Regenerating deprived urban areas in Western Europe: three common approaches and a new perspective

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Abstract

Area-based initiatives are designed to improve economic, physical, and social outcomes in a formally defined territorial area. A considerable amount of literature highlights that the implementation of this approach differs considerably between Western European countries. The study identifies three common approaches. The first, defined as a sector-based approach, focuses on the coordination of welfare services in a specific area. This approach may promote an efficient organisation of specific welfare sectors but does not seek to implement a multi-sectoral approach. The second, defined as the integrated approach, pays particular attention to institutional arrangements. The third, informal relations-based approach, is developed mainly in intersubjective relations and focuses on individual abilities, often without systematic engagement to change how public and private institutions work. In this study, I outlined a conceptual framework for a new perspective in area-based initiatives that recognises the plurality of autonomies that operate in a community.

Introduction

In many Western European countries, area-based initiatives such as community anti-poverty programmes, community-led regeneration, neighbourhood planning, and other area-based programmes emerged over the last three decades as key tools for regenerating deprived urban areas, tackling poverty, and increase employment. Rather than national sectoral policies, these initiatives refer to a formally defined territorial area representing the primary remit for the provision of formal services and direct actions by community organisations.

A considerable amount of literature highlights the fact that the design and implementation of area-based initiatives have differed considerably between Western European countries and even between cities. Different types of area-based initiatives emerged in various Western European countries, most notably Denmark, the Netherlands, the UK, France, and – somewhat later – Germany (Atkinson, 2008; Hohmann, 2013; Atkinson and Zimmermann, 2018; Haider, 2021). During the 1990s, the wider application of area-based initiatives across Europe was the result of a new discourse on urban poverty associated with the growing recognition of a different form of urban social exclusion (Mingione, 1996; Atkinson Zimmermann, 2018). In the early years of the new Millennium, the spatial dimension of poverty became more significant (Lupton and Turok, 2004). With the spread of a social investment approach in welfare policies, more emphasis was placed on citizen responsibilities and/or obligations, the promotion of high-quality human capital and labour-market participation of benefit recipients of working age, and early childhood education and care. In Sweden, the concept "area-based development"

is used as an umbrella term that includes a wide range of activities related to the population in areas characterised by socio-economic challenges, such as high rates of people who receive social assistance or a high percentage of residents with low incomes and high unemployment rates (Grander et al., 2022, p. 1). In the UK, a succession of area-based initiatives have aimed to regenerate areas where poverty and related forms of disadvantage are concentrated by seeking to bring about economic, physical, social, and environmental improvements (Lupton and Turok, 2004; Pearson and Gore, 2015). The last decade has seen a marked interest in area-based initiatives around the world as a tool to tackle social exclusion and economic deprivation and as a response to the effects of neoliberal urban developments on communities (Sendra and Fitzpatrick, 2020, p. 2; Roberts and Nelson, 2024).

Area-based initiatives are designed to address poverty in deprived areas, improve the active participation of local residents, as well as economic and social outcomes, by adopting a multi-sector and multidisciplinary approach and providing a coordinated investment package in different sectors. The three aspects that identify area-based initiatives (place-based approach, coordinated activities in different sectors, active participation of citizens) are often absent in many experiences. In many contexts, area-based initiative implementation focuses on a single economic or social disadvantage and does not encompass a broad range of interventions; the design and implementation of many innovative programmes do not interact with and impact ordinary programmes. Often, there is a lack of coordinated investment in social initiatives and the physical environment. Many other programmes have become the exclusive domain of the planners; they are a technical process deemed capable of identifying the objectives and means by applying consolidated and systematic disciplinary knowledge. In many cases, they are aimed almost exclusively at activating collaborative and communicative relationships in a community and helping families and individuals build and maintain relationships deemed essential for the community's well-being.

