

Challenges for SSE-networks supporting local sustainability: lessons-learned of an IEP Site experiment in Mechelen (Belgium)

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Abstract. *In this paper, we report the first lessons learned of an Inclusive Economy Participation or IEP Site experiment realized in the city of Mechelen (Belgium). An IEP Site is a geographically concentrated location where profit, public, and social profit organizations join forces to stimulate the inclusive economic participation of vulnerable citizens. Because stimulating inclusive economic participation is one of the basic dimensions of sustainability, an IEP-site can be depicted as the physical residence of a network that supports local sustainability. As Social and Solidarist Economy organizations fulfill a key-role in this location, the IEP Site network can be depicted as an SSE-network. Although the experiment in Mechelen did not correspond entirely with the fundamental features of an IEP Site, the encountered endeavors did generate useful and relevant lessons learned. As such, we have experienced how difficult it is to join forces successfully and to create a well-functioning local network for economic inclusion. Additionally, unexpected setbacks have challenged the partners to continue to come up with creative and on-the-spot solutions. At the same time, these setbacks have put their motivation, commitment, and resilience repeatedly under pressure. Fortunately, there were also unexpected strokes of luck. Thus, the partners have experienced how a diversified methodological approach and active participation of vulnerable citizens themselves in the spatial design of the site, has triggered the competences of self-reliance and personal growth of the vulnerable citizens involved. In short, the experiment in Mechelen generates useful new insights that stimulate further development and successful implementation of the IEP-site concept in Belgium.*

Keywords: Inclusive economy, IEP-site, experiment, Belgium

JEL Codes: L2, L3, J6

1. Introduction

The notions of sustainability and sustainable development have different meanings. One of the earliest definitions was presented by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in the now generally known Brundlandt reports (1987). According to this definition, sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In addition to strong ecological engagement, this definition also implies engagement in three other areas: politics, culture, and economics (Pearce, Markandya and Barbier, 1994; Scott Cato, 2009; Mishra, 2017; Shapiro and Verchick, 2018). The exploration and development of the economic dimension often associate the notion of sustainability with other, existing economic concepts. The economic dimension, for example, is often linked to inclusive economic growth, an inclusive economy and a highly

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developed Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) (Defourny, Develtere and Fonteneau, 1999; Bouchard, 2009; Conforth and Brown, 2014; Hasmath, 2015; Van Meijl, Ruben and Reinhard, 2017). The common thread that runs through these related notions is that everyone in our society has the right to participate in economic life. This means that both the economy and economic models and/or policies must be explicitly geared towards the creation of (participation) opportunities for everyone – including the most socially vulnerable among us – and at achieving mutual economic solidarity.

With an eye to this economic inclusion, we at the Faculty of Design Sciences of the University of Antwerp (UAntwerp) have come up with the concept of the IEP Site. The acronym stands for Inclusive Economic Participation. An IEP Site, in other words, is a place where different organizations join forces to support and inform socially vulnerable citizens, both as consumers and as producers. Because SSE organizations – along with the public (mainly local governments) and private actors involved – are the main stakeholders of these sites, we define IEP Sites as local SSE networks in organizational terms (Vallet, Bylemans and De Nys-Ketels, 2017; Vallet, De Nys-Ketels and Bylemans, 2018). In addition to a priority focus on the economic dimension, an IEP Site also respects the ecological, political, and cultural dimensions of the notion 'sustainability' (see below under 3.2). In short, conceptually, an IEP site is very much in line with an integrated notion of sustainability, but it mainly emphasizes the economic dimension.

This contribution focuses on the meaning of the IEP Site and the inductively generated lessons learned from its de facto operation. The lessons learned are the result of the first pilot project that was realized in the city of Mechelen (Belgium). With respect to its structure, we will successively address (2) the development of the IEP Site concept, (3) the concrete meaning of the IEP Site and its overlap with the notion of sustainability, (4) the experiences gained during the IEP Site pilot project in the city of Mechelen, and (5) the lessons learned in Mechelen. It is important to emphasize that our contribution mainly shows how difficult it is to realize economic empowerment through the entwining of network forces. In our opinion, however, the interim results are inspiring and make future follow-up research and projects on IEP-sites worthwhile.

2. Why Is There a Need for IEP Sites?

In the first section, we reflect on the reasons why we launched the IEP Site concept in the first place. On the one hand, these are reasons that refer to ongoing exploratory research in the Flanders SSE sector. This sector consists of organizations whose economic activities comply with well-defined principles, namely (i) the primacy of labour over capital, (ii) the guarantee of democratic and transparent decision-making, (iii) the generation of products and services with pronounced social added value, and (iv) respect for the quality of the environment and the life of several generations worldwide (Defourny, Develtere and Fonteneau, 1999; Bouchard, 2009; Conforth and Brown, 2014). On the other hand, these are reasons related to the social commitment of academic research. Both allow us to embed the IEP Site concept in a broader framework of disciplinary movements, publications, and existing research.

2.1. Existing Spatial Barriers

We began studying the Flemish SSE sector more than ten years ago. We have tried to obtain insights into the long-term challenges this sector faces, as well as into the ways in which SSE organizations deal with them (Vallet, 2010a and 2010b; Vallet, Van Wymeersch and Bylemans, 2018). In concrete terms, this resulted in research into strategic policymaking by SSE organizations.

