARDIANS & FRIENDS ASSOCIATION OF PERSONS WITH AUTISM – “ILIAXTIDA”

The Association of Parents and Friends of Autism is settled in a small village near Serres. Since 2015, the Association moved into a former elementary school that had closed down due to a lack of students.

‘We currently have 45 kids ranging in age from 5 to 37 years old. Our programme runs from Monday to Friday, with two sessions each day - one in

the morning and one in the afternoon. To transport the kids, we organize our own transportation using two mini buses.’ explains one of the team member. Kids and adults are offered plenty of occupational activities, from music to sports, from arts to cooking, etc.

The association consists of 14 team members, including only one employee (all the others are volunteers). ‘I have personally dedicated 9 years to this association, along with four other women who are also working tirelessly. We are the core group managing the association.’ explains a team member.

‘Unfortunately, people with disabilities are often isolated and hidden in society. The central government has shown little interest in addressing this issue on a national level, but the municipality has been supportive in providing care.’ The building we use is provided by the municipality, and the

costs for electricity and water are funded by a LEADER program.

What is very unique is that the parents decided to put together the state social allowances they receive for their children with autistic disability. Each autistic person receives a social voucher worth €5000 for 11 months. The association pools these vouchers together to hire private staff and professionals for specific classes or support (music, dance, gym, and a social worker).

Why did this association got created? 'We created this association because autistic children were spending their afternoons at home, feeling isolated. We wanted to provide them with a social and supportive environment.' explains a member.

In terms of social isolation, both the children and their parents experience it. However, the location of the association within the village has helped to integrate well with the community. 'We collaborate with the local music association and school, and typical children from the school often come to play with our kids.' comments the team member.

While many associations for children and adults with mental disabilities can be found everywhere throughout Europe, this association is inspiring in the way it is self organized and partly self-financed (by putting in common their private social vouchers). And of course, it provides to about 45 people (kids and adults) a chance to overco-

me social isolation by socializing with others everyday and in a safe environment.

ADVISORY SUPPORT CENTER FOR WOMEN VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

The Advisory support center for women victims of violence was established in June 2013 and is part of a network of 64 centers throughout Greece. The main purpose of the center is to address gender-based violence. It is supported by the national government and operated by the Municipality. The center provides support to victims of gender-based violence and/or discrimination, including domestic violence, rape survivors, workplace violence, sexual harassment, women trafficking, women in poverty, women refugees/migrants, women with disabilities, single mothers, and unemployed women.

The team at the center consists of four full-time employees, including a sociologist, social worker, psychologist, and lawyer. The center is open Monday to Friday from 8am to 4pm, with a 24/7 hotline available for emergencies. The center offers social counseling, legal advising, and psychological support to the women it serves.

'So far, at the center has supported 960 women and continues to assist new women every month. The main goal of the center is to empower women and help them become independent.' explains one of the team



Association of parents, guardians and friends of persons with autism, Iliaxtida, Serres, Greece



Advisory support center for women victims of violence, Serres, Greece

member.

The center confirms that domestic violence often leads to social isolation. 'Sometimes, the purpose of the violence is to isolate the victim from their family and friends in order to exert control over them. Even women who are employed may have low self-esteem and isolate themselves because of violence.' comments a team member.

In addition to support the victims out of their isolation, the centre also aims to break stereotypes surrounding gender roles and expectations. 'We also collaborate with 20 other shelters in Greece and have a temporary place for short-term emergency stays, funded by a union/association for children who are victims of abuse. The temporary shelter has only one room and is run by volunteers. Women can stay for up to three months with the possibility of extending their stay for an additional three months.' describes a member.

The center also addresses the perpetrators of violence and works with the Center of Mental Health under the Ministry of Health. Perpetrators are mainly dealt with through legal punishment, but they need to agree to receive psychological support to avoid criminal prosecution. The center highlights that many perpetrators have drug and alcohol problems and are also sometimes socially isolated (and at the opposite others have very rich social life). Most perpetrators hold sexist beliefs and adhere to gen-

der stereotypes.

To break stereotypes and raise awareness, the center visits schools, conducts training sessions for children, and develops educational games. They also organize awareness events and campaigns, such as musical events, photo exhibitions, etc.

While domestic violence centres, associations, public services, etc. are, at last, multiplying everywhere, we can see (and we also saw it in other cities of the network) that the work they do is vital to get the victims out of the terrible isolation they've been put into (and maintained into). Even though domestic violence may seem quite specific, within the topic of social isolation, numbers show that the people concerned by it, is, unfortunately, rather big. We'll see whether the cities of the network manage to develop actions on this particular challenge.

THE SOCIAL ROLE PLAYED BY THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

It varies a lot from one country to another but religions can, sometimes, play strong social roles.

In Serres, we met a priest who is visiting lonely individuals in the afternoon. 'I go and see older people who live alone because their children are away, individuals with chronic illnesses or other health issues, and people living in precarious situations'. explains the priest.

There are some people that the priest regularly visits and, of course, from time to time, new ones (because neighbours said to the priest 'there is a young man living alone next door who you should go and see'). 'Each visit to a new home brings a sense of surprise as we don't know if the person behind the door is mentally stable or struggling with drug addiction or has other mental health issues.' describes the priest.

