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Managing External Stakeholders during Unexpected Events to Ensure Project Success

Pedro Sereno Albuquerque Leitão

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by

Pedro Sereno Albuquerque Leitão

under the guidance of
Professor Eleonora Monaco

Católica Porto Business School, Universidade Católica Portuguesa
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Abstract

This study seeks to evaluate how internal stakeholders participating in an international project manage to engage with external stakeholders, to ensure that a participatory approach is carried out during a crisis. To do this, data was retrieved from project documentation and from open-ended interviews on two main actors of the project.

The main results of the study reiterate the importance of building a resilient and adaptable work group. On one hand, resilience is essential to face unexpected events with the magnitude of COVID-19, where the operational and work methods are put up to the test and force project teams out of their comfort zone. Partners who had built a resilient work group prior to the pandemic managed to have more interactions and engagement with external stakeholders than those where this did not occur. On the other hand, an adaptable work group must know how to leverage a crisis as an opportunity to use new work methods and, in this case, digitalize processes and operations. This was the case with several members of the project, who adjusted the interactive and participative dynamics to the digital tools and subsequently succeeded in the external stakeholder engagement.

Keywords: Stakeholder Engagement; External Stakeholders; Unexpected Events; Project Success; URBACT; COVID-19.

Number of words: 9958

Resumo

Este trabalho procura avaliar a forma como *stakeholders* internos conseguem gerir os externos num projeto internacional, de modo a assegurar que uma abordagem participativa é seguida num período de crise. Para tal, foram recolhidos dados da documentação do projeto e de entrevistas realizadas a dois dos principais atores da rede.

Os principais resultados deste estudo reiteram a importância de construir um grupo de trabalho resiliente e adaptável. Por um lado, a resiliência é essencial para enfrentar eventos inesperados com a magnitude da COVID-19, onde métodos de trabalho e operações são postos à prova e obrigam as equipas a sair da zona de conforto. Parceiros que construíram um grupo de trabalho resiliente antes da pandemia conseguiram ter mais interações e envolvimento com *stakeholders* externos do que os parceiros onde tal não aconteceu. Por outro lado, um grupo de trabalho adaptável deve saber encarar a crise como uma oportunidade de utilizar novos métodos de trabalho e, neste caso, digitalizar processos e operações. Este foi o caso de diversos membros do projeto, que ajustaram a dinâmica interativa e participativa à luz de ferramentas digitais e sucederam no envolvimento de *stakeholders* externos.

Palavras-chave: Envolvimento de *Stakeholders*; *Stakeholders* Externos; Eventos Inesperados; Sucesso do Projeto; URBACT; COVID-19.

Número de palavras: 9 958

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List of Abbreviations

APN	Action Planning Network
EU	European Union
IAP	Integrated Action Plan
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
LP	Lead Partner
LE	Lead Expert
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ULG	URBACT Local Group
WP	Work Package

1. Introduction

Nowadays, there is a continuous public and private investment in including stakeholders in the decision making process to comprehend their needs and constraints (Eskerod et al., 2015). The URBACT programme, having recognized this, funds networks of cities to achieve a common goal while participating with their local stakeholders, promoting thus a participatory approach (URBACT, 2021a).

In stakeholder literature, the importance given to successfully engaging with external stakeholders has been recognized, as well as their overall significance. However, given the unprecedent nature of the COVID-19 crisis, there is a gap in literature regarding how to successfully engage and manage external stakeholders during an unexpected event of this magnitude, *i.e.*, a crisis.

Considering this, the aim of this thesis is to evaluate how partners participating in an international project engage with external stakeholders to ensure that success criteria, defined by the programme, is achieved.

To do this, a network with seven different partners and their respective local stakeholder groups were studied. For starters, the expected outcome of the project at the network and local level was compared to the real outcome, which suffered the impact of the pandemic. The project's success at network level was achieved; however, at local level, only some partners with certain characteristics managed to successfully engage with their external stakeholders. These were characterized by (i) having engaged with their external stakeholders prior to the pandemic and (ii) seeing the crisis as an opportunity to increase their digitalization and digitally adapt their operations.