However, some five years ago, we broadened our initial disciplinary focus in close consultation with the professional field. On the basis of semi-structured interviews and focus groups consisting of experience

experts, including SSE entrepreneurs, SSE employees, political and administrative SSE policymakers and coordinators at the local and Flemish policy level, we learned that the successful implementation of strategic policies is closely related to the spatial design of SSE initiatives. By 'spatial design', we mean the location and design of both economic meeting points and meeting places (for example markets, shops, forums, and information desks) as well as economic, educational facilities and workspaces (for example classrooms, studios, coaching spaces and shop floors). Because, according to the experience experts involved, spatial design can either break down or raise barriers for the target group, we have gradually broadened the strategic focus with a design-oriented focus based on the disciplines of interior design, architecture and urban development (De Nys-Ketels, Vallet and Bylemans, 2015; Vallet, Bylemans and De Nys-Ketels, 2017).

One particular spatial challenge – which was also recognized on the national and international (research) platforms at which we presented our advancing insights – caught our attention. According to the experience experts mentioned above, the number of initiatives associated with the economic inclusion of socially vulnerable citizens in Flanders had increased considerably over the past ten years. However, this did not result in the target group's being helped in a (more) prompt, predictable, and precise manner. According to the experience experts, geographical fragmentation was a major problem: initiatives were and are located in different locations throughout the Flemish countryside as well as set up by different bodies. This geographical fragmentation presents a barrier to socially vulnerable citizens, because they generally find it difficult to bridge spatial distances mentally (for example, due to a need for proximity and security), physically (for example, due to restrictions on movement) and financially (for example, due to the lack of affordable and easily accessible modes of transport). In addition, the organization of initiatives by separate bodies requires extra coordination efforts: What support can I, as a citizen, get from whom and at what location, exactly? In short, the spatially dispersed nature of the economic inclusion initiatives in Flanders risks, according to the professional field, undermining their accessibility and, therefore, also their (positive) effects.

To find a suitable solution to this particular problem, we sought inspiration from the sociologist and urbanist Manuel Castells (Castells, 1989, 2000, 2010; Stock, 2011). He says citizens can (only) participate in and thus become part of social fabric by connecting, for example, information, people, and capital. People who do not find ways to connect are inevitably left behind. Following Castells' ideas, we came up with the idea of creating spatial nodes that bring together initiatives for the economic inclusion of socially vulnerable citizens. We named these nodes IEP Sites or Inclusive Economic Participation Sites (see more under 3). IEP Sites can be created anywhere in principle, but our focus is on the urban environment

2.2. Scientific Foundations: A Matter of Scientific Commitment

As mentioned above, our IEP Site research was not only inspired by the needs and requirements of the field, but also by our own discipline and its tradition of engaged academic research. In concrete terms, this involves the disciplines of economics, organizational theory, management, and design sciences. They are, therefore, the building blocks of our scientific commitment and foundation.

First of all, this scientific foundation can be associated with the concept of an economically inclusive society in which everyone is equal and can and may participate fully in the economic process. The economy belongs to everyone including those who, in the currently dominant ideological system, are characterized as vulnerable because as producers they do not have sufficient marketable competencies and means of production, and as consumers, they do not have the coveted purchasing power and needs that can be satisfied by profitable products. Moreover, their vulnerability runs the risks of becoming a vicious circle. Because of their vulnerability, they are in danger of losing their full citizenship and independence. Others – read: economically stronger fellow human beings – often determine what is good for them. Others determine the

structures and the rules of the game. Similarly, others also determine the organization of the economic and public space, often in the service, or so they think, of what vulnerable fellow citizens need and what motivates them. This may well be meant for the best, but it does not benefit the strength and resilience of vulnerable people. A more emancipatory approach is needed, one in which socially vulnerable citizens learn to 'read' and 'write' economically and spatially so that they can challenge others to explore and take new paths together and on the same footing. The ambition to develop an emancipatory approach to economics to create an economically (more) inclusive society is in line with the work of various academic researchers, especially of colleagues active in the niche of the SSE (Spear et.al., 2001; Moulaert and Ailenei, 2005; Monzon and Chaves, 2008; Certo and Miller, 2008; Conforth and Brown, 2014). In parallel with the above, our scientific engagement is also linked to attempts to develop new and alternative economic models (for example, Alter-Globalism). In this respect, too, we follow various academic researchers in the field of economics (Sanders, 2000; Krugman, 2008; Stiglitz, 2010 and 2012; Piketty, 2014; Yunus, 2017).

The second type of scientific engagement is related to the spatial design process. Most spatial design processes have introduced different optimizations, improvements, or refinements to give users a say. In the design disciplines, these initiatives generally fall under the heading of user-fit design (Siu, 2003). When we evaluate these methods of participation in the design process and especially their actual applications, the results appear to be somewhat disappointing. After all, the dominant design logic often remains that of designers themselves and/or that of the (financing) client (Sanders, 2000; Freeman, Nairn and Sligo, 2003; Friess, 2010; Luck, 2018). This is also the case with regard to the design of public and social profit spaces that accommodate economic inclusion initiatives. With respect to the public space, for example, classical hearings are commonly about designs that are actually largely finished and will only address small or general grievances (for example, a request for a bus stop in front of every entrance, for a location other than an industrial estate, for more green in the public space or for Fabrication Laboratories or Fab Labs at which creative citizens can make their own products). Or co-creation moments that are limited in time and space operationally address people's direct wants, rather than ask further questions and possibly expose people's underlying needs. In short, designers and their own (functional and technical) expertise and assumptions and opinions about what is good for 'the' vulnerable citizen and how they do and will behave in a space often still occupy center stage. Although intentions are sometimes good, designers and clients together quite autonomously decide what is actually 'good', 'suitable', and 'beautiful' for the vulnerable citizen and thus for society. Using a new design logic that we also developed and applied at the IEP Sites, we of research group Henry van de Velde (Faculty of Design Sciences, UAntwerp) try to transcend this traditional design approach fundamentally. The new design logic starts from the vulnerable users themselves; their experiential expert role is transposed, through spatial awareness and literacy, into energy and action potential. They themselves actually become the starting point of the design process. They create their own space.