The starting point of my analysis is the need to recognise the plurality of resources that an area-based initiative can mobilise: in a community, a constant interaction exists between public and private providers, charities, families, and informal relationships. Each sphere of life (the state, the market, the third sector, the sphere of informal relationships) adds specific values and logic of action within the interactions and carries a specific conception of well-being and care relations. An area-based initiative impacts this network of relationships, improving or worsening the performance and capacity of care in each sphere of life.

1. The argument of this study is structured as follows. In the first section, I proposed a reconceptualisation of the relationships among welfare, market, family, and informal sectors in the design and implementation of area-based initiatives. As many authors highlight, these spheres of life are of particular relevance in the construction of the system and social integration (Lockwood, 1964; Habermas, 1984; 1987; Archer, 1996; 2015; Abbott et al., 2016). In the following sections, I identify three widely spread approaches in Western Europe, highlighting significant differences between them regarding objectives and resources used in designing and implementing area-based initiatives. Then, I outline a conceptual framework for a new perspective that recognises the integrative role of each sphere of life.

The study concludes with some comments on the need to promote area-based initiatives that are able to establish a constant interaction between public institutions, market dynamics, and family and informal relationships as well as protect the integrity of each sphere.

Theoretical framework

In this study, using the distinction between system and social integration (Lockwood, 1964; Habermas, 1984; 1987; Archer, 1996; 2015), I identify three main common approaches to area-based initiatives. For Lockwood (1964, p. 244), social integration refers to the orderly or conflictual relationships between the actors, whilst system integration focuses on the compatible or contradictory relationships between the parts of the social system.

This theoretical research shows that the interplay between social and system integration can increase the ability to produce social change in a community. Archer (1996; 2015) and Habermas (2023) argued that citizen social antagonism is not a sufficient condition for changing a community when the system of institutions is well-integrated and free from tension or contradiction between its parts. Conversely, high contradictions and low integration between the institutions do not change a community or a society when no social agents are ready to exploit the system's integration. In other words, in area-based initiatives, stability and change rest upon the discrepancy between the properties of system integration and those of social integration.

This distinction can be an analytical tool for understanding the differentiated impacts of the wide approaches across Western Europe. Many empirical evaluations of area-based initiatives show that evidence of their success in helping to turn around depressed areas remains elusive (Rhodes et al., 2005); significant differences exist in the assessment of outcomes, depending on the detailed design of the area-based initiatives and the specific context (Andersson and Musterd, 2005; Atkinson, 2008; Crisp et al., 2015).

I further argue that the distinction between social and system integration can help us to highlight the complex nature of area-based initiatives and to outline some of the features of a new perspective. The implementation of welfare programmes relies on combinations of institutional resources and informal relationships existing in the community and on the interactions between public and private providers, the third sector, and the sphere of informal relationships. For example, integrating health and social care projects built around frail older people's needs tries to bring together health and social professional services, public and private structures, families, and the voluntary sector. In social care policies, autonomous initiatives by families interact with professional public and private services and formal and informal care providers. In these processes, contradictions, and incompatibilities between the institutions and different sectors can appear, hindering the achievement of expected results; in the sphere of social integration, the processes can either produce collaborative relationships and hold a community together amicably or "divide groups and ultimately tear a society apart" (Abbott et al., 2016, p. 38).

However, as Habermas (1984; 1987; 2023) states, social integration is declining as a distinct realm; it no longer produces values and relations capable of influencing other spheres of life. The background of resources, relations, common beliefs, contexts, and dimensions of the social integration realm and communicative actions has progressively lost relevance over the last three decades. In many cases, social integration is being replaced by system integration, weakening relevant integrative resources of area-based initiatives. Communicative infrastructures have often been "colonised" by the economy and the state, money, and power (Habermas, 1987, p. 187; Habermas, 2023).