The paper is structured according to the following: section 2 outlines the main literature regarding unexpected events, stakeholder theory and project success definition; section 3 sets out the methodology and contextualizes the URBACT

programme and the Food Corridors network; section 4 identifies and analyses success criteria at network and local level; section 5 discusses the results regarding the main drivers of success; and section 6 concludes with limitations of this study and further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Project Management's Approach to Unexpected Events

2.1.1 Risk Management's Insufficiency to Manage Uncertainty

Risk management studies the possible negative outcomes of a project and calculates ways to manage uncertainty in advance (Geraldi et al., 2010), being essential to guide managerial decisions and expectations around project implementation (Kutsch et al., 2021). However, several authors believe that even the most complex risk and uncertainty management tools, projects always face a continuum of unexpected changes and must find out approaches to overcome these (Aaltonen et al., 2010; Geraldi et al., 2010; Parisi & Bekier, 2022; Piperca & Floricel, 2012).

There are a significant number of definitions of unexpected events across the literature. Some authors characterize this type of events as happening outside of project stakeholders' frames of expectations (Kutsch et al., 2021). Others classify them as deviations, exceptions, surprises, unforeseen and emergent events (Aaltonen et al., 2010), where things do not unfold as planned or because conditions change over time. It is commonly perceived that unexpected events are those which were not originally planned and expected to take place as part of the project.

2.1.2 Types of Unexpected Events

Unexpected events can be characterized in numerous ways according to different factors. While they can be viewed in a *continuum*, varying from simple fluctuations to chaos (Geraldi et al., 2010), they are also different according to their implications in the project, ranging from small-scale operative exceptions to

strategic level exceptions, disruptions, and crisis that can threaten project existence (Aaltonen et al., 2010).

A matrix was developed to classify the types of unexpected events, considering two dimensions. The first dimension characterizes the event's deviation with respect to an embedded model, may this be in the form of budgets, risk tabulation or operational plans. This dimension was divided into three levels of predictability: (i) more intense than predicted, (ii) predictable but unpredicted, and (iii) unpredictable. The first corresponds to events which had a higher intensity and impact than initially anticipated. They usually happen when managers over- or under-estimate risks. The predictable but not predicted events are those that could have been predicted but were omitted due to a variety of reasons, such as the communication barriers. The unpredictable events are completely unforeseeable and unpredictable, due to their unprecedented nature. These types of events are more likely to defy the prediction of even the most sophisticated risk assessment models (Piperca & Floricel, 2012).

The second dimension concerns the *locus*[1] of the generation of the unexpected events in the project, *i.e.*, the system's boundaries. Three types of boundaries were considered, according to their position when compared to the system: the internal environment, the immediate external environment, and the general external environment. Internal events are those whose tasks and objects of study are directly involved in the project. The stakeholders included in these are the individual or group actors that are effectively working in the project. Events in the immediate environment have a *locus* of generation related to task environment, namely the portion of external environment that is considered relevant by project participants. This category's stakeholders include relevant markets, industries, and institutions. On the other hand, events in the general

[1] Locus - the place where something happens or the central area of interest in something being discussed (Cambridge Dictionary)

external environment have no direct or indirect relation with the project, however they can impact the project's outcome.

The author then proceeded to create a typology of events with nine categories (Piperca & Floricel, 2012).

Table 1 - Categories of unexpected events

Level of predictability	Locus of generation: Internal environment	Immediate external environment	General external environment
More intense than predicted	Overrun	Setback	Swing
Predictable but unpredicted	Oversight	Knock on door	Revelation
Unpredictable	Showstopper	Mystery visitor	Shocker

2.1.3 Approaches to Manage International Projects during Unexpected Events

There are numerous studies which analyse the project manager's approach during periods when international projects face unexpected events. There are three main levels where positive approaches focus on: the organisational, group and the individual level.

Having a responsive and functioning structure at the organisational level is key. The ability of organisation's managers and the project team to respond to changes appropriately and swiftly can decrease the negative effect of unexpected events (Geraldi et al., 2010). Another characteristic the author identified was the sense of empowerment, as participants were allowed to decide what responses should be undertaken.

At a group level, it is essential to have good interpersonal relationships with different project actors. The ability to engage with stakeholders and negotiate a common ground, and the overall presence of a variety of local stakeholders, was perceived by various researchers as imperative to positively resolve unexpected events (Aaltonen et al., 2010; Geraldi et al., 2010; Loosemore, 1998). Making

information available and communicating effectively is essential to keep everybody in the clear about the way the project will proceed and reduce information asymmetry across stakeholders (Geraldi et al., 2010; Loosemore, 1998).