3. What is an IEP Site?

Having explained our motives and embedded them in existing academic research, let us return to the characteristics of IEP Sites. By analogy with the ideas of Castells (see before), an IEP Site is a geographical hub in the urban fabric that gathers organizations that work on the integrated economic participation of socially vulnerable citizens together and connects them spatially. SSE organizations play a key role in this process.

3.1. Many, complementary functions

During our successive research projects, we found that IEP Sites fulfil various functions (Vallet, Bylemans and De Nys-Ketels, 2017; Vallet, De Nys-Ketels and Bylemans, 2018; Vallet, Van Wymeersch and Bylemans, 2018):

- The basic function of an IEP Site, first of all, is to accommodate various organizations that work on inclusive economic participation. In addition, certain spaces can be shared and thus used in an optimized or ecologically responsible manner.
- Secondly, IEP Sites are easy to locate and easy to reach by socially vulnerable people.
- Thirdly, IEP Sites offer socially vulnerable people a range of opportunities to participate in the initiatives on offer as well as in designing the location. We think this is a very special feature. A well-considered setting, affirmative architecture, and open design can ensure that these sites are interesting, attracting poles that socially vulnerable citizens themselves can help build. By means of actual co-creation, such sites become their sites.
- Fourthly, the physical proximity of like-minded organizations also stimulates the necessary synergies and innovations. The realization of joint or integrated projects is a very special, but hardly self-evident feature. After all, previous research has shown that the fact that organizations are settled together on a single location does not always lead to mutual encounter and cooperation.
- Finally, well-considered design and setting of the site, for example in a poor or vulnerable urban area, can also contribute to neighbourhood-oriented development

3.2. Connection to sustainability

Based on the above definition and functions, there are various ways in which the IEP Site concept is in line with the notion of sustainability:

- Through economic inclusion, IEP Sites link up with the economic dimension of the notion of sustainability.
- Through the explicit involvement of public partners and the creation of organization networks, IEP Sites also play on the political dimension of the notion of sustainability.
- Through their geographical setting and anchoring in urban neighbourhoods and districts, IEP Sites also touch on the cultural dimension. IEP Sites feed or create, as it were, local communities with their underlying norms and values (for example, inclusion, solidarity, emancipation).
- Through the presence of SSE organizations, IEP Sites also touch on the ecological dimension of the notion of sustainability. After all, an important organizational characteristic of any SSE organization is an explicit focus on the quality of life of a number of generations worldwide and, therefore, on the quality of the environment. That is why various SSE organizations are also active in ecological sectors such as circular economy, green energy, ecological water management, and environmentally safe mobility.

3.3. Developing Strategic-Spatial Blueprints Using Qualitative Exploratory Research

Pursuant to the launch of the new concept as well as the expertise of the research team (see 2.1), our research was and still is focused on the exploration and development of models or blueprints that can further specify and concretize the IEP Site concept and its strategic and spatial design. Such blueprints would help local policymakers and interested SSE organizations make more deliberate and targeted policy decisions about the sustainable, inclusive economy. On the one hand, exploratory research consists of inspiring case studies taken from the Belgian SSE sector and on the other, of realized pilot projects in Flemish cities.

A first pilot project (2015-2017) was to be realized in the former colony of Wortel-Merksplas, which considered reallocating five buildings to create an IEP Site focused on the sectors of sustainable agriculture and horticulture (including a pick-your-own garden, local products and therapeutic animal care) and sustainable tourism (including collective accommodation for equestrian tourism). However, its actual realization was discontinued prematurely due to shifts in the local political agenda.

A second pilot project took place in the city of Mechelen (2017-2019) [1]. With the financial support of the ESF (European Social Fund), a temporary IEP Site was set up on the third floor of a former boarding school. This IEP Site focused on socially vulnerable young people (that is, with a low level of education, unemployment, replacement income, housing problems, serious social and/or medical problems, and absent or unclear future prospects). The site focuses on the development of a sustainable care sector. In concrete terms, this involves the niches of (i) healthy and cheap food and hospitality industry, (ii) accessible neighbourhood-oriented maintenance and repair services, (iii) an affordable circular user economy (that is, recycling-based interior design and small-scale urban agriculture), and (iv) the development of accessible informative digital platforms. This IEP Site provides training, coaching, and practical experience [2]. The following sections will further explain its setup, progress, as well as the insights it generated.

Methodologically, the pilot project uses a qualitative research setup that in concrete terms uses action research (that is, into successive decisions as well as interventions), observations (that is, of behaviour shown by the young people and the partners before and after the interventions) and open interviews (that is, about perceptions and experiences of the young people and the partners) (Charmaz, 2014; Yin, 2017). As such, the pilot project takes the form of a case study that, in line with its pilot character, is gradually developed and designed.

4. What have we found at the IEP Site in Mechelen?

The IEP Site in Mechelen is (for the time being) the only pilot project that has actually been able to test run. Because the test only ran for six months and because the pilot project has not yet been fully completed at the time of this writing, these are ‘findings under construction’. This means that the lessons learned must be read with due caution. This is even more advisable in light of the methodological framework of exploratory qualitative research (see above). We are not proving anything, but we are developing additional insights that gradually bring us closer to a better understanding of our initial IEP Site ambition.

Below, we successively address our findings regarding the explicit profile (4.1), the course of events and the challenges that manifested (4.2), and the way in which we made additional choices and carried out additional activities to deal with the challenges of the pilot project (4.3).

