



Best Practices Database

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Urban Oasis Programme, Hebden Bridge *United Kingdom*

Best Practice

New for 2002

Categories:

Children and Youth:

- 0-9 years
- 10 years to adult
- children's participatory planning and leadership development
- health and nutrition

Poverty Eradication:

- job creation
- vocational training

Housing:

- access to housing finance
- affordable housing
- eco-logical design
- land tenure and security

Level of Activity: Provincial/State

Ecosystem: River Basin

Summary

Over 50% of the world's population is now living in cities, many condemned to permanent under-employment, social and economic deprivation in barren inner-city housing estates. A pioneering initiative, the Urban Oasis, has been established within such surroundings, to provide a practical demonstration and training facility of community-based, low-cost, self-help solutions to these problems.

A self-help partnership made up of an international environmental and community development organisation (The Arid Lands Initiative), a high-rise tenant managed company (Apple Tree Court), local youth employment and probation services, with the support of the local church and schools, has documented the priority needs of local people and in response, created a green and productive 'inner-city oasis' around and within a typical inner-city high-rise and documented the experience with broadcast-quality video and photographs. The existing gardens and derelict land have been extended/reclaimed for perennial community orchards and intensive fruit and vegetable gardens. By converting and extending the bottom floor of the high-rise buildings a multi-purpose leisure and training centre has been created, helping young and old, male and female to gain practical food growing, cooking and management skills.

To ensure that this process of successful, community-based urban renewal can be replicated elsewhere the programme has been documented on broadcast-quality video, to support this 'beacon of good practice' demonstrating practical inner-city regeneration.

Narrative

SITUATION BEFORE THE INITIATIVE BEGAN

Pendleton, lying in Salford, a 37 square mile city of 230,000 people, exemplifies the worldwide problems of high-rise, inner-city 'sink estates'. Permanent male and female underemployment of over 20%, social deprivation, treeless run-down housing estates have created 'poverty amongst plenty', fuelling typical, interrelated economic, environmental, social and health problems.

ESTABLISHMENT OF PRIORITIES

A 'rolling programme' of documentation and community meetings identified shared priority 'felt needs' of grassroots community groups as:

- Creation of safe, multi-purpose community cafe conservatory, catering/leisure facilities
- A 'sense of secure ownership' of housing and immediate community land surroundings.
- Community-based regeneration of derelict local landscape to provide contact with nature and neighbours.
- Access to land/training to grow and cook high-quality/nutritious fruit and vegetable at a reasonable price.
- Sustainable employment creation, particularly for young males and females around environmental, catering, landscaping and horticulture work to improve household incomes, diets and reduce 'food miles'.

FORMULATION OF OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

To establish/support a local NGO/tenant associations/parish church/school partnership which would create a practical training facility to demonstrate and disseminate practical training on re-greening derelict inner city land for employment creation, amenity value and food growing, in order to:

1. Focus practical community action on establishing of allotments, perennial orchards, herb gardens, community nurseries, wildlife meadows, ponds and native species woodlands by regenerating derelict land.
2. Help high-rise residents, local school children, young unemployed acquire management, catering, gardening skills necessary to manage their local housing/landscape to grow fresh fruit, vegetables and trees.

MOBILISATION OF RESOURCES

The starting point was sustained action by Arid Lands Initiative, to mobilise local leadership and activists, by stimulating and audio-visually documenting an on-going dialogue to identify a 'rolling programme' of shared, priority problems around which community action could be mobilised and proposals could be submitted to Corporate Government and other grant-awarding bodies.

Local community groups were sufficiently encouraged by initial seed funds to commence practical action, tackling priority problems and the leadership was encouraged to manage these local activities and partnership networks were informally created, converging around particular micro projects, which sometimes evolved into larger, 'common interest' clusters or dissolved/reformed thereafter around subsequent challenges.