From late 1980, many theorists attempted to develop new typologies or perspectives, translating neo-liberal theory into an approach to urban planning and area-based programmes (Allmendinger 2009; Baeten, 2011; Sager, 2011; Gunder et al., 2017). This neo-liberal approach significantly affects the theory and practices of area-based initiatives (Atkinson and Zimmermann, 2018), by promoting different relationships among the state, the market and informal relations. Traditionally, in most European countries, the local government has been the main actor in neighbourhood projects (Aalbers and Van Beckoven, 2010, p. 449; Grander et al., 2022). In the 1990s, local governments encountered a movement towards more differentiated approaches to the design and implementation of an area-based initiative: since then, some responsibilities have been progressively transferred to the market or civil society; public matters are no longer the exclusive responsibility of the public administration (Kooiman, 1993; Sullivan et al., 2006; Atkinson and Zimmermann, 2018).

Three common approaches

The core idea behind area-based initiatives is that simultaneous and coordinated investment in different sectors such as employment, physical improvements, and social initiatives in a neighbourhood provides extra benefits, leading to increased social cohesion (Agger and Jensen, 2015). However, integration is

often a term used by policy-makers but it is not implemented; in many cases, it acts more as a policy "buzzword" than a coherent and recognisable practice (Aalbers and Van Beckoven, 2010, p. 450).

In the literature on community action and implementation processes, the distinction between top down" or "bottom up" plays a key role in identifying different approaches. The "top down" approach emphasises the role of government and professional decision-making and involves a flow of resources, information and measures from the central level of a system to the local level (Somerville, 2011). The main references of this approach are Pressman and Wildavsky and their seminal work (1973) on the conditions of an effective "top down" implementation. In contrast, a "bottom-up" approach is associated with community engagement, mobilisation of social capital, and creation of active local communities (Banks, 2003; Henderson and Thomas, 2013). In the last two decades, a bottom-up approach has prevailed even if, in many cases, critical issues emerge: a large body of research highlights that the biggest flaw of the "bottom up" approach is its over-emphasis on the capacity of individual agency (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2002; Bishop, 2010; Gallent and Robinson, 2012).

However, classification based on "top-down" or "bottom-up" approaches can lead to neglecting other dimensions of the design and implementation processes. In my study, I argue that it can be useful to integrate this classification, introducing a distinction between different area-based initiatives, (with a "top-down" or "bottom-up" approach) regarding the social spheres (market or public resources or informal relationships and community groups) each programme relies on to produce change and achieve the desired outcomes. In this way, we can identify three common approaches concerning the social sphere decision-makers rely on and prioritise.

A first common approach: when a sectoral view prevails

Area-based initiatives are designed to improve community participation and coordinate the activities of public and private institutions. However, in many cases, a sectoral approach which can also be defined as silo initiatives or projects (Alcock, 2004; Kettl, 2006) prevails. Frequently, sector-based initiatives focus on the organisation and coordination of welfare services in a specific area addressing a limited target group. They may promote an efficient organisation of specific welfare sectors such as the services provided by the Department for Family Policies but do not seek to implement a multi-sectoral approach nor improve collaborative attitudes or active community participation (Belsky et al., 2007; Steinert and Pilgram, 2008; Gallent and Robinson, 2012). Administrative cultures and organisational divisions and practices tend toward the maintenance of a sectoral status quo and can prevent the integration of different policy sectors (Jacquier, 2005). The difficulties encountered in coordinating activities from different sectors are perceived as insurmountable structural problems of compatibility between different action logics, welfare and other public activities and public and private enterprises (Belsky et al., 2007; Grander et al., 2022). Area-based initiatives strongly emphasise the territorial organisation of certain welfare services and interventions that respond to the needs of the population of defined groups of people.

There are many other cases (Raffo et al., 2007; Duveneck et al., 2021) where, to tackle social challenges in deprived neighbourhoods, the programme focuses on critical issues deemed to be drivers for significant change. The programme addressing more severely deprived households concentrates on small segments of the territorial context (*small pockets*). They include some subjects living in a particularly critical condition and inevitably exclude many other social groups. These programmes do not transform the identity and the evolution of an area through multi-sector and multi-stakeholder activities, but they can deal with the most evident criticalities in terms of poverty, drug addiction, violent crime rates, and educational poverty.