4.1. Focusing on Socially Vulnerable Young People in a Growing Care Sector

It is, in line with our previous research results, important to make strategic choices about target groups and economic activities at the launch of the IEP Site (Vallet, Bylemans, and De Nys-Ketels, 2017; Vallet, De Nys-Ketels and Bylemans, 2018). These choices are made explicitly for the purpose of meeting specific local challenges and of the support available among the partners involved. It is important to note that the decision-making process worked out significantly different than we expected. More about this in sections 4.2 and 4.3.

The profile of the IEP Site in Mechelen clearly centers on the economic reintegration of socially vulnerable young people (that is, the target group). They are young people between the ages of 18 and 25 who not only have special needs as consumers (for example cheap housing, accessible training and coaching,

healthy basic food) but also as producers (they have, for example, difficult access to the regular labour market and lack financial investment resources).

In accordance with conceptual guidelines, the choice of the target group was mainly made by the two local public partners involved (Vallet, Bylemans, and De Nys-Ketels, 2017; Vallet, De Nys-Ketels and Bylemans, 2018), which also substantiated their decision. According to the City of Mechelen and the VDAB (Flemish Employment and Vocational Training Office), the number of socially vulnerable young people in the Mechelen region is large and growing. A total of eight young people were recruited into the IEP Site project over a period of six months.

As we mentioned earlier, the selection of economic activities targeted some niches in the care sector as a whole, in concrete terms the sectors (i) healthy and cheap food and hospitality industry, (ii) accessible neighbourhood-oriented maintenance and repair services, (iii) an affordable circular user economy (that is, recycling-based interior design and small-scale urban agriculture), and (iv) the development of accessible informative digital platforms (for example, where to go to get your needs met).

The aim of the IEP Site was to recruit young people and train them for work in these sectors as much as possible, but the training goals were not entirely fixed in advance. In the course of the project, we made a deliberate decision to build in more space and openness to ensure that the young people could also be trained for other niches (see below under 4.3).

4.2. The course of Events and Emerging Challenges

The launch and incremental development of the experimental IEP Site in Mechelen actually ran a different course than we had planned. This was the result of unforeseen circumstances that consisted of challenges of a threatening nature as well as of an opportunity-creating nature.

Moreover, we faced turbulent circumstances that made it necessary to add the necessary water to the initial conceptual wine (see below at An Unexpectedly Difficult Start-Up, and also at 4.3). The main question is whether such unforeseen and turbulent circumstances are unique and exclusive to the Mechelen experiment, or self-evident and inevitable at the setting up of an IEP Site in general. That is why it is important to report explicitly on these circumstances. A detailed explanation of the circumstances or context also fits in with the explicitly exploratory and qualitative character of the IEP Site research.

- **A Restraining as well as Inspiring Context**

First of all, some contemporary developments that are taking place in the entire public and SSE sector are not actually unique to the city of Mechelen, for example the need for far-reaching cutbacks, the scarcity of (financial and human) resources, the limited public space left to be allocated freely, the need for directly visible (electoral) results and a pronounced (policy) priority meant to quickly correct the requirements of the labour market. Risky exploration, reconnoitering, testing, and gradual development are therefore not really in demand and are sometimes even impossible.

In the case of the IEP Site project in Mechelen, these developments regularly led to tensions between, on the one hand, the need to learn and acquire insights (that is, the need to explore and experiment) and, on the other, ambitions and expectations – particularly on the part of the ESF financier and the city council involved – to achieve visible results (that is, the necessity to perform).

On the other hand, the IEP Site in Mechelen was set up in a relatively favorable local context. After all, there are many organizations in Mechelen that are committed to the target group concerned. They guaranteed the local availability of a great deal of target group-oriented expertise.

- **An Unexpectedly Difficult Start-Up**

A second challenge was created by the difficult and repeatedly delayed start-up of the IEP Site project. The reasons were diverse.

First of all, there were challenges related to the location. The original location was suddenly declared uninhabitable shortly after the commencement of the project. After a few months of negotiations, a second location suddenly proved not yet to be available. This was a pity because we, in accordance with the guidelines of our initial concept, had already begun exploring the neighbourhood and contacting interesting local partners (a social restaurant, a sport and boxing club, for example). Given the original concept, the third and final location, namely an empty floor in a former boarding school, was not exactly ideal from a spatial point of view, but a further search was undesirable given the project's by then limited time span.

Parallel to the challenges presented by location, the partners involved presented us with challenges as well. The gradual refinement and choice of a target group (i.e., youngsters) and economic activity (i.e., sustainable health-care sector) required an additional search for expert partners, preferably in the SSE sector. As a result, the initial consortium (comprising the city of Mechelen, UAntwerp, AMS and VDAB Mechelen) was expanded by two SSE partners who had the necessary expertise about the target group (Arktos and Emino) and by two partners who not only had expertise about the sector, but could also provide access to other local SSE organizations active in the selected sector (the SSE organization Groep Intro and care company Rivierenland).

Shortly thereafter, more problems arose, this time with regard to the finding and actually recruiting of target group members. Although we had made the necessary agreements with the facilitating partners (including VDAB Mechelen) in advance, things turned out to be much more difficult than we had expected. Recruiting and holding on to a substantial group of young people proved difficult. Also, an additional problem arose concerning the correct administrative-legal statute under which the young people could and had to be appointed at the site (see under 4.3, methodical customization).

All in all, the launch of the IEP Site in Mechelen turned out to be much more complex and difficult than we had expected. In an ever-shrinking timeframe, the partners had to creatively and benevolently look forever different and (more) feasible solutions. Fortunately, we usually found them (see 4.3).