Arid Lands Initiative continued to act as the 'enabling coordinator', securing financial resources, marshalling technical know-how where appropriate or coordinating field visits to exemplary grassroots activities elsewhere. Audits of local skills/experience were collected, however humble or seemingly irrelevant, and matched to tasks agreed as priorities. Constant audio-visual documentation acted as a mirror and self-correcting 'Progress check-list'. Traditional non-formal local networks and associated

funding sources of the parish school, church and youth groups were also engaged and city wide/regional health, employment and regeneration initiatives/funds were gradually recruited where appropriate.

PROCESS

Baseline research identified a locality typifying an inner-city community so deprived that they couldn't escape the cycle of poverty, environmental and health deprivation. Barriers were multiple: limited access to cash and low interest, long term credit; high unemployment reducing household budgets to well below official poverty thresholds', an absence of safe recreational facilities; no 'sense of ownership' of their housing or secure outdoor leisure space; a high proportion of disposable income spent on food and fuel; limited access to high-quality fresh food at a reasonable price or the land to grow it; lack of local infrastructure and public transport to provide shopping choice.

Arid Lands Initiative then encouraged partnership with the Urban Oasis Programme, which engaged a number of local networks (tenants associations, schools, employment agencies, parish church, Criminal Probation Services, Health Action Zones).

A process was established where grassroots representatives in a typical tenants association were supported, with Arid Lands Initiative as the external 'enabler'. Concerns aired were ranked in order of priority and successively tackled, by practical action, training and external technical and financial advice and resources where needed. The process was audio-visually documented over a three-year period, including interviews, building a record of the needs, problems and solutions. This rolling programme created a replicable 'pathway towards self reliance', managed by the grassroots participants themselves, at their pace.

All activities/micro projects built towards an integrated 'beacon of good practice', now accessible and visited by community groups, relevant agencies from the UK and overseas. TV programmes, press articles, conferences have influenced regional/national policies and practices and this award-winning practical model is now being replicated elsewhere in the UK with funding from Government, business and charity. Unemployed youth are now involved in 'learning by doing' training in environmental, gardening and recycling initiatives and the Urban Oasis model is being replicated in school/community networks, particularly ethnic minority groups, following the same process as pioneered in this project, including on-going broadcast quality, documentation for awareness raising, training and dissemination.

The targets against which progress was measured:

- Number of groups visiting Urban Oasis.
- Number of groups continuing to develop local action plans and implementing them.
- Community, youth unemployed and tenant involvement/training and growth of their institutional/personal capacities.
- The potential impact on diet and health of inner city communities, local biodiversity and reductions in food miles.
- The growing list of priority problems tackled and solved.

RESULTS ACHIEVED

The Urban Oasis Project has been established as a practical and comprehensive self-help demonstration of 'best practice' in the sustainable renewal of an inner-city environment. Improved housing, community cafe training facilities, landscaping, wildlife ponds, orchards, lawns, flower/vegetable plots, demonstrate how communities can be supported to tackle the new agenda of government, through sustainable and more cost-effective local action, linking employment, health, social exclusion and poverty issues. Organically grown food is sold cheaply to tenants and supplies the community cafe at the base of the high rise, where the huge new conservatory provides a 'tropical oasis' at the centre of the layout. Unemployed, probation youth, the disabled and local school children have helped local tenants achieve their dream whilst learning new skills.

In financial terms a semi-derelict high-rise, with 40% unoccupied tenancies has been transformed into a fully renovated apartment block, community centre and productive gardens and is now 100% occupied with a waiting list. Other high-rises have been demolished at a cost greater than all the monies spent supporting this community-based model of holistic, social, environmental and community regeneration. This practical demonstration facility and process has been quoted in Government Departments of Environment, Social Exclusion and Health documents and as the prime case study in a National Strategy Document to improve inner-city, high-rise tenancies (over 1 million households). Local peoples' self-esteem and capacity for practical action has been rebuilt and the demonstration, in such evidently difficult circumstances, constantly inspires other groups through visits, TV programmes etc.

