

Power in Dirt: making public services more efficient by improving vacant spaces

CHANGE! Good practice factsheet

Title of good practice/initiative
<p>Power in Dirt: making public services more efficient by improving vacant spaces</p> <p>Power in Dirt is a systematised initiative of Baltimore City (US). Since 2011, it has helped people all over the city adopt and revitalize vacant lots.</p>



Description of the good practice /initiative: history, activities, number of involved people, territorial scope, current scale, future plans, impact and benefits (Max. 400 words)
<p>Baltimore's 'Power in Dirt' initiative aims to tackle the negative effects caused by large numbers of vacant lots, by making it possible for residents to adapt these for a range of uses, from community gardens to play areas, chess parks or concert spaces, however the majority of lots was used for gardening. Led by a Chief Service Officer reporting directly to the city's Mayor, the initiative involved working with the housing department to identify and map vacant lots and create a method to allow citizens legal right of entry, and working with utility providers to come up with a way of providing water to the lots at a reasonable cost.</p> <p>Before Power in Dirt there were some guerrilla actions, but the city created a system through the adoption and the watering process. It seems that the city communicated this well as after creating the system people and associations just started adopting lots.</p> <p>After an agreement is signed, residents or associations may begin their project to clean and beautify the lot. Agreements last one year, and with it, the gardeners may benefit from \$120/year water access provided by the City. Agreement renewals can last up to five years. The city has created an online portal that citizens can use to search for lots, apply to 'adopt' them and request a water supply. So far, more than 1,100 lots have been adopted, 79 per cent of which have been revitalised and maintained.</p> <p>If communicated well, it is an efficient tool to create a neighbourhood or city a safer, more productive place for everyone.</p> <p>Only city-owned vacant lots are available for adoption. However, many privately-owned vacant lots are in need of improvements as well. If a resident finds that the lots are privately owned, the municipality also offers a helping hand by providing basic information about steps that can be taken to legally access a privately-owned vacant lot.</p> <p>License agreements do not permit residents to install a permanent structure, parking, a dog park, playground equipment or a pool</p> <p>Some groups stewarding adopted lots have put a great deal of time, energy, and resources into making a site a vibrant and unique space in their neighbourhoods, and they seek to retain the space for community use in the future. Their hard work can be rewarded: if a community has maintained a lot for five years, it may be eligible to apply to have it protected as a land trust site through Baltimore Green Space.</p>



European Union
European Regional Development Fund



Brief description of how the specific **local public service** has been **challenged** (with figures, if possible)

As hundreds of cities, Baltimore also faced the problem caused by the crisis: more and more vacant spaces turned up contributing to a faster deprivation of the neighbourhood. Adopting a vacant lot can improve living conditions in a neighbourhood. Studies show that urban greening and gardening can play a significant role in revitalizing communities and reducing the impacts of poverty. Since Power in Dirt started in 2011, more than 1100 lots have been adopted. The majority of spaces was used to grow food. Communities with adopted lots have seen a 35 percent overall reduction in service requests to clean up trash. Green spaces also help decrease air and water pollution.

Role of the municipality within the process (e.g. how the municipality facilitates or coordinates the process to systematise/upscale a civic initiative)

Maintenance of public spaces is clearly the municipality's responsibility. To create a system like this needs forward thinking and agility to reinvent service design and delivery.

Key attributes (success factors) enabling (municipal) staff to implement the project successfully

In line with the above, key attributes are leadership and the willingness to take risks and face failure.

Links to website for further information on the good practice/initiative and recommendation to a specific partner

- www.powerindirt.com
- article: <http://www.baltimoresun.com/business/real-estate/wonk/bal-wonk-power-in-dirt-baltimore-vacantlot-adoption-program-gets-time-at-mayors-conference-20120618-story.html>

This practice shows similarities with Cities of Commons and the main issue is the creation of a system allowing residents to act legally. Few cities have such legislative framework in Europe, so it is interesting on a larger scale, but due to the likely focus of the IAP, Power of Dirt is mainly relevant for Riga among the CHANGE! partner cities.

The above description was prepared based on mainly the website text.