- **A Less than Ideal Final Location**

The final (third) location presented a special challenge. It was, for one thing, on the third floor of an otherwise largely unused building, which dulled the conceptually desirable liveliness, attractiveness, and accessibility to young people and local residents. The site was hardly visible from the street and could only be reached by stairs (that is, there was no lift). The location was also a problem for the partners who, for the same reasons, were only present on the site on a part-time basis (two or three days a week).

All in all, the location of the IEP Site in Mechelen was used as a part-time operating base rather than as an easily accessible, attractive, and intensively used or active place for both the young people and the partners, as our initial concept would have it.

- **A Temporary Experiment with an Eye to the Future**

Another feature was the pronounced temporary nature of the IEP Site. On the one hand, the IEP Site was established in a temporary emergency location (see above). On the other, its lifespan was as limited as its ESF funding. This was not in line with our initial concept either, in which a continuous character and long-term perspectives for both the young people and the partners were prioritized.

We have tried to compensate for this temporary character in different ways (see 4.3). For example, all partners searched extensively for ways to continue the operation of the IEP Site, also after the termination of

the ESF funding. In this respect, they explicitly expressed their support to a future-oriented engagement to the IEP Site consortium. What complicated the situation was that the ESF did want the continuation of the pilot project but insisted that financing had to be found elsewhere entirely. The partners of the IEP consortium felt this was a somewhat distorted state of affairs.

4.3. Additional Choices/Activities to Meet the Challenges

So much for the challenges; now on to the choices made and activities carried out to successfully meet them.

- **Writing and Registering to Learn**

Regarding the noted tension between exploratory learning on the one hand and result-oriented performing on the other, we have, in line with the innovative nature of the granted ESF funding, mainly focused on the learning. However, the pressure to achieve visible results (that is, to reach a large number of young people) remained high. This was mainly due to the influence of the public partner (the city council of Mechelen). Two election moments, specifically the local elections in the early autumn of 2017 and the Flemish, federal and European elections during the realization of the pilot project in the spring of 2019, at times considerably increased this pressure. In concrete terms, the ambitions included reaching a large or larger group of socially vulnerable young people and actually offering them permanent employment.

The most important activity was the creation of a scenario in which the partners wrote down fairly meticulously what exactly they experienced during the different stages of the project (that is, which challenges they faced) and how they dealt with these (that is, by which activities and methods). Each activity was also accompanied by an explicit evaluation (comprising insights, learning effects, and advice for the future).

In addition, the learning process was also stimulated during steering committee meetings during which we not only regularly discussed operational developments, but also talked about desirable and obtained learning effects (for example, the problems of and alternative solutions with respect to the administrative-legal statute). After these meetings, records of the discussions would be included in the minutes and in the developed scenario.

A third and final activity that prioritized learning overachieving was an exercise concerning the compulsory development of a business plan. The ESF made drafting a professional business plan in the course of the project compulsory. Together with the Antwerp Management School (AMS), which provided coaching on the subject, we decided to organize a half-day workshop to provide the IEP Site consortium with a 'guiding canvas'; this allowed us to express relevant experiences and learning effects jointly.

- **Joining Local Forces to Create More Breathing Space**

We managed to partly solve the difficulties we experienced recruiting and activating socially vulnerable young people by making intensive use of the rich local landscape of specialized organizations and existing initiatives in Mechelen. We have always tried to match the range of activities available at the IEP Site with that of existing local organizations.

In concrete terms, for example, we were able to call on regular students in technical education programs in Mechelen (TSM) to devise a logo and signage on the IEP Site itself and the Mechelen Parks and Public Gardens Department helped us set up a small vegetable garden on the outdoor space of the IEP Site. To find suitable assignments and trainee posts for the young people of the IEP Site, we collaborated with an urban wood workshop as well as with community workers (that is, with J@M). To realize a more outreaching approach to the recruitment of young people, we also consulted with the penholder of another ESF project in Mechelen, namely the Samenlevingsdienst. To de facto furnish the IEP Site; finally, we purchased materials

and furniture from local retailers and other SSE organizations in Mechelen (including a local do-it-yourself shop and the Ecoso thrift shop).

- **Simultaneous Stocktaking, Identifying, Activating and Designing to Create a Visible and Attractive Site**

The difficulty of finding a suitable location as well as the hardly ideal profile of the location we finally settled on led to the following activities and interventions.

The first activity was the drafting of an inventory of the minimum conditions that a location must meet in order to (be able to) be suitable as an IEP Site. A first condition is the presence of consultable information for interested initiators about freely available spaces in the city. A second condition is the availability of basic facilities regarding the utility infrastructure (water, electricity, lighting, heating, and sanitary facilities). A third condition is related to minimum accessibility and visibility from the street. In this respect, we prefer locations that are on the ground floor, with at least a minimum of signage and appropriate features (for example, a large open entrance door, few communicating doors, many glass walls and/or windows, no sills or stairs and lots of infrastructural signposting).

Some minimum conditions can also be met by the participants of the IEP Site themselves. It is therefore not necessary that all the conditions are met in advance. At the IEP Site in Mechelen, this applied to the signposting, which we provided together with the young people of the IEP Site as well as with third parties (such as TSM).