SUSTAINABILITY

This project did not employ any of the traditional social scientists' 'clip board survey' techniques, preferring to establish a trusted, ongoing partnership between an external facilitator, able to provide the minimum necessary technical and financial resources and a typical, inner-city, grassroots tenants association. By tackling and solving immediate priority problems before moving on to the next priority action this pioneering approach created a 'rolling programme' of community-based development, environmental regeneration and training which was not pre-planned but which continuously evolved in response to participants' immediate 'priority felt needs'. Grants were secured on a rolling basis to tackle specific problems, the tenant association itself became a self-managed company, with proper gender inclusion procedures. On-site materials (e.g. Excavated, pre-war cobble sets) were used as paths, walls etc. No external landscape designer was used, local people visited other relevant sites and designed their own space.

This self-help approach has:

- Created local employment opportunities, improved the income and practical skills for young unemployed New Deal clients.
- Improved the housing and landscaping assets of inner city sites, increasing local biodiversity through the growing of food producing vegetables and trees.
- Encouraged productive recycling/composting for food growing and reducing landfill.
- Stimulated locally-based partnerships/training, practical actions.
- Integrated the perceived priorities of socially-excluded, low income and minority groups and practical action within the wider 'joined up' context of policies of LA21 and HMG Sustainable Development Strategies.

Discussions with the Cooperative Bank indicated that a property loan, for outright purchase by the tenants would result in them moving from disinterested tenants, of a rundown high-rise block to co-owners of a valuable, landscaped community apartment property with mortgages repaid within approximately a decade, implying that community-based urban regeneration is self financing if communities are creatively and sustainably supported towards self reliance.

LESSONS LEARNED

This whole initiative was inspired by the example of a World Heritage City in the Yemen Republic, Shibam, the world's first high-rise city. Arid Lands Initiative filmed this example and showed it to Salford's inner-city, high-rise tenants, to demonstrate that illiterate, innumerate, poor people, when given control over their own environment, housing, means of livelihood could build and sustain their own habitat over thousands of years. By subsequently establishing a process of grassroots - implemented, step-by-step, inner-city regeneration, driven by local peoples' shared priorities, we have succeeded in demonstrating and documenting that local people, in this very different climate, environment, but sharing similar urban poverty and other constraints, can also tackle and solve their problems through their own self-managed, supported action.

The major organisational lessons learnt are that for successful, sustainable grassroots action the minimum, necessary ingredients are: Energy, enthusiasm, trust and leadership, a common interest to

solve defined, shared priority problems, a proper constitution, properly-elected grassroots representatives, local accounting systems supported by active membership, doing not talking or writing, plus funds, under the transparent control of membership with monitored and documented records.

This points up a further lesson that, however apparently lacking is a communities' 'capacity for self improvement', a constant policy of 'trusting subsidiarity' (always devolving actions and decisions downwards to the humblest level until proved otherwise) can succeed in a very cost-effective, albeit slower but more sustainable and replicable community development, where external consultant reports, commissions, workshops and top-down, 'integrated development programmes' fail. Another lesson is that practical 'learning by doing' can build and transfer skills and enable 'models of good practice' to be built and horizontally disseminated, particularly with the reinforcement of audio visual documentation, and if actions remain focused on solving the priority problems as determined by the evolving community itself.

TRANSFERABILITY

UK's Yorkshire, Humberside and Northwest regions have large pockets of urban and rural deprivation as concentrated as any in the country, as highlighted in *(Ref. Report by the Social Exclusion Unit, Cabinet Office, September 1998, 'Bringing Britain together': a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal). The practical, documented know-how already gained by establishing the Urban Oasis Demonstration Centre has been shown to successfully tackle many of these problems. This experience is now being transferred within and across regions to other socially-excluded groups, particularly those with a high proportion of the most difficult to access minority groups, initially in the Yorkshire and Humberside region and then nationally.