At an individual level, authors argue that a competent leader who demonstrates adequate and appropriate behaviour, including self-awareness and ability to deal with stressful situations, is important to manage unexpected situations (Geraldi et al., 2010).

However, the cases analysed demonstrated some unsuccessful practices that negatively impacted the project's planning and implementation. On an organisational level, having a rigid structure - which increased time spent justifying and reporting what was done – left little time to undertake actions (Geraldi et al., 2010). However, there were also findings that reported a lack of structure and formal mechanisms to respond to unexpected events. Regarding the stakeholder level, if this engagement was done following a top-down control, resource- and time-consumption was also a problem. Furthermore, when unexpected and unpredictable events take place, an author argues that stakeholder's communication, mutual sensitivity, collective responsibility and teamwork is less likely (Loosemore, 1998). To conclude, at an individual level, problems appeared when managers over-reacted and could not control their emotions (Loosemore, 1998).

2.1.4 Approaches to Manage International Projects during a Crisis

As aforementioned, there are certain events which come from outside the environment of the project and may cause a big impact. In the framework described earlier, the shocker events are those with these characteristics (Piperca & Floricel, 2012). The author argued that this type of event is rare, and they typically do not affect the project directly, but when they do, managers fail to see

this risk. An example could be the change in security regulations as a response to the terrorists' attacks from 11 September 2001.

These events, when reaching a magnitude which causes sudden change to the daily procedures, are considered to be a crisis (Loosemore, 1998). The author characterizes these events as unexpected in an organisation's life, for which there is a lack of contingency plans in place, threatening priority goals and demandind a time-pressured response. Crisis were described by being "unique laboratories of human life, forcing to the surface, processes which lie at the very core of management" (Loosemore, 1998, p. 139). They inevitably cause a big advance in science, as seen in moments of international political instability, rapid technological advances and hostile business environments. The notion of having a crisis affect a project's operations has passed from a matter of 'if' to a matter of 'when' (Geraldi et al., 2010).

During the last two years, the COVID-19 pandemic was an unexpected event that challenged all project managers to learn to cope with it. Some projects were forced to make sense of the new paradigm, often with cancellations, postponements or revisions of planned activities (Parisi & Bekier, 2022). Project managers were also forced to rethink the strategy adopted, adapting it to the disruption of the pandemic. The resilience of project teams and organisations was tested, as many risk management frameworks could not proactively measure the pandemic's impacts. Proactive risk management techniques cause an over-reliance upon strategies of anticipation and steer attention away from the need to build resilience into organisations to deal with the unexpected (Loosemore, 1998).

2.2 Stakeholder Engagement for Project Success

2.2.1 Stakeholder Theory in Projects

In project management, stakeholder theory argues that project organization is accountable to a broader range of stakeholders (Freeman et al., 1984), who are identified (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Eskerod et al., 2015; Freeman et al., 1984; Maddaloni & Davis, 2017; Vos & Achterkamp, 2012; Yang, 2013), engaged (Derakhshan et al., 2019; Eskerod et al., 2015, 2016; Lehtinen et al., 2019; Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020), analysed (Freeman et al., 1984), prioritized (Eskerod et al., 2016; Freeman et al., 1984; Yang, 2013) and managed (Arnstein, 1969; Eskerod et al., 2015; Freeman et al., 1984; Hillman & Keim, 2001; Lehtinen et al., 2019).

The definition of stakeholder evolved since it was first developed, in 1968 (Eskerod et al., 2015), albeit a significant amount of academics believe Freeman, one of the main sources of inspiration in this area, was the founder of stakeholder management theory in 1984. Freeman defined stakeholders as "those groups who can affect or are affected by the achievement of the organization's purpose" (Freeman et al., 1984, p. 49). The definition was later improved, considering the interests of stakeholders for their identification, whether the corporation has any corresponding functional interest in them (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Later, the term was adapted inside project management, being project stakeholders defined as the people and groups affected by the project or in a position to influence it, regardless of whether they have an official role in the project or not (Eskerod et al., 2016; Eskerod & Huemann, 2014; Friday-stroud et al., 2006).