The concern to improve everyone"s condition with even fewer intensive interventions does not emerge. The programmes" aim is not to coordinate the measures implemented by different public and private subjects but to improve a community's physical environment or daily life relations starting from a limited target.

Citizens, deemed to be discerning consumers, are invited to comment on design decisions, but their participation is managed by professionals who assemble a public voice from individual preferences sampled through surveys, exhibitions, and forums (Barnes et al., 2003). Atkinson (2008) notes that too often, both local government organisations and private sector developers conceive and develop regeneration projects with minimal levels of community input; here, community involvement has rarely risen above the level of consultation (p. 120). A small number of public and private actors influence the design and implementation of the programme. These programmes involve only key stakeholders of the welfare world (service users, carers, voluntary and organisations), leaving most people without the power to ensure that the decision-makers will listen to their views. Often, they do not constitute a process capable of producing the entire community's involvement in establishing priorities and objectives and identifying possible integrated activities to be undertaken in a specific area. In other cases, the emphasis is on land and property development and the improvement of the physical environment (Syrett and North, 2008; Gkartzios et al., 2022).

In many cases, such a welfare programme provides a multitude of individualised interventions addressing a target's members (McGregor et al., 2003). For example, frequently, the objectives are to promote the acquisition of professional skills that favour the beneficiary's entry into the labour market. Rights and welfare services are individualised to respond to individualised families. Addiction and disabilities are individual problems rather than relational ones that can be faced through individualised solutions without considering interactions and interdependencies or involving relationships with other community members. Activation strategies shift away from the community, its resources, ties, and critical relations (Siza, 2022). Without assessing the impact on the relationships between the target and the general population of the deprived area, the area-based programme can favour some individuals who exit from deprivation, creating new social divisions in the community.

In the programme's implementation, each intervention is provided on an individual case-by-case basis: specific actions to improve the interactions between the beneficiaries are not planned. Welfare benefits to help low-income households, interventions to improve the residential environment, pilot training programmes, and individual care interventions are not accompanied by significant actions to build network relationships between families or promote the social infrastructures that support a neighbourhood's quality of life.

As a whole, the sum of these individualised welfare actions does not constitute a collective strategy involving the inhabitants of that neighbourhood. A fundamental characteristic of each programme and each strategy of change is often absent: a vision of how an area or aspect of that area will change in the future (Rydin, 2011).

A second common approach: enhancing the integration between public and private institutions

The second, defined as the integrated approach (European Commission, 1998; Parkinson, 1998; Aalbers and Van Beckoven, 2010), is aimed at counteracting the sector-based approach by establishing more widespread coordination and integration between different sectors (health and social care, education, housing, employment). In the 1990s, it became clear that traditional sectoral policies were not sufficient to deal with the complexity of urban problems (Aalbers and Van Beckoven, 2010, p. 451). France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom were the first European countries where national governments implemented integrated urban regeneration and neighbourhood renewal projects (Jacquier, 2005). In Denmark, area-based initiatives rested on an integrated and coordinated approach between different public sectors (Agger and Jensen, 2015; Zheng et al., 2014). In the Netherlands, urban policy has combined expertise with financial and human resources in dealing with the economic, social, and physical aspects of cities in an integrated and area-based way (Musterd and Ostendorf, 2008, p. 83).

The European Commission advocates an area-based approach to the regeneration of deprived urban areas integrating economic, social, cultural, environmental, transport, and security aspects (European Commission, 1998, p. 5). Typically, the integrated territorial interventions also include initiatives aimed

at reducing crime and vandalism, renovating housing, reinvigorating public space, handling traffic issues, stimulating local community life, and so on (Van Gent et al., 2009, p. 55).

Integrated development programmes in deprived areas have been promoted in all European countries to improve the areas in which the institutions and private companies operate through actions directed at increasing tangible (infrastructures, services) and intangible economic assets (relational skills, social capital, collaborative networks), thus enhancing the production of "localised collective competitive goods" (Crouch, 2001).