A subsequent set of activities concerns the activation and actual furnishing of the location. On the basis of our experiences, we can say that the IEP Site coordinator and the partners play an important part in this. By his presence and by the weekly work meetings of partners and young people, the IEP Site coordinator was the main driving force behind the activities that took place on the site itself, for example (i) the practical organization of workshops (for example woodworking, wall finishing and kitchen garden layout), (ii) the provision of materials and tools, (iii) the provision of required infrastructure (such as a table tennis table and a projection screen), (iv) the calling in of extra help (for example that of the local wood workshop and the Mechelen Parks and Public Gardens Department), and (v) the follow-up of the furnishing activities. Enterprising, anticipating, and motivating coordinators who are willing to roll up their sleeves provide an important stimulus. In addition, there is the dynamic part played by the partners. Based on our experiences, we can say that it is very important that the partners carry out their activities (that is, counseling or coaching, training, production activities, and service activities) on the site itself as much as possible. In concrete terms, this means the site itself requires sufficient supporting infrastructure (for example, studios, office spaces, and coaching and relaxation spaces).

Like the signposting, such spaces can also be created by the young people of the IEP Site themselves. At the IEP Site in Mechelen, for example, the young people designed and de facto furnished the various spaces as well as the terraced urban kitchen garden. In most cases, the design assignments were carried out without a hitch, this in contrast to the practical realization.

- **Customized Communication for the Improved Recruitment of Young People**

The difficulties in recruiting target group members for the IEP Site in Mechelen resulted in a number of additional interventions. One set of interventions was aimed at the improvement and optimization of communications. Generally speaking, we opted for more customized communication.

At the start of the project, for example, we made an extra effort to develop simple, clear messages for different types of media (for example brochure, info session); these were mostly used by the VDAB Mechelen. Despite our best efforts, it was very difficult to get a positive response from the target group. On the basis of informal conversations with the young people (that is, also with those who eventually dropped

out), we strongly suspect that this had something to do with the image and the part that the public authorities play in the general counselling process of these young people. After all, they are controlling and sanctioning bodies with which the young people involved did not always have a positive relationship outside the IEP Site. It is only logical for these public bodies to play this part and to do so in the IEP Site project as well. However, on the basis of our experiences, we can say that this probably creates some reservations and distance between the target group and the IEP Site. Further research is recommended.

Subsequently, we increasingly opted for a more personal and trusting approach to communication. In concrete terms, we offered individual, personal counseling through the coaches of the SSE organizations Arktos and Emino (in response to the 'need for a face'). From the moment the young people were informed about the project via the VDAB Mechelen, they could count on a personal welcome and further explanation at the IEP Site. It was important, according to the coaches, that this happened as soon as possible. After all, lengthy-time intervals could result in young people staying away, perhaps never to come back. We also repeatedly noted that if the coaches were not present on the site, the young people they were supervising would not show up either. This confirms the theory that the development of a personal relationship of trust is a prerequisite for a successful approach.

The need to overcome the short-term and temporary nature of the IEP Site is related to the development of a relationship of trust. On the basis of the coaching we provided, we found, for example, that socially vulnerable young people are often fed up with finding themselves in one temporary project after another. The temporariness erodes their motivation and engagement. What they need are more tangible and sustainable future perspectives. That is why all of the partners involved in the IEP Site project went out of their way to find additional financing and/or follow-up projects during the course of the IEP Site project. However, this was not properly communicated to the young people involved, and this aspect could certainly be improved upon.

- **Customized Methods for the Improved Recruitment of Young People**

Based on our experiences at the IEP Site in Mechelen, we can say that the success of the recruitment of young people also depends on the method used, which must be customized to the life rhythm, priorities, and needs of the target group. On the one hand, this implies the use of a sufficiently *broad* method and on the other, the use of a sufficiently *flexible* method.

In concrete terms, we have undertaken three types of activities to ensure this broad focus. They are also activities directly in line with the scientific engagement mentioned above (see 2.2).

To recruit young people, we first initiated intensive, individual talks to map candidates 'dreams' (life) talents and (life) ambitions. The recruitment method was thus explicitly geared towards the overall growth of the individual, this with guarantees with regard to the freedom to explore and interpersonal equality (that is, the young people are equal partners in the IEP Site project and are, from the outset, allowed to indicate which route they actually want to take or which paths they want to explore). Among ourselves, we succinctly called this setting up 'dream sessions'.

In addition, we focused on the second type of activities on the development of the spatial literacy of candidates to stimulate their broader social awareness, development, and self-reliance. In concrete terms, we realized this through two workshops. Using simple reference photos that we collected, we invited the young people to join us in the furnishing of the IEP Site, including all desired and/or required spaces. Using the photos as a source of inspiration for a talk/dialogue, we tried to make them aware of the dimensions of a design that can change (for example, color, light, material, circulation, and so on). Through talks and reflections about the function of the various spaces and the choices they made and preferences they had, they gained insight into the way different aspects of a design can influence people's experience and the resulting

behavior (for example, some people can relax better in space X, some people like to be coached in space Y, some people are motivated to learn in space Z, and so on). In short, space can be changed, and this change can have positive and desired effects on people's experiences (that is, space can have an atmosphere) and thus also on their motivation for things like training and/or work. Moreover, change does not have to be expensive or complex. Once raised, this awareness also stimulated their self-reliance (for example, they became aware they could actually do certain things themselves, or make certain purchases themselves, or ask their boss). Last but not least, they also increasingly realized that they could use their growing spatial awareness and self-reliance in their personal lives (for example, they realized that they also wanted to make certain changes in their own living environment, changes that would help them recover and make them feel at home) and in their social-spatial commitment (they realized for instance which changes at the community center would make them want to visit it much more often and make themselves heard, or they realized they would like to do something about the seating on the square now that they saw the many possibilities, and/or they realized that maybe they would like to go to the community centre meeting after all). In this respect, spatial literacy and self-reliance also supported and activated their emancipation and strength.

The third and final type of activity implied that the IEP Site in Mechelen also provided space for general relaxation and the fulfilment of basic needs (for example, it had a multifunctional space in which young people and their coaches could eat their homemade lunches together and a mirror- and jungle room to relax in that they designed and furnished themselves). In short, the site certainly had a lot more to offer than spaces aimed directly at training, coaching, and work.