Under the project umbrella, stakeholder engagement and management are quite unique, due to the generally limited time-span of the project, the different strategies adopted by the project manager, and the interests and interactions between project stakeholders. For instance, some strategies promote a back-and-forth stakeholder engagement and disengagement according to their potential to

create project value (Lehtinen et al., 2019), while others believe that it is essential to engage with stakeholders for the entire duration of the project (Eskerod et al., 2016; Friday-stroud et al., 2006). Due to each stakeholder's identity, each of them has individual interests which may be conflicting (Chinyio & Akintoye, 2008; Eskerod et al., 2015), and behave in ways which they feel will help them accomplish their project objectives, which may or may not be congruent with the project manager's objectives (Friday-stroud et al., 2006; Maddaloni & Davis, 2017).

Stakeholder engagement both in an organisation and in projects revealed to have significant upsides, such as increasing relationships with customers, employees and suppliers, thus yielding better financial returns and creating a competitive advantage (Freeman et al., 1984; Hillman & Keim, 2001), promoting a good public image when involving the public (Derakhshan et al., 2019), lobbying towards decision-makers, and increasing the financial and nonfinancial contributions towards the project (Eskerod et al., 2015). Nevertheless, some downsides also originate from stakeholder engagement, such as the inability to cope with strict and numerous stakeholder expectations (Eskerod et al., 2015; Shenhar & Dvir, 2008).

Having a broad view on stakeholders related to companies was considered as the best way to adopt stakeholder management (Freeman et al., 1984). Stakeholder inclusiveness can be defined as the extent to which all stakeholders are considered by the focal organisation of project during its whole duration, regardless of their power and potential to help (Arnstein, 1969; Derakhshan et al., 2019; Eskerod et al., 2016). Furthermore, when applying this stakeholder inclusiveness in a project scenario, there is an increase in the likelihood of having more engaged and satisfied stakeholders (Eskerod et al., 2016). Having a broad variety of stakeholders in projects is also required due to many demands

considering different themes (e.g., environment, sustainability) (Eskerod et al., 2016; Lehtinen et al., 2019).

2.2.2 Types of Stakeholders

Throughout the generations of strategy and project management theory, there have been different ways of categorising stakeholders (Maddaloni & Davis, 2017). However, the main stakeholder groups are generally identified as primary/secondary (Freeman et al., 1984), and internal/external (Derakhshan et al., 2019; Friday-stroud et al., 2006; Lehtinen et al., 2019; Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020).

A differentiation of stakeholders was first conducted in 1984 to allocate the limited management of resources (Freeman et al.). This developed not only the notion of stakeholder prioritisation, but also a separation between primary and secondary stakeholders (Eskerod et al., 2016; Yang, 2013). Primary stakeholders are defined as those with contractual relationships with the project (e.g., customers, suppliers), or those with legal authority over the project (e.g., governmental organisations). These are considered as being essential to the organization or project's survival and well-being. On the other hand, secondary stakeholders have no formal contractual bond with the project or direct legal authority over it, nonetheless they can influence the project (Maddaloni & Davis, 2017).

More recent scientific contributions adopted a distinct approach, dividing stakeholders as internal and external to the project. Internal stakeholders are those who are directly or contractually linked to the development and implementation of the project. Alongside other actions, they are responsible for the formal decision-making of the project and are responsible for engaging and managing the heterogeneous group of external stakeholders (Derakhshan et al., 2019; Lehtinen et al., 2019). On the other hand, external stakeholders are those

who are outside of the sample of the internal stakeholders but can have an influence on the project. These stakeholders vary across different projects' themes and dimensions, and may include Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), citizen associations, governmental associations, schools, private companies, research centres, and universities. The main purpose of their presence in the project is to share their knowledge and feedback regarding the project's theme, increasing its value, and improving the range of actors who get positively impacted by it.

2.2.3 Contributes of External Stakeholders for Project Development

External stakeholders' inclusion in projects may lead to diverse positive impacts on project management and implementation. Some academics believe that transparency when engaging as early as possible will contribute to an incorporation of their opinions and interests into the success criteria and objective definition (Lehtinen et al., 2019), while others seek a positive long-term performance and value creation (Bryde, 2005). Moreover, it is important to grasp the expert knowledge regarding some project tasks which may only be available in external stakeholders (Derakhshan et al., 2019). On the other hand, some researchers believe that an inclusive approach to stakeholder management can be resource-intensive and costly and may often lead to bad project efficiency (Friday-stroud et al., 2006). Furthermore, the non-inclusion of some external stakeholders in projects may damage the focal costs and reputation of the internal stakeholders (Maddaloni & Davis, 2017).