Often ideas about integrated policies and practices from one country have been adapted to another country's local context: the French Contrats de Ville clearly influenced the Italian Contratti di Quartieri, and both the Dutch Grotestedenbeleid and French Politique de la Ville influenced the Belgian Groot-stedenbeleid/Politique des Grandes Villes (Aalbers and Van Beckoven, 2010, p. 450).

Area-based initiatives attempt to reinforce the effectiveness of welfare services through actions aimed at achieving stronger synergies among different sectors and establishing a collaborative relationship with private initiatives. Such an area-based initiative, for example, coordinates the actions and decisions concerning health and social care policies, education and training, statutory planning, and private economic initiatives. In this approach, a programme is defined by taking into account the evolution of existing programmes and objectives and by evaluating interdependencies and duplications.

However, much research highlights that the main feature of the integrated approach is that it pays particular attention to institutional arrangements, neglecting the importance of ordinary people and small associations (such as integrative resources) and underestimating the critical role played by social capital (Aalbers and Van Beckoven, 2010). Interinstitutional linkages may be strengthened, while at the same time, these institutions became more and more detached from the citizens in particular neigh-bourhoods (Uitermark, 2005, p. 156). The need to involve many players and key stakeholders from several sectors can become laborious and often leads to reducing the number of actively participating citizens or assigning them a purely consultative role (McGregor et al., 2003). Many area-based initiatives are dominated by public and private institutions without a significant mobilisation of citizens and community groups. The level of effective participation tends to be lower than in sectoral approaches, and community groups play a secondary role in the governance structure (Elander and Blanc, 2001). This common approach gives priority to the coordination of institutional activities and resources. Partner-ships involve mostly for-profit organisations and local governments, while no formal organisational collaborative relations are provided for community groups or self-help organisations. Face-to-face work with citizens substantially disappears from decision-making processes.

Many integrated strategies have extended their action by seeking to face both the structural and relational resources existing in the community (inward-looking approach) and their connections with dynamics present in other contexts (outward-looking approach) (Hall, 1997; Cameron and Davoudi, 1998). Several studies have documented that in many cases the local level is not adequate for planning certain types of infrastructure: a health facility or the placement of a road is not planned only by taking into account the needs of the inhabitants of a community (Miller and Rein, 1974; Gkartzios et al., 2022). Local micro-causes are deeply related to the broader structural transformations. Many problems experienced in the most disadvantaged areas (job losses, changes in the housing market, loss of services) arise from decisions and developments far beyond the neighbourhood (Taylor et al., 2007; Gkartzios et al., 2022). The need to include local programmes in a national strategy to strengthen synergies between institutions and key stakeholders can make the integrative process more complex and unstable.

A third common approach: engaging community groups and organisations

The third approach is developed mainly in the domain of intersubjective relations and focuses on individual abilities, without a systematic engagement aimed at changing how public and private institutions work. The focus shifts from large aggregates and sectors of society towards networks of

relationships between small groups and within peoples' daily lives (Atkinson, 2008; Bishop, 2010; Gallent and Ciaffi, 2014; Sullivan, 2022).

These social programmes are focused on intersubjective relationships, peoples' abilities, and the conditions and opportunities that increase alliances between the inhabitants. Area-based initiatives are neither organised as sectoral processes aimed at changing single issues of an area nor as projects for coordinating institutions and the most important public and private subjects. They are strategies aimed at increasing the growth of social cohesion, the social inclusion of people excluded from social life, and avoiding the social disadvantages of children living in deprived neighbourhoods from being reproduced in subsequent generations.