Successful pilot programmes are being spread cost-effectively by well targeted, 'learning by doing' action, supporting practical material, readily accessible to tenants, minority and socially excluded groups that do not readily absorb 'project case studies', densely written literature and complex, professionally managed 'top-down programmes'. The programme is publishing and disseminating simple and accessible resource material (short, basic, step-by-step, 'learning by doing' material and vegetable/tree growing packs for schools and low income households) summarising the range of practical actions that can stimulate and support sustainable, community-based regeneration around food growing, community cafes, secure space for leisure and recycling, waste management and training/employment creation.

A website will be established, linked to other partners working with the same target groups and in practical demonstration with primary schools, tenants associations, New Deal agencies, Healthy Living Centres and Health & Education Action Zones that encompass and target socially excluded communities. This programme, sitting centrally within Government priorities of targeted 'joined up' action around health, training, employment creation and environmental management.

Key Dates

Spring 2000 - Open University programme, Prof. Bellamy visit.

May 1999 - New Deal Oasis employment training starts.

Dec 1998/May 1999- Winner BT/WWF, Ford European Conservation Awards.

Spring 1998 - Government Health, Treasury Ministerial visits.

July 1996 - National Lottery/Government oasis grants secured.

References

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Source: Trees of Time and Place Bulletin, issue no.7, spring 1999.

Title: Food for All.

Source: The Big Issue, issue No. 248, Feb 15-21 1999, page 16.

Title: Conservatory Oasis.

Source: HABM, October 1998, page 17

Title: Professor Bellamy Challenge to Tony Blair for a date at Salford Oasis.

Source: Manchester Evening News, Alan Salter, 20/08/1998, page 5.

Title: Jewel in the town.

Source: The Guardian, Rachel Lewis, 01/05/1996.

Title: Salford's urban oasis.

Source: The Guardian, Paul Evans, Vol. 153, No. 20, 12/11/1995, page 30.

Title: Urban oases - greening the urban desert.

Source: Town & Country Planning, Anthony Milroy, October 1995, pages 271,2,3.

Contact

Tony Milroy
Machpelah Works,
Burnley Road,
Hebden Bridge, W. Yorks, HX7 8AZ.

Tel: 01422 843807

Fax: 01422 842241

Email: oasis@aridlands.freemove.co.uk

Type of Organization: Non-governmental organisation (NGO)

Partners

Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)

Andy Kirby

The Environmental Action Fund,

Zone 6/G9, 123 Victoria Street,

London, SW1E 6DE.

Tel: 0207 890 6654

Fax: 0207 890 6659

Type of Organization: Central Government

Type of Partner Support: Financial Support

Community Fund (formerly known as National Lottery Charity Board)

Liz Lush

Dallam Court, Dallam Lane,

Warrington, WA2 7LU.

Tel: 01925 626809

Fax: 01925 234041

Type of Organization: Charitable Trust

Type of Partner Support: Financial Support

The Body Shop Foundation
Gordon Roddick
The Body Shop International PLC,
Watersmead, Littlehampton,
West Sussex, BN17 6LS.

Tel: 0903 731500

Fax: 0903 726250

Type of Organization: Corporate Sponsor and Charitable Trust

Type of Partner Support: Financial Support

Financial Profile

Year	Total Budget (US\$)	Partner A (% of the budget)	Partner B (% of the budget)	Partner C (% of the budget)
1996/97	60,000	DEFRA 50%	Nil	Nil
1997/98	115,000	DEFRA 38%	Community Fund 12%	Shell Better Britain 15%
1998/99	190,000	DEFRA 22%	Community Fund 70%	Sainsbury Foundation 8%
1999/00	145,000	DEFRA 30%	Community Fund 60%	Sainsbury Foundation 10%
2000/01	100,000	DEFRA 50%	Nil	Sainsbury Foundation 30%
2001/02	100,000 replication	DEFRA 50%	CSV 10% (cash and in-kind)	Sainsbury Foundation 15%

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