What is rather striking is the number of people the priest visits each month... 'Around 100 people per month. I provide them a listening ear and assistance for those in need.' explains the priest. For him, social isolation could be defined as 'someone being alone in spirit and heart'.

To combat social isolation, the priest encourages isolated individuals to engage with the community by volunteering and supporting others. An example is shared of a shop owner who lost her son suddenly to a heart attack. She withdrew from life until the priest suggested organizing visits to prisoners. This new purpose brought her out of her grief-stricken state. Previously, 'her home used to feel like a cemetery, but now she found a new purpose in her life' tells the priest.

If we would give to the priest a magic wand full of resources, what would he do with it? 'I would create a three-floor building. The first floor would have games and an open café, the second floor would house an open kitchen providing free meals, and the

third floor would offer temporary residential accommodation. The space would be open to everyone' imagines the priest. This surely sounds like a promising social centre with mixt-use.

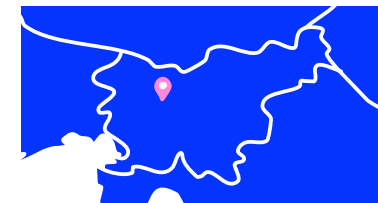
Besides, visiting lonely people, the church has a cultural center (with music, dancing, and choirs), a homeless temporary shelter for around 7-8 people, a social support to provide essential items like food (for example, they distribute 400 liters of oil per month), household products to about 350 families, three daily food distribution locations serving around 250 individuals each day, one time vouchers to students, summer camps, etc.

Clearly, the church plays a key social role, which may be could or should be, at least for a part, the mission of the public authorities... But in any case, in Serres, priests are, in a way, full time social workers.



Orthodox Church,
Serres, Greece

Škofja Loka, Slovenia



Country = Slovenia
Region = Gorenjska
Province = Upper Carniola
Area = 146 km²
Population = 23 779 hab
Population density = 164 hab/km²

The Municipality of Skofja Loka is composed a main city with smaller towns around. To avoid centralizing services and to offer support even to those living a bit further from the main city, Skofja Loka has several interesting practices to prevent or reduce social isolation. Here are a few cases:

ELDERLY TO ELDERLY PROGRAMME (STAREJŠI ZA STAREJŠE, ZDUS)

Even though it is not strictly specific to Skofja Loka, but done at national level, the programme Elderly to Elderly is worth highlighting. It was launched by the National Association of Retirees of Slovenia (ZDUS) in 2004.

The concept? 'We know that older people need help, advice or sometimes just a chat to improve their quality of life. Our volunteers contact our older members in person or by phone. They chat with them to brighten up

their day, give them useful information, help them organise small tasks (pedicure, doctor's appointments, etc.) and inform them about the possibilities of a better quality of life in their home environment.' explains the association on its website.

The principle? 'Young' retirees help their older peers. In Skofja Loka, there are about 50 volunteers. All of them are retired and have accepted to give some of their time to take care of other retirees. The social affairs department, launches a volunteer call once a year. All expenses of the volunteers are, of course, covered. 'All volunteers also receive a training and information about elderly people.' explains a civil servant of the social department. 'After the visits to the elderly homes, the volunteers report back to our social service, and we also receive a yearly report on the feeling of loneliness based on a survey they conduct.'

The elderly to elderly programme is interesting, not because it relies on volunteers, but because it complements the work done by the traditional public social workers. And that most probably, some isolated elderly open their doors more easily to another retiree than to a civil servant.

Proving its relevance and importance, the elderly to elderly programme got awarded, in 2017, 'Citizen of Europe Prize' by the European Parliament.

It is worth mentioning also the **PROSTOFER** initiative which gather retired volunteers who drive other elderly around for appointments, shopping, etc. In Škofja Loka, there are 11 volunteers who drive elderly around every day.

TAKING CARE OF 'NEETS' YOUNG ADULTS (ZAVOD FAMILIJA - PUMO+ PROGRAMME)

NEETs stands for 'Not in Education, Not in Employment, Not in Training'. The concept of NEET is often compared to the Japanese concept of Hikikomori, as both behaviours lead to a form of social and occupational withdrawal. Because of that 'inactivity', NEETs (but also hikikomori) are at risk of social isolation. This is why the association Familija decided to take part to the national PUMO+ programme (launched by the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education). So, what is it exactly? 'Basically, the programme has two goals: employment and education.' explains the president of the

association. 'We host about 40 to 45 NEET young adults per year, here in Skofja Loka. They are between 15 to 29 years old with an average around 18-20.'

In theory, the young adults entering the programme come from Monday to Friday, from 9:00 to 15:00. 'But in practice, some of them struggle to come on regular basis and remain engaged on the long run' comments a team member.

'Clearly, the majority of them are socially isolated... so the group dynamic is very important to us, besides finding them a job or a training' comments the president. Indeed, most of them have dropped out of school, so they lack of social relations and of social skills. This is why besides job and training, the association aims at achieving long term impact on: increasing self esteem, healthier lifestyle, improved quality of life (and a positive attitude towards the future).

In order to build up a group dynamic and to maintain it, the association offers social activities. 'We have a garden, we plant, we harvest and we cook together. We make films. We do summer camps. We do sports. We make art, etc.' explains a team member.