In many cases, a kind of top-down approach prevails. The government sees the need to reconnect to the citizenry or the risk of completely losing its legitimacy (Gallent and Ciaffi, 2014, p. 4) and so seeks to improve relationships between citizens and promote higher levels of education, economic growth and lower crime rates (Gallent and Robinson, 2012; Hohmann, 2013). Local government departments ultimately manage community groups (Beatty et al., 2010, p. 245). These initiatives are not defined as an opposition to institutions but as a collaborative citizen activity within the framework of a project defined by practitioners and experts. Particular emphasis is placed on creating social capital and opportunities for families and individuals to participate in collective activities, often focusing on a single critical issue identified by institutions. This practice does not involve a change in the relationships between ordinary people and people in positions of power (Gilchrist and Taylor, 2011).

Several other area-based initiatives emphasise the citizen's autonomous activity and collective actions as an alternative to statutory planning. Development by the community itself seems to be a more "natural" way of meeting the needs that are not met by institutions and formal organisations (Burns and Taylor, 1998; Somerville, 2011, pp. 49-54). They express little trust in institutions and the support they can provide and relations with institutions are often characterised by tension. Decisions taken at the institutional level are understood to be wrong, supposedly lacking impartiality or hindering citizens' autonomous activities (Butcher et al. 2007).

Community self-help is an empirical response to contemporary societal issues (Burns et al., 2004). These autonomous initiatives promote a change in land use, with urban regeneration projects and community spaces accessible to all neighbourhood inhabitants. They emphasise the transformative rather than ameliorative potential of their initiatives (Ledwith, 2008).

In many European countries such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and France, austerity politics and reduced spending on welfare create the conditions for the emergence of active citizens as agents of change, occupying the space left by a withdrawal of funding from local government (Gallent and Ciaffi, 2014, p. 325). These initiatives emphasise the role of face-to-face work with informal groups and families that can be involved in activities of mutual interest. In this way, the design and implementation of a social programme start from the bottom of a community, mobilising social subjects traditionally distant from institutional decision-making processes. Formal groups are no longer involved, but instead, informal networks are the active subjects. These networks have fewer resources and are often run almost exclusively through voluntary effort (Gilchrist and Taylor, 2011, p. 71), the mobilisation of their social capital, and the promotion of relations of trust between citizens.

Persistent friction between the aspirations of community actors and priorities expressed by institutions in statutory planning favours the design of autonomous initiatives and the search for solutions by resources made available by the community itself (Gallent and Ciaffi, 2014, pp. 326-329). Community organisations use diverse approaches to fight against the demolition of social housing, instead proposing alternative plans that respond more directly to the local community's need and demands (Sendra and Fitzpatrick, 2020, p. 1). In many contexts, *bottom-up* initiatives become *bottom-only* initiatives (Bishop, 2010). The outcomes of these programmes are evaluated on the changes produced at this level of social action: whether they are able to strengthen social ties and forms of belonging, building social relationships of support and care.

However, the volatility of these networks limits their capacity to act as dependable solutions to deprived areas (Taylor, 2003, p.61). Moreover, social relations in a neighbourhood cannot be separated

from the social context in which they operate. Lacking key economic resources like jobs and income, a high degree of mutual and voluntary activities in a neighbourhood can create "downward-levelling pressures"; namely, pressures to conform to a set of neighbourhood norms and values that make it difficult for individuals to enter mainstream society (Forrest and Kearn, 1999, pp. 9–10; Van Gent et al., 2009).

Current directions in planning theory have recognised these bottom-up and bottom-only practices. Urban planners such as Forester (1989), Friedmann (1992), and Healey (1997; 2007) have coined these experiences and practices as a "communicative shift" or "collaborative shift". This planning direction has emerged from the work of practitioners; it has not been driven by theory, nor, for the most part, has it been built on theory. Academics and practitioners have been operating quite separately. Academics have outlined a new theory of collaborative rationality to help make sense of these practices (Innes and Booher, 2010; 2015). The theoretical perspectives are mainly based on Habermas's distinctions between instrumental action and communicative action (1984; 1987). Instrumental action, on the one hand, is oriented towards success, self-affirmation, and influence and operates through the media of power and money. Communicative action, on the other hand, is oriented towards the intention of understanding, towards comprehension, and consensus building which is ultimately based on the authority of the best argument; it attributes a privileged position to spheres of life where the communicative action is expressed.