As aforementioned, having a stakeholder-inclusive approach is beneficial in project management. Following societal movements and trends (social movements for civil rights, environmentalism, women's rights, societal inclusiveness), external stakeholders have acknowledged the legitimacy of their intervention both on projects and organisations (Eskerod et al., 2015; Maddaloni

& Davis, 2017). On this level, local authorities assume a position of control of other stakeholder groups and have been considered the most influential actor which organizations aim to work closely with (Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020).

The project manager has the responsibility to evaluate the local stakeholders' approach concerning the project, promoting a proactive rather than oppositional behaviour, leading to value creation (Maddaloni & Davis, 2017). Based on the perception of attitudes, managers filter and allocate the right resources and effort to those stakeholders which may maximize local communities' positive input towards cooperation and collaboration, minimizing negative attitudes.

2.2.4 External Stakeholder's Engagement and Management

External stakeholder engagement is defined as the means used to involve these actors in project's operations or decision-making. External stakeholder engagement is carried out by internal stakeholders and comprised of several processes, including identification, classification and analysing their environment (Aaltonen et al., 2010; Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020). Engagement strategies are then devised, ensuring transparent information sharing to build relationships.

Aaltonen (2020), a recognized scholar under the external stakeholder management theory, includes four challenges for managing these actors: task division, task allocation, provision of reward, and provision of information. His study identified three organizing solutions to overcome the challenges. Governance-based solutions include engagement activities (ranging from distribution of information to personal visits) and indicators (objectives pre-defined by internal stakeholders) and aim at facilitating interaction with external stakeholders in inter-organizational projects. Value-based solutions motivate stakeholders to collaborate in engagement activities based on non-monetary rewards, such as social reputation, while being committed to a common goal, the

project. Dynamism-based solutions include flexibility in operations, a timely focus on relevant activities (where the focus on working and problem solving between internal and external stakeholders, rather than arguing), and effective communication systems to collect feedback, and gathering and sharing learning experiences.

Overall, the goal of external stakeholder management is to align the project with all parties' strategies, resulting in an overall stakeholder cooperation and satisfaction and project success. To achieve this, internal stakeholders play a pivotal role in planning all the engagement and management activities and processes, through objective definition and interest consideration (Eskerod & Huemann, 2014; Yang, 2013). Due to the diverse nature of all stakeholders, as well as the different subjective factors which define stakeholder satisfaction, achieving this goal and succeeding in all the pillars of a project is extremely challenging (Bryde, 2005; Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020; Prabhakar, 2008).

2.3 How to Measure Project Success

2.3.1 Evolution of Project Success

Since the beginning of project management, there has been a steady evolution of the meaning of project success (Müller & Judgev, 2005). The initial research considered that the Iron Triangle, also called time/cost/quality triangle, was the framework used to measure the success of a project (Barnes, 1988). However, different academics soon realized that there were projects which could be viewed as successful despite the Iron Triangle Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) being met (Atkinson, 1999; Bryde, 2005). Researchers believed that these measures were insufficient and soon started to include other criteria to measure projects' success. These were gathered and arranged in a new framework, The Square Route (Atkinson, 1999), which considered three other pillars to measure project success

alongside the Iron Triangle: the information system, stakeholder community benefits and organisational benefits (Ika, 2009).

The definition of project success later evolved and encompassed client and end-user satisfaction alongside the Square Root criteria and was determined using a list of critical success factors and frameworks. In the 21st Century, there is an emphasis given to a broader set of results that vary according to projects and are typically evaluated considering more inclusive critical success factors and rhetoric success factors (Atkinson, 1999; Bryde, 2005; Ika, 2009).

Due to the increased variation between different projects, the bottom line consists in correctly defining the project success criteria and critical success factors for each project. Project success criteria may refer to a group of principles or standards used to judge a project success, may these be technical or practical. On the other hand, critical success factors refer more specifically to conditions and events which contribute to project results (Ika, 2009).