Of course, we could not resist from asking directly the youngsters, what they were taking from this programme? 'It helps me because I want to finish my school (and final exam)' comments a first one, 'to find a job'



Elderly to Elderly (Starejši Za Starejše), Skofja Loka, Slovenia

On call transportation (Prostofer), Skofja Loka, Slovenia



PUMO+ Programme (Zavod Familija), Skofja Loka, Slovenia



Youth Centre being used by elderly (BLOK), Skofja Loka, Slovenia

adds an other, 'for fun', 'to socialize', 'to make friends', 'to meet people', 'to solve problems' answer others.

When those young people are not here in the programme, what do they do? 'We train', 'do streaming', 'hang out with friends', 'play at home', 'play accordeon', 'study' or 'stare at the ceiling' jokes an other. When asking if they would recommend this place to others, not only they answer a massive 'Yes' in unisson, but they actually do, recommend the place. 'Indeed, most of the participants come from recomandations of former youngsters' confirmss the president. And apparently, former beneficiaries are never far... Indeed, during the study visit, by chance, we met two former members who were coming back just to pay a visit to the others, proving the attachment they have to the association, the space, the people.

This case is probably one of the most inspiring one, found during study visits, regarding young people at risk of isolation. And it will certainly inspire other cities of the Breaking Isolation network.

DOUBLE-USE SOCIALIZATION CENTRES FOR KIDS AND THE ELDERLY (BLOK)

The municipality of Skofja Loka is composed of a main town and smaller villages around. To avoid centralizing all services and activities to the main town, the municipality developed an approach of decentralizing some services, including Youth Socialization

Centres. Skofja Loka counts 3 youth centres designed to host kids after school. The age range varies from 10 to 18 years old, with an average around 13. Each day, about 20 kids show up in each Youth Centre. All 3 of them are also opened during holidays so as to continue to provide activities to the kids.

Of course, Youth Centres, are not so unique and can be found in multiple cities around Europe, but what was interesting, for me, in Skofja Loka, is that they decided to open up the space (2 out of 3 for now), in the morning to elderly people from the neighbourhood (about 10 to 15). Indeed, Youth Centres are used by young people in the afternoons only and left empty and unused the rest of the time. In order to satisfy the request of elderly people who were asking for a place to meet, the idea came out to make double us of the existing infrastructures. Not only it is a good practice in regard to the responsible use of public money and resources but it multiplies, throughout decentralized neighbourhood, meeting places, for both young people and for elderly.

'It's important that it's close to our neighbourhood, rather than to go to Skofja Loka' comments an elderly. Why do they come here? 'Because we come home happy after having gathered together, and it's worth it' proudly comments a member, 'we make jokes' smiles an other, 'we sing together', 'we connect' simply concludes an other.

Tønder, Denmark



Country = Denmark
Region = Southern Denmark
Area = 1 499 km²
Population = 37 928 hab
Population density = 26,8 hab/km²

The municipality of Tønder, in Denmark, is probably, amongst the 10 cities of the Breaking Isolation network, the one dealing with the largest spectrum of public welfare services. Indeed, in Denmark, a lot of public services are dealt at municipality level rather than at national or regional levels. Municipalities manage most of citizen-related services. It is also worth noting that Denmark is ranking high in terms of social welfare in the EU. Finally they develop multiple approaches, often targeting elderly, to prevent or reduce social isolation. Here are a few ones:

OPENING-UP NURSING HOMES (TOFTEGAARDEN AND LEO NURSING HOMES)

We visited, in Tønder, several nursing homes. And besides the fact that most of them are rather small and medium units, enabling a family-size feeling with about 25 to 50 people per

nursing home, one interesting practice stroke us in two places we went: The Toftegaarden Nursing Home and The Leo Nursing Home. Both centres decided to experiment and to open up to elderly people living around the nursing homes.

How? Why? Well, at Leo, for example, they created, in March 2023, a group called the Tuesday's Club. The Tuesday's Club gathers 6 elderly residents of the nursing home and 6 elderly neighbours from outside. Of course, they meet on Tuesdays and chat, sing, share wine together. 'The Tuesday's Club is helping the 6 elderly neighbours to break social isolation... and it's interesting to see that people prepare their clothes the day before, for example, they do their hair, put some jewellery on, etc.' explains the director of the Leo Nursing Home XXXXX.

In the same spirit, at Toftegaarden, they launched an experiment, in Au-

gust 2023: the Meal Companionships. It brings together 3 residents of the nursing home and 4 elderly people from outside (who still live in their own homes), 3 volunteers to facilitate the meal and an employee. The difference with the Tuesday's Club? At Toftegaarden, the Meal Companionships is gathering specifically people with early signs of dementia (those coming from outside were identified by the Dementia Coordination of the Regional Hospital as part of a programme called Faelles Om Demens), which is why the meal is facilitated but also includes collective tasks/activities such as setting the table, decorating it, installing name tags, etc. The Meal Companionship takes place every Thursday. Similarly to the Tuesday's Club, people look forward to it, get ready, put lipstick on, etc. They have a rendez-vous.

Those 2 experiments are very inspiring especially since we know that social isolation increases the risk of developing dementia by 40 to 50%... So the more people keep socializing, just like in the Tuesday's Club or The Meal Companionships, the less likely they are to develop dementia, and the more likely they are to age happy.