Many commentators criticise this emphasis on communicative action, considering this approach as a sort of utopianism of participation (Fainstein and Fainstein, 2013, pp. 40–41). In many *bottom-up* and *bottom-only* practices, the emphasis on building a community tends to obscure the inequalities and different social classes that divide the various social groups and constitute significant barriers to promoting social cohesion (Shaw and Mayo, 2016).

A conceptual framework for a new perspective

An area-based initiative cannot be reduced to one level of action such as the communicative or the institutional, but it can recognise the plurality of autonomies that operate in terms of the well-being of a community. In contemporary societies, welfare systems rest on provision by three agencies: the state, the market, and the family, with additional support from the community, employers, and charities (Taylor-Gooby, 2017). In the design and implementation of an area-based initiative, we need to acknowledge the differentiation of each sphere and the necessity to protect their integrity, rather than try to reduce contemporary communities and social systems down to the identity of one of their spheres (the state, the market or the civil sphere) (Alexander, 2019; Lynch, 2022). Social cohesion and inclusion no longer depend on the state or market alone or on the combination of the two, but on the network between state, market and civil society (Archer, 1996; Donati and Archer, 2015).

A considerable amount of literature highlights that area-based initiatives can have a crucial role when they develop at two integration levels: in triggering collective interest among residents involved in local projects and in setting institutional priorities (Gallent and Robinson, 2012, p. 181). Its processes can take place at the neighbourhood level, but can also include actions to change institutions, government, and welfare (Banks, 2003, p. 15). Unlike "bottom-only" programmes or sectoral programmes, area-based initiatives can play an important role when they are: aimed at modifying the relationships between citizens and people who hold positions of political, economic, and social power; and aimed at supporting people to take collective actions to achieve the institutional changes they desire and find the resources (public welfare, private market, informal relationships) they need to achieve their goals (Gilchrist, 2009; Pitchford, 2008). A step in the right direction from the United Kingdom is the area-based initiative "Sure Start," which coordinated health, education, and welfare services in disadvantaged areas; it has had positive outcomes in improving health, the ability to learn for children aged 0–5 years old and in strengthening families and communities (Carneiro et al., 2024).

From this perspective, an area-based programme recognises the integrative role of each sphere of life and becomes a process through which citizens' involvement seeks to modify institutional choices and

promotes the capacity for dialogue and comparison. It plays a positive role in establishing trust and relations between civil society and a municipality (Agger and Jensen, 2015). Community development (Henderson and Thomas, 2013), community work, and community practice (Butcher, 2007) can be relevant approaches for engaging and achieving collaborative and responsible communities (Banks, 2007, p. 78) and mobilising the resources of social integration. Moreover, these processes of empowering individuals and groups may play a key role when providing and maintaining an interplay between social integration and system integration, allowing people and their organisations to influence and transform institutions, public policies, and services (Gilchrist, 2009; Perez and Duffy, 2024).

Drawing community development into the sphere of area-based regeneration became widespread in countries like the United Kingdom and Germany in the early 1990s. In the last two decades, dialogue through partnership and community planning has become the defining model for community development (Pitchford, 2008, pp. 93–95). Most community development approaches have become tools to enhance integrated care and support and to ensure effective and constant relationships between the public apparatus, private profit, the sphere of the family, and informal relations.

An area-based initiative can act as a process capable of placing value on the autonomous capacities and active participation of the people and, through their involvement – their intentions, wishes, and projects – changing functions and priorities of public and private institutions. In this broader perspective, the transformation of institutions and intersubjective relations within a community is developed in a complex and constant interchange of spheres of life.

In many area-based initiatives, policy-makers are not always aware that this setting and the constant interaction between the state, the market, the family, and informal relationships cannot be simplified: each sphere of life operates, in every case, positively and negatively, influencing the dynamics of transformation even in situations in which the importance of the risks and the resources it ensures are not recognised.