So much for the broad focus of the approach, we have subsequently undertaken three activities to ensure its flexible focus.

First, we abandoned the initially formulated recruitment process (that is, the one we developed during the preparation of the trial run stage), which used a strictly linear incremental plan that had the candidates go through the entire six-month trial period together as a group. Instead, we opted for a more continuous and adaptable recruitment approach, with limited or even absent sanctioning implications for candidates who were absent for a while or dropped out. After all, if we want to restore their relationship with society definitively, sustainably, and trustingly, we must be prepared to offer them, over and over again, opportunities to pick up the thread. This way, their involvement and engagement with the IEP Site can slowly grow as well. Their generally unpredictable and at times, very impulsive and searching behavior has meant that, throughout the six-month period, they have seldom been continuously present on the site as a group. Moving away from the prescribed steps of the incremental plan also means that the exact content of the process can be reviewed in the interim. Being part of a trial also implies: being allowed to change your mind (for example, a candidate who initially thought he wanted to be trained as a warehouse attendant because he couldn't think of anything else realized, after trying some other things, that he would much rather do something creative and sporty with young people and that becoming a warehouse attendant was not his cup of tea at all). Admittedly, such flexibility is not self-evident to public partners who, as a controlling body, are expected to take the reins and, if necessary, sanction (for example, the VDAB Mechelen). As a result of this methodological choice, these public partners occasionally experienced role conflicts.

A second activity implied that throughout the project, we searched intensively for a suitable administrative-legal statute, that is, a statute that would allow a flexible and broad exploratory and financially remunerated labour market trajectory for the target group (see 4.2). However, such a statute does not currently appear to exist in Flanders. The VDAB Mechelen, therefore, examined whether the so-called BIS statute could possibly offer a solution in this respect? This is a statute that allows for additional financing and also has a varied duration (for example, a minimum of one month and a maximum of six

months). However, the formally existing BIS statute needed to be adapted in order to achieve the desired flexibility in terms of content. To this end, the local VDAB Mechelen drafted a proposal for a kind of 'generic' BIS status and submitted it to the Flemish central office of the VDAB. Unfortunately, the proposal was not deemed acceptable by the central office of the VDAB, which, moreover, indicated that they wanted to keep the statutes for training on the one hand and work on the other clearly separate. This is not without consequences. If a young person wants to attend the unique IEP Site labor market training trajectory, there is no single, conclusive, and all-encompassing statute to refer to. It now takes a consecutive set of different statutes, each application for a short period of training and/or working, as well as statutes with regard to different sectors and/or positions. This implies that candidates face a complex and probably inimitable tangle of changing short-term statutes and that the partners involved encounter a considerable administrative burden.

Finally, a third activity implied that we gradually opted for a flexible management model of the IEP Site consortium, this in line with the needed flexible employment trajectory. After all, if the recruitment trajectories have to be flexible, then the partners of the consortium who develop, manage and support these trajectories must also be able to deal with flexibility in terms of their organization and policy. In concrete terms, this implied, for example, that we (i) (continuously) recalibrated the essence of our ambitions, (ii) translated these into general guidelines rather than advance descriptions at the operational plan level, (iii) gave guidance in accordance with developments that occurred, (iv) left sufficient room for adjustments and revisions, (v) (dared to) develop pragmatic and creative solutions, (vi) tested these and further adjusted and revised them on the basis of actually found results, (vii) had sufficient eye for small successes or changes, and (viii) coordinated a great deal through direct personal talks. This management model is very much in line with the so-called behavioural incremental management paradigm as recognized in the management sciences (Vallet, 2018 and 2019). It is very well-suited to organizations that find themselves in unpredictable and dynamic environments. After all, by itself, the behaviourally incremental management paradigm guarantees the necessary resilience and inventiveness needed to survive in such an environment. This was also the kind of environment in which the Mechelen IEP-site consortium found itself as a result of the difficult start-up and the emphasis on learning instead of performance.

5. What did we learn in the IEP Site in Mechelen: results and discussion?

Although there are different types of gained insights, we can group most of them into the following four clusters of lessons learned.

First, there is the importance and strength of the location. The pilot project teaches us that the spatial characteristics of the location are clearly crucial for the success of the IEP Site's mission. This, in itself, is not a completely new fact. After all, we have suspected this for some time now, which is why the spatial characteristics play an essential part in the strategic-spatial blueprints developed earlier (see 3.3). Reflecting on the nature and quality of the spatial characteristics mentioned in the conceptual blueprints, we could actually have foreseen that the two (perforce) alternative locations were essentially unsuitable. However, given the pilot nature of the project, we decided, on the basis of our experiences in Mechelen, to examine the extent to which we could still remedy this unsuitability through the furnishings (for example, the activities to improve the signage). We have found that this is possible to some extent, but unfortunately never convincingly, and certainly not in a short period of time and by young people and partners who are not active on the site full time. In short, it is unwise to compromise on spatial requirements, especially during a pragmatic and forced (quick) search for a suitable IEP Site location. On the basis of our experiences in

Mechelen, we have also gained more insight into the spatial requirements at the operational, technical level (see 3.3, drafting of an inventory of the minimum conditions). These requirements make a useful complement to the information in the strategic-spatial blueprints, which was rather more general and less concrete. In this respect, we have already gained more hands-on inspiration. On the basis of our experiences in Mechelen, we have finally also gained more insight into the required overall profile of the site: what should the site actually radiate (e.g., to be a lively, attractive, and accessible place, both to the young people and to the partners).