SELF-HELP SOUTHWEST (SELVHJÆLP SYDVEST)

Self-Help Southwest was created, in Tønder, in 1999. It was founded by 4 local women who said: 'we need something else than the welfare system can offer'. Indeed, one of the founder had lost her son-in-law then her hus-

band and needed psychological support, from people who could understand what she was going through... The idea of self-help groups were born: 'bring together people with similar life experiences, make them sit together, exchange and feel normal and ok with their feelings and experiences' explains the director. 'It started with the grief of loss of a companion, then divorce, then illness, dementia, parents with kids with autism, unemployed people, people who had accidents, etc. many groups were created.' The point? Realizing you are not alone with the situation you're going through.

'When experiencing a crisis, people often feel lonely, but most of the time they don't tell that they're lonely... social isolation is often covered up with other needs/pretexts (I'm new in town, I want to meet new people, etc.)' comments the director. The team of the association is doing interviews with every single person willing to join a group... in order to ensure that the person is willing to follow the group rules, principles, to participate and share with others, etc.

Each group session lasts about 1h30-2h00, there is tea, coffee and water, and people do a short round of individual speeches then the group chooses topics of interests to be discussed in particular, and in the end, there is a quick wrap up. Some groups meet every week, some every month. Each group is facilitated, at the beginning at least. Indeed, some groups become fully autonomous and self-managed



Opening-up nursing homes (mixing residents from nursing homes and elderly from the neighbourhood), Tønder, Denmark



Det var som at komme hjem

AF DITTE MADVIG EVAID, U-STORY

I et stort hus i et af de nye kvarterer i udvalgte af kommunen har Marlene Skottchen og med sine venner, der er i færd på vej ud i byen, der er i færd på vej ud i byen, der er i færd på vej ud i byen...

Om at tage tingene 'oppefra og ned'

AF DITTE MADVIG EVAID, U-STORY

For at gøre det lidt mere interessant, så har Heidi, der er i færd på vej ud i byen, der er i færd på vej ud i byen, der er i færd på vej ud i byen...

Da hun i sin krop er i en sådan situation, så er det vigtigt at have nogle venner, der er i færd på vej ud i byen, der er i færd på vej ud i byen...

VELLIV FORENINGEN logo and text: SYNLIG SELVHJÆLP ER STØTTE AF VELLIV FORENINGEN

Magazine page with title 'Livet er en gave' and a photo of a woman sitting at a desk.

Magazine page with title 'Synlig Selvhjælp' and a photo of a man with glasses.

Magazine page with a photo of a man in a cap and a logo for 'SYNLIG SELVHJÆLP ER STØTTE AF VELLIV FORENINGEN'.



Self-Help Southwest (Selvhjælp Sydvest), Tønder, Denmark

after a while. On paper, 'groups are built for a period of 6 months in average... but some have been running for 10 or 12 years, some people go out, some new ones come in, we also have people who also meet outside the group so some groups are closing', explains Heidi XXXX.

What is the age range of participants? At the moment of the study visit, from 7 years old to 88... with an average around 60 years old. How many group does Self-Help Southwest have? 'We have about 25-30 groups running in parallel at the moment, with between 3 to 8 people per group, so about 180 people in groups at the moment', explains the director. Each group is run by a volunteer, and the association has about 30 of them, they are mostly retired people but young retirees. Often, they are former teachers, pedagogists, nurses, etc. Regarding employees, the association has only 2 (one director and one part time assistant). And what about participants? How are they found, or how do they find the self-help groups?

'Our main recruiter is the municipality, especially the health care department, children & school department and the job center, because they know about us and call us to check whether we've got groups which could be interesting for some of their beneficiaries' explains Heidi. 'Of course, mouth-to-ear and our communication events are also very useful'.

Self-help groups appear to be a precious tool to prevent social isolation of

many people facing hard life events... especially because public services don't usually have much to offer in those cases. Definitely something to investigate within Breaking Isolation as a potential transfer of practices!

NATURE AS A SOCIALIZATION LEVERAGE AT TØNDER NATURE SCHOOL (TØNDERMARSKENS NATURSKOLE)

The municipality of Tønder is a rural area, where fields and nature occupy a wide space. The Tønder Nature School is run by the municipality and is hosting people of all age, from young kids, to teenagers, adults and elderly people including people with dementia. Besides nature-based tours and classes, the school has launched, in 2020, nature-based socialization groups. The team of the school (2 employees) created different groups. 3 groups of men, including widowers, people who suffered nervous breakdowns, depression, groups of lonely men and one group with dementia. Each group gathers about 10 people, age 50 to 80. Groups gather on a monthly basis and go into nature together. 'We do, bird watching, nature walking, mushrooms picking and grilling together, but also oyster and shrimps picking, fishing, etc.' explains Bo, one of the school leader and nature guide. 'In the beginning, it was quite a challenge for them to connect with other and talk to others... the nature is the central point for us. Some group live by their own... some require high attendance/facilitation. With them we use nature

as therapy. When we seat in a group it's difficult to be facing others but in nature, it's not as confrontational, because you can walk side by side, look at the sky, look around you... When we go out, the thing I love is to shut up and observe the group of men discussing together...' comments Bo. Besides groups of men, Bo also explains that they also set up a group of unemployed women for about 3 months who met weekly on Fridays and now, after they've been accompanied, the group keeps meeting together, autonomously. They created lasting social relations.