An intervention in one of these spheres that strengthens or weakens the role of the state (for example, welfare retrenchment policies) or the market (privatisation of some services), inevitably falls in this interactive setting. The probability of a sphere asserting its values and achieving its objectives depends on the kinds of interactions that emerge. Every process of change inevitably falls into a broad equilibrium, which includes logic, interactions, and interdependencies that develop between these spheres of life.

In addition, in many practices these spheres of life are considered functional equivalents, as they are deemed alternative ways to meet the same individual and collective needs. It is believed that welfare programmes can sometimes place greater emphasis on market resources and other times on voluntary organisations and community groups, believing that they achieve seemingly similar outcomes (Gilchrist, 2009; Gallent and Robinson, 2012).

From a novel perspective, market, welfare, and family are not functional equivalents, and care and support schemes ensured by a given sphere can only partially be fulfilled by the other spheres. Each mix we choose (more market or less market, more informal relations or fewer informal relations) affects the direction of change, creates advantages or disadvantages for some social groups, and proposes different conceptualisations and operationalisations of individuals and collective well-being. Each sphere has a concept of well-being, and the interactions between them limit the effects of the logic that characterises and distinguishes each sphere (the market, welfare, the family, and the informal sector).

Adding to this, the state, the market, the family, and informal relationships are indeed distinct spheres of life but are also inevitably intertwined and strongly interrelated (Siza, 2022). Without a communicative agreement, no institutional system can adapt to its social environment: systems need an external flow of arguments and ideas (Brunkhorst, 2008; Siza, 2018; 2022). System and social integration do not merely co-exist, rather they are inextricably intertwined. From this perspective, the implementation process could begin at the level of informal and associative relationships or from the top (bottom-up or top-down), in both cases with the aim of promoting integration of the institutions and strengthening their roots in the domain of communicative actions. System and social integration are necessary and inevitably connected to each other, albeit with constant tensions that we have to be dealth with in area-based processes. Without the performance of functional rationality by the institutional system, no communicative agreement can be stable.

Conclusion

In this study, I have emphasised the need to promote a new perspective in area-based initiatives that is able to protect the integrity of each sphere and establish a constant interaction between public institutions, market dynamics, and family and informal relationships. Social and system integration are founded on these spheres of life. This distinction can be a framework for my proposed perspective aimed at promoting coordination between the state and market (system integration), coordination of the sphere of informal relationships (social integration), and collaborative relations between these two levels of integration. The proposed conceptual framework is grounded in the distinction between system and social integration (Lockwood, 1964; Habermas, 1984; 1987; Archer, 1996; 2015; Abbott et al., 2016) with the aim of involving the sphere of informal relationships, public institutions, and market dynamics in the decision-making system.

Many area-based initiatives are undeniably far from having adopted this new perspective. The three approaches to area-based planning widely spread in Western Europe simplify the relationships between welfare, market, and informal sectors and their specific values, logic of action and their conception of well-being. In a first common approach, programmes only utilise the resources of specific welfare sectors but do not seek to implement a multi-sectoral approach or the active real participation of local residents. In a second common approach, programmes revolve around the coordination and integration of several formal institutions and tend to replace participation with consultation with formal key stakeholders: in many of them, intersubjective relationships practically disappear from the formal decision-making processes. A third common approach aims to activate collaborative relationships in a community and build social capital, emphasising individual agency capacity and underestimating the role of institutions.

However, as suggested by recent literature, the proposed perspective already exists. Experience and social practices that recognise the population's active participation in changing an institution's priorities are undeniably growing in many Western European countries (Roberts and Nelson, 2024). In many contexts, area-based initiatives are now a process that simultaneously mobilises individuals, associations, and institutions to achieve shared goals and improve social and system integration. They are developed as tools able to embed communicative experiences in area-based initiatives and are aimed at improving well-being and the quality of life in a community, modifying the priorities, direction, and functions of public and private institutions.

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