The second set of lessons learned concerns the complexities of recruitment and commitment. The pilot project in Mechelen teaches us that recruiting socially vulnerable young people is not easy, not even when the subject is discussed well beforehand with the professionals involved (e.g., VDAB Mechelen). Moreover, the concept of 'recruitment' appears to have two meanings. On the one hand, it involves drawing young people to the site itself, that is, finding candidates, enthusing them, attracting them, and making sure they stay. On the other hand, recruiting them means ensuring these young people become active in the labour market. When we look at drawing young people to the site, we find this has, first of all, to do with the liveliness, attractiveness, and accessibility of the location (see above), so to speak, to the hard or material side of the story. But there is more; there is a soft or immaterial side to it as well. Thus, successful recruitment also involves partners getting to know the target group well, understanding it, and being able to guide its members in the right direction. We found we had underestimated the behaviour of the target group members, which was rather unpredictable. They also had trouble uniting and committing. We knew this was going to be difficult, but we thought that we would be able to overcome this by the consortium itself. Based on our experiences, we had, however, to gradually adapt also our IEP Site methodology in a way that felt acceptable, trusting, and respectful to them. Finally, successfully drawing young people to the IEP Site, furthermore, turned out to be related to the way the partners behaved on the site. In order to restore young people's confidence in themselves, in others and thus in society, partners had to be prepared to do more than just execute a relatively strict, specific, and streamlined plan to ensure that these young people became active on the labour market. The approach had to centre on increasing the holistic strength of the integrated emancipation of the participants. On the basis of our experiences in Mechelen, we also learned that partners must be given sufficient time to acquaint themselves with this approach. Also, expert partners or SSE organizations apparently need time to learn to combine all the insights and learning effects (for example, to appreciate the methodology we developed with regard to spatial literacy, which had an important, but unexpected, effect on the young people's realistic perception of desirable employment trajectories). Whether partners learn easily and quickly or rather difficultly and slowly apparently has to do with their respective organizational cultures. In this respect, the IEP Site in Mechelen taught us that temporary, project-based, and above all short-term financing of an IEP Site is not really suitable. Learning effects can only be achieved and profitable if an IEP Site can be active for a sufficiently long period of time. In sum, we can say that the IEP Site in Mechelen teaches us that the economic inclusion of socially vulnerable young people is a complex challenge and that it is probably very important to be able to fall back on a dynamic consortium, eager to learn, in which knowledge, experience, and attitudes are bundled. The characteristics of the location or space can reinforce this (even more).

Thirdly, there are the lessons learned concerning the resilience of a motivated hub. The project in Mechelen teaches us that despite setbacks, barriers, and question marks along the route, an enthusiastic or motivated and engaged consortium can right a lot of wrongs. It is very valuable always to be willing to look for solutions that remain in line with the essence of the IEP Site concept and its mission. Despite what some would presumably call 'meagre results' (for example, results reached by a small group of eight young people in only six months' time), partners should continue to seek respectfully and trusting connections with young

people. This shows a willingness to 'think outside the box' if required and necessary, like a partner once stated at an informal meeting. Finally, it is important to mention that many reforms in some institutional partner organizations (for example, the VDAB and the SSE-sector) sometimes resulted in a loss of resilience (e.g., they lose their most knowledgeable team members due to rationalization and financial reforms. In these circumstances, the risk of a brain drain or broken engagements and trust within an IEP site consortium is high.

6. Conclusions

This paper focuses on the impact of SSE-networks on the economic dimension of the concept of sustainability. In particular, it focuses on the pilot project of a so-called IEP Site in the city of Mechelen. Although the IEP Site in Mechelen was not an ideal-typical pilot project for a number of reasons, we did manage to learn some interesting lessons.

Taken together, the lessons-learned demonstrated how difficult it is to create well-oiled networks and partnerships to realize the economic empowerment of young vulnerable citizens. The most important preconditions for the successful establishment of an IEP Site are the availability of a suitable location (one that meets certain spatial characteristics), the realization of a successful recruitment (that is, using several complementary channels and partners) and the presence of a resilient consortium (organizations that are steadfast, creative and mutually supportive). SSE-organizations are key in this respect, but they, too, depend on the goodwill, expertise, and enthusiasm of other local actors. Moreover, they need sufficient space, time, and money to slowly learn and incrementally grow into their central network role.

As the IEP Site in Mechelen is the first pilot project ever being realized, the reported lessons-learned contribute considerably to the further development and practical implementation of this new concept. Hopefully, it is the start of a long list of additional research initiatives and projects that eventually will generate an inductively elaborated model on successful SSE-networks for inclusive economic participation.

7. Acknowledgments

This research has been made possible thanks to the funding by the European Social Fund – Belgium (Priority OP 5 Innovation by adaptation).

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Endnotes

- [1] The total duration of the project is two years; the actual trial is six months.
- [2] Due to the short period of time available for the trial run, on the one hand, we gained practical experience through a number of sector-related applications on the site itself. In concrete terms, this involved setting up, using recycled materials, of a terrace vegetable garden, a reception and coaching area, two small relaxation areas, a multifunctional meeting place with collective eating facilities, and three small work areas for the conceiving, preparing and performing of assignments. On the other hand, we gained practical experience through the realization of two external assignments. In concrete terms, this concerned the construction of a summer outdoor bar, using recycled materials, for an accessible hospitality outlet at the Den Deigem service centre and the creation of extra consumption and meeting spaces, using recycled materials, at the De Refuge social restaurant. Unfortunately, the second assignment was cancelled due to a lack of time.

Manuscript received: 08.11.2019

Manuscript received in revised form: 17.11.2019

Manuscript accepted: 18.11.2019