The Nature School also works with young people, including ones with HDHD, to whom they give special responsibilities to keep their attention (like carrying the tripod, the bird watching monoculars, etc.).

The Tøndermarskens Naturskole is a very inspiring case in which nature is used as a basis for socialization activities. This could certainly inspire other cities within the Breaking Isolation network.

TURNING 75 YEARS OLD? WE PAY YOU A VISIT! (ACT ON PREVENTIVE HEALTH VISITS)

It is worth mentioning here, even though it does not apply in the Municipality of Tønder, that Denmark has launched, since 1996, what they call 'Preventive Health Visits'. The principle? When you turn 75, the municipality calls you and proposes to pay you a visit at your home. Why? Well

do check how you're doing (interview format) and quick assessment of your potential needs/requests (evaluating special needs). Of course, the elderly person can accept or refuse. If he/she refuses, then the municipality will re-do the same offer some months later (one can change his/her mind). If you accept, you can benefit from regular home visits if you wish (2-3 times a year) as well as phone call to check up on you!

Even though the process of Preventive Health Visit, so far, is mostly focussing on preventing 'functional decline', we believe that, within Breaking Isolation this inspiring practice could be eventually used/extended to also assess social isolation, in order to identify those at risk, and eventually to break the isolation of those who suffer from it already.

It might be worth noting also that, in Denmark, since 1937, 5 days after the birth of a child, the children department of municipalities pay a visit to parents, to check on the kids health, possible post-partum depression, etc. Each visit is about an hour and there are about 5 or 6 of them. This inspiring practice could be highly interesting to identify possible signs of social isolation, esp. of single parents who are higher risks of isolation.



Socialization through the Nature School (Tøndermarskens Naturskole), Tønder, Denmark





Synth- esis

IN SHORT

For a long time, social isolation has not been regarded, by public authorities, as a public problem that needed to be tackled. Numbers of people suffering from social isolation is, however, **growing, all over the world.** And the **severe effects of isolation** (premature death, dementia, etc.) are now, thanks to recent scientific research, better understood and measured (see page 49).

Existing policies and public interventions tend to focus more on social cohesion and/or social integration. While those 2 dimensions are fundamental, rather few public policies try to explicitly and directly fight social isolation. Yet, in practice, we discovered, during the study visits in the 10 cities of the Breaking Isolation network, that **many cases, practices, services, either carried by municipalities or by NGOs, help to fight social isolation,** sometimes directly and often indirectly. This is a good news for the network as we have now collected dozens of inspiring practices which might be, depending on context and opportuni-

ties, potentially transferred from one city to another (see City Profiles).

An other important dimension, confirmed both by the literature review and the study visits, is that **social isolation is not age related,** and in particular not strictly a condition of old age. Indeed, from teenagers to young adults, from single parents to middle-age lonely persons, from freshly retirees to elderly people, people of all ages can be subject to isolation. Therefore, responses need to be not only touching all age categories but they also **need to be transversal.** Indeed, social isolation can not be tackled by social and health departments alone, but need to be fought through collective responses from youth, elderly, cultural, sport, environment departments, etc. (see page 30).

Finally, most of the cases we came across offer rather good answers to prevent social isolation of those at risk, but **few of them offer ways out of isolation for those already isolated.**

SUPER SHORT SUMMARY


Findings highlight the following elements:

- **Social isolation is not a private issue but a public problem**, which requires dedicated local strategies and action plans,
- Social isolation is not only concerning old people but **all age range**,
- Social isolation is a **growing issue with severe effects on health**, increasing risk of dementia, risks of heart stroke and risks of premature death, etc.
- Number of isolated people is high and **their identity vastly unknown**
- Social isolation should not be only taken care of by social and/or health departments/policies, but **transversally responded...**
- Social isolation should not be taken care only by public/municipality tools/policies but also in partnership with **local stakeholders and associations** (NGOs), etc.
- Social isolation should be prevented but **answers for those already isolated also need to be developed**

7 POTENTIAL FOCUS

The challenge of social isolation is large and has systemic causes and implications. The reflex would be to tackle this challenge by targeting sub-groups of people such as 'the elderly', 'the young ones', etc. But, doing so would not be correct. Why? First, because a lot of causes of social isolation are not necessarily age-related. Second, because targeting specific groups always lead to siloed policy approaches. 'It's not in our scope. It's the Youth Department's job'. Therefore, we recommend to cities not to work on the subject of isolation through the age lense but rather 7 focus points (which could be potential focus for the Breaking Isolation's future Integrated Action Plans):

1. **We need to better identify socially isolated people**
2. **We need to better diagnose those at risk of isolation (early signs)**
3. **We need to develop direct answers to help out those already isolated**
4. **We need to reinforce and multiply solutions to prevent isolation of those at risk**
5. **We need to raise awareness on social isolation, how to recognize it and its effects**
6. **We need to develop city-wide answers by partnering within municipality departments and with local stakeholders, and in particular, local NGOs**
7. **We need to reinforce a culture of mutual community care**



Method- ology & work- plan

The challenge of social isolation is large and has systemic causes and implications. The reflex would be to tackle this challenge by targeting sub-groups of people such as 'the elderly', 'the young ones', etc. But, doing so would not be correct. Why? First, because a lot of causes of social isolation are not necessarily age-related. Second, because targeting specific groups always lead to siloed policy approaches. 'It's not in our scope. It's the Youth Department's job'. Therefore, we recommend to cities not to work on the subject of isolation through the age lense but rather 7 focus points (which could be potential focus for the Breaking Isolation's future Integrated Action Plans):

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- 6. We need to develop city-wide answers by partnering within municipality departments and with local stakeholders, and in particular, local NGOs**
- 7. We need to reinforce a culture of mutual community care**

THE JOURNEY IN DETAILS

The Network journey of Breaking Isolation (see schema on next page) is built on an **alternance between transnational exchanges and local activities of ULG**. The general journey is built around 4 types of activities: transnational exchanges, ULG meetings, webconference (with external expert) and online network meetings.

Each transnational level activity is followed by a local ULG activity to ensure the transfer of the knowledge, the tools and the methods as well as the key information discussed and learned during transnational meetings to the local levels and especially the URBACT local groups (ULG). **The network journey is organized in 4 stages: the activation stage, the planning action stage, the preparation of implementation stage and the network finale stage.**

The first stage, the Activation stage, ran from June 2023 to December 2023 and aimed at activating all the necessary elements for the proper start of the networking activities and the process of action planning. The Activation phase ends with this key deliverable: the Baseline Study. Plus the network's communication plan. This phase was critical to **ensure the engagement of each partner city**, as well as the political support within each city. **In this**

stage, Lead Partner, Nicolas Castet of the City of Agen (Fr) and the lead expert, Christophe Gouache (Be), were able to conduct all 10 study visits together. This allowed to reinforce the duo, LP+LE, but also allowed for a double analysis of study visits findings. Going together to every city also enabled us to meet more easily with local politicians, as we were forming a sort of 'mini-delegation' from France and Belgium. In the 10 cities of the Breaking Isolation network, we managed to meet with 9 mayors (and in all 10 cities met other elected officials in charge). The only missing mayor was because the study visit to place right after new elections and the newly elected mayor was not yet in office. **This was important for both of us, LP and LE, to check whether or not the network will benefit from political support or not.** In all cities, political support is present, yet with different levels of intensity for the moment.

During the Activation phase, the network managed to organize two physical transnational meetings (and met 3 times in total if we include the University in Malmö, Sweden). The first meeting took place in Agen (France) and was designed as the official kickoff of the network (getting more familiar with the topic of social isolation, visiting local interesting cases, planning study visits).

Then all 10 study visits were made between September and December 2023. Finally, a Transnational Meeting took place in Skofja Loka (Slovenia) in December. This last TNM focused on sharing and discussing the Baseline Study (and in particular city profiles)

and consolidate ULG plans and methods for ULG meetings to come. It was also a key moment to stabilize all TNM dates for the whole URBACT journey.

NOW THAT THE ACTIVATION IS OVER, WHAT AWAITS US?

The second stage, Planning Actions, is the longest and most significant part of the action planning journey (as it runs from January 2024 to Dec. 2024). Stage two will be dedicated to learning, exchanging and experimenting. **Transnational Meetings (TNM) have been spread over the two year period to come and in a way that would enable the network to meet, roughly, every two-months and a half.** We believe this to be quite balanced, meaning be not-too-frequent and not-too-rare for the network to move forward as a unique tight group. Indeed, it has been agreed with cities and LP and LE, that all TNM shall gather all cities every time because of the importance of the content that is shared during those meetings. **A strong attention will be brought, during this stage, to testing actions.** Indeed, previous URBACT III experience showed that experimenting, testing actions is not only a great way to check whether if an action is relevant, pertinent and if it deserves to be entering the final version of the Integrated Action Plan. And, in parallel, testing actions reinforces engagement and motivation of URBACT Local Groups.

The third stage, Preparing Implementation will run from January 2025 to September 2025 and will aim at focusing on the operationalisation aspects of the IAP. It will be a quite key stage

– even though they all are important – because the IAP will start having a more and more advanced and finalized shape. **And this third stage will include, in April 2025, the URBACT City Festival** which will gather all cities of all 30 networks.

The last stage, the fourth, Network Finale, will run from Oct. 2025 to Dec. 2025 and will aim on **the launch of IAPs and dissemination of results.** It includes the delivery of the Integrated Action Planning report, all 10 final Integrated Action Plans and the network results. It will be a rather short and intense stage since the network will have to 'wrap up' all its results, lessons learned, etc. as well as the final IAPs. It will also be the end of the URBACT journey which is why a last transnational meeting will be organized in the coordinating city of Agen – where all started.

The way the journey has been designed is to allow TNM and ULG meeting to follow one another so that partners go to TNM and share what they've done with their ULG, then exchange, learn and get familiar with the next tools and methods they'll have to use with their ULG afterward. TNMs also play a crucial role for the team building of the network (reinforcing relations, mutual trust, etc.). Online checkups (transnational) and webconference (with external expert) are expected. However, their frequency and number might evolve based on the needs and requests of the cities. Obviously, one-to-two city to LP & LE chats will take place on request or if needed along the all journey.

TRANSNATIONAL MEETINGS FORMATS

Every Transnational Meeting is co-created. By who? The Lead Partner, the Lead Expert and the host city. Lead Partner and Lead Expert design the work sessions and together with the host city, they co-decide on what could be worth visiting in terms of local cases (if possible we try to visit two local inspiring cases per TNM) as well as what places to eat and socialize in evenings.

Each transnational exchange is designed to be interactive and participatory. Some classic formats have been banned such as the U and O shape meeting rooms. As much as possible, we try to re-arrange the room multiple times during the day so as to keep people active and moving but also because each activity requires a different posture (curved theater mode for presentation, small tables for group work, all standing up (no chair) for short presentations, etc. (see pictures on the right).

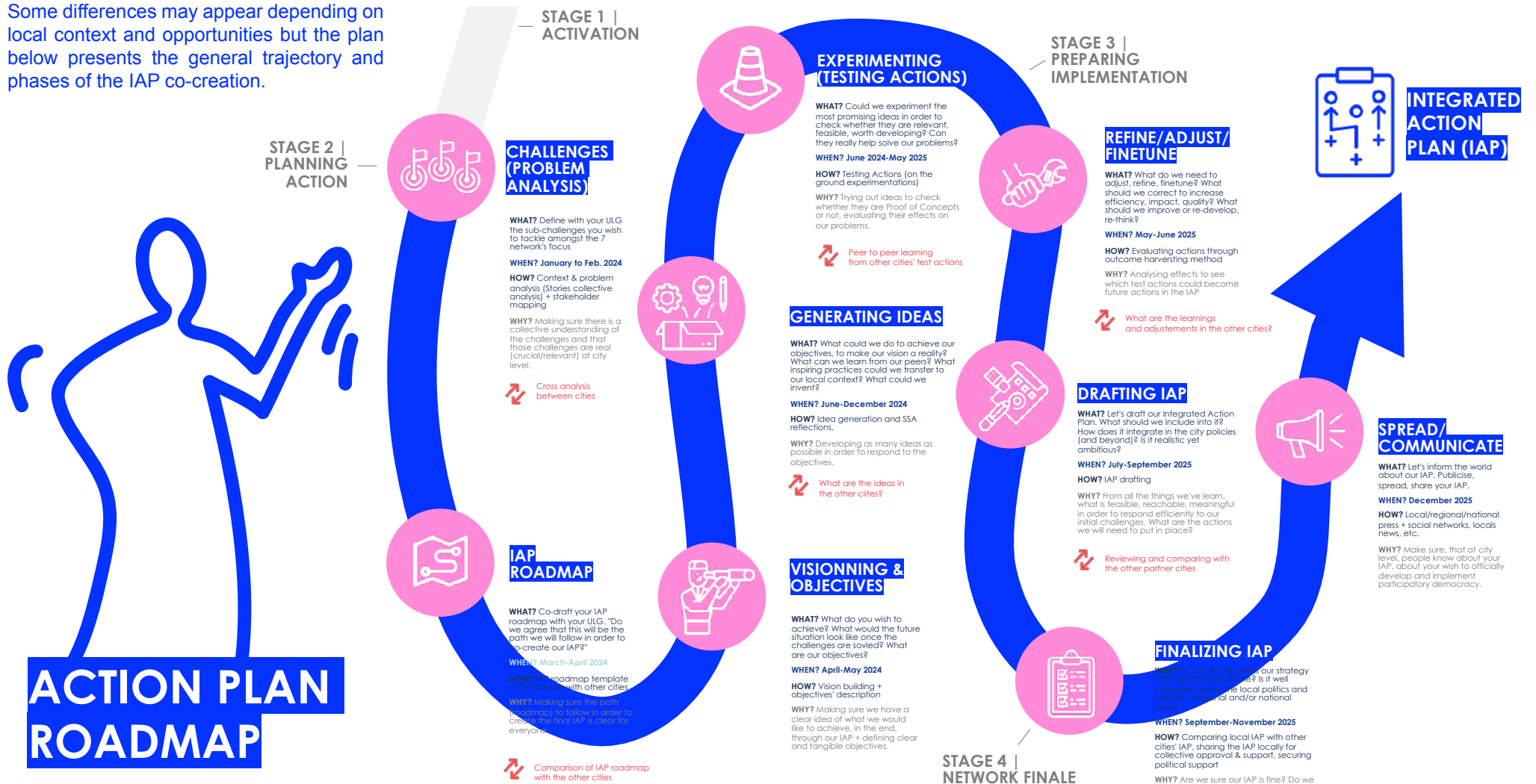
During each TNM we will develop and use different tools and methods based on what we wish to achieve. Also, in every TNM, all cities discover and try the tools they are expected to be using with their own ULG afterward, as a way to ensure they understand how it works and to eventually adjust the tools & methods (it's a sort of a collective crash-test). Cities also have dedicated sessions in which they are expected to present how things go in their own places, with their ULG, etc.

Finally, **conviviality** will also be at the heart of the TNM experience. Indeed, the more we build close relations between all members the more they remain enthusiastic, engaged, and are ready to share, in transparency, the challenges they face, their failures and successes, etc. **Bringing cities, countries together, is also part of the European project and URBACT spirit.**



ROADMAP PHASES

Each city will follow a rather similar roadmap to develop their Integrated Action Plans. Some differences may appear depending on local context and opportunities but the plan below presents the general trajectory and phases of the IAP co-creation.



THE ROADMAP PHASES

CHALLENGES (PROBLEM-ANALYSIS)

ULG's first task will be to work on the problem analysis of social isolation. As explained before, the topic of the network is complex with many underlying causes and we need all ULG members to collectively discuss and analyze the problem and sub-causes in order to build a shared understanding of the issue. Instead of using the problem tree method (especially because the Baseline Study already highlighted the major causes of the problem), we decided, together with the network that we would work on collecting and analysing real life stories of social isolation. Each ULG in each city will have to write stories of socially isolated people then analyze the reasons, factors, causes which led to the isolation of the persons. This will avoid doing a 'theoretical or abstract analysis' but to focus on real cases, real stories that everyone can rely to.

Besides working on real life cases, the objective is to also publish a book of all stories. 10 stories in 10 cities in 10 countries. 100 stories of isolation. Not only this deliverable should help raise awareness about the topic and the network but it will be a working tool for all of those also working on social isolation. Stories will be made in order

to cover the vast diversity of isolation cases, meaning, elderly, young people, single parents, widows and widowers, mentally ill, etc.

Besides publishing a book, we realized, during the study visits that our topic of isolation was very sensitive, human and emotional. Behind every isolation case is a person's life, a personal story. This means that working on social isolation requires a human-centered approach and human-centered policies.

IAP ROADMAP

The IAP roadmap will be based on the draft presented in the previous page but it will be adapted to each city with precise dates and local specifications (ULG group + other consultation groups of stakeholders, political support, etc.).

VISIONING & OBJECTIVES

This phase will be key because it will set the base of the ambition and objectives of the future IAP. However, objectives might evolve and be reviewed during the network journey (in particular when doing peer review of all draft IAPs). In any case, visioning will help, for each city, clarify what they want to achieve, what they want the situation to be in the future in their city, in 10, 20 years from now. Vision building methods and tools will be provided by the lead expert and will include visual story-telling and/or film-making. Visions and objectives will be shared and discussed at network level during Transnational meetings.

GENERATING IDEAS

This phase is, most certainly, one of the most creative one. It is the key moment during which we will push cities to innovate, to think outside the box, to come up with new, original, atypical ideas and potential policy concepts.

The generation of ideas will be based on a multi-source approach:

- Solutions already existing in the other cities and potentially transferable (as mentioned before, the study visits enabled to already identify many of them, which are described in this baseline study)
- Solutions already existing elsewhere (outside of the network)
- Finally, new ideas coming out of the network and the ULGs

In this phase, we will try, LP and LE together, to push cities to go beyond the classic policy responses they know of, in order to explore more creative and collaborative options. Later on, ideas will be reviewed, filtered, and analyzed according to their potential impact on the problem, their feasibility, their acceptability, etc.

EXPERIMENTATION (TESTING ACTIONS)

Testing Action is not only an exciting phase for ULGs and cities but also a crucial one to validate or unvalidate some potential ideas. Testing Action is a powerful step for getting 'proofs of concepts' (POC). In other words, to observe what are the outcomes and effects produced by an intervention, to learn under what conditions they apply and work, to understand what they re-

quire to effectively respond to the original hypothesis they try to answer to, etc. As Lead Expert, I will provide to cities, not only a dedicated course on how to test actions but also Testing Action monitoring templates, and advices on how to carry the experimentations themselves. In particular, I will share the findings of the Small Scale Action study I had the chance to conduct for the URBACT secretariat at the end of the URBACT III programme (together with Liat Rogel, Selam Mebrahtu and Elisa Saturno).

REFINE/ADJUST/FINETUNE

This phase is meant to select the promising actions, the ones worth keeping and developing further and identify those to leave aside. This phase is a strategic one because it will set the base for the IAP draft coming up right after. Local political check will be required at this stage. Actions will be looked at based on their potential impact, their success conditions, feasibility, readability, acceptability, etc.

DRAFTING IAP, FINALIZING IAP AND COMMUNICATION

Both of those phases will be dedicated to the actual writing of the Integrated Action Plans of all 10 cities. Peer to peer review will play a key role in ensuring cross fertilization and inspiration. Each IAP will be discussed and reviewed so as to ensure its credibility, robustness and pertinence. Again, political check will be crucial at this stage as the IAP will require approval. Finally, the network will work together to spread and communicate about their IAP both at EU level and at local level.



“The most terrible poverty is loneliness and the feeling of being unloved.”

Mother Teresa

Testing the tool of writing real life stories of isolation (using AI-made portraits) and collective problem analysing during a TNM Skofja Loka, Slovenia

Humans are, by nature, social creatures. We, humans, need social interactions. We need to talk, to laugh, to cry, to play, to share...

But what happens when one does not get any social interaction, at all?

What happens when it's not by choice? When a person has, completely, and for a long period, no relation with his/her fellow human? What happens when one gets truly isolated, left alone? What happens to our society when more and more people get isolated, feel left out, abandoned, unfit for society?

This Baseline Study of the Breaking Isolation EU network reviews existing policies, scientific literature about social isolation but also existing practices found in 10 small and medium sized cities throughout 10 European countries. This report also highlights the key challenges that the 10 cities will have to address during their journey together.

Christophe Gouache

BREAKING ISOLATION