2.3.2 Difference between Project Success and Project Management Success

As the Iron Triangle (Barnes, 1988) approach lacked as a definition to project success, there was a need to create a distinction between project success and project management success (de Wit, 1988). To measure this, there was a necessity to differ project objectives from project management objectives (Munns & Bjeirmi, 1996) and no longer confuse the Iron Triangle objectives with project success. Nowadays, project management success refers only to the internal efficiency achieved during project development and implementation, measured through the time, cost and quality objectives defined previously in the Iron Triangle (Atkinson, 1999; Baccarini, 1997; Ika, 2009). The time objective is measured in terms of meeting the schedule as a percentual of the initial plan. Cost objectives are considered successful when the budget is met. Quality relates

to functional and technical specifications defined in the project planning phase (Baccarini, 1997).

On the other hand, project success is of higher importance (Baccarini, 1997) and is now encompassed as a more complete definition of project management success, considering the scopes of short- and long-term efficiency and effectiveness from internal and external stakeholders and objectives (Ika, 2009). The dimensions which are apart the notion of project success are soft dimensions, subjective, subtle and more difficult to measure, contrasting to the hard dimensions (e.g., time, cost), which are tangible, objective, and measurable (Baccarini, 1997). The researcher also mentioned that success is perceived individually and subjectively by each stakeholder, is affected by time, and is not always manageable as stakeholder satisfaction goes beyond the control of project managers.

2.3.3 How to Manage External Stakeholders during COVID-19 and achieve Project Success

To explore how external stakeholders are engaged to ensure project success during the COVID-19 crisis, this thesis analyses the different behaviours which internal stakeholders adopted to engage with external stakeholders.

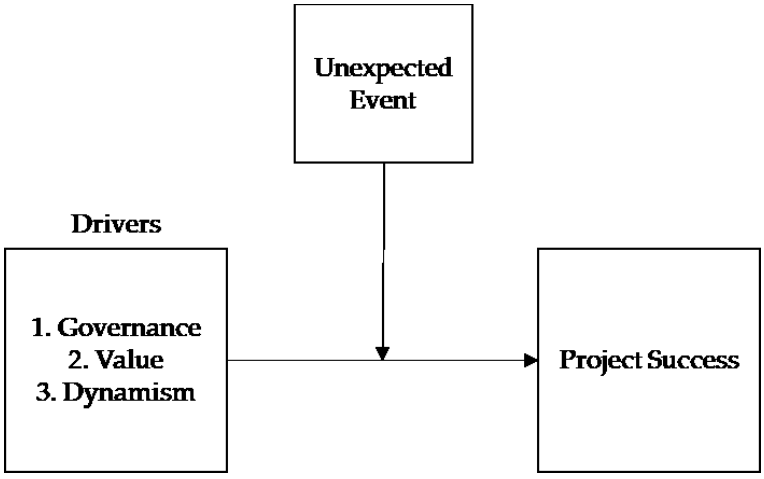

Figure 1 - Drivers to overcome expected events and succeed in projects

Under the light of stakeholder theory, to overcome challenges and unexpected events, project managers must turn to governance-, value-, and dynamism-based solutions (Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020) to manage stakeholders. However, the diagram does not detail the type of unexpected event, which in this case study is the crisis, or shocker (Loosemore, 1998; Piperca & Floricel, 2012). Given the unprecedented nature of this crisis, it is relevant to explore what kind of solutions were successfully implemented to succeed in the project.

3. Case Study

3.1 Case Study Methodology

Yin (2003) classified case studies as (i) exploratory, (ii) explanatory, and (iii) descriptive. Exploratory research attempts to explore and investigate a problem with high levels of uncertainty and ignorance, resulting in a research which lacks a formal structure. The explanatory case studies are highly structured in nature and aim to identify causal links between the factors or variables belonging to the research problem. Descriptive studies, provide an accurate and valid representation of the variables relevant to the research question. The thesis' case study is exploratory, as the way external stakeholders are being managed to ensure project success is being explored when the project gets impacted by a crisis.

The data collection phase may be done using documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2003). This thesis' data was gathered through (i) documentation, such as reports, agendas, meeting minutes, and (ii) interviews. This multiple-source data collection approach had the objective of increasing the reliability of the information gathered, as over-reliance on document as evidence in case studies has been criticized (Tellis, 1997). On the other hand, the interviews were open-ended, meaning the research could ask for the informant's opinion on events or facts, to corroborate previously gathered data. The informants were the Lead Expert of the project and a representative of the Lead Partner, who participated in all network and local meetings of the partner.

Regarding the analytic strategy, there are three analytic techniques: (i) pattern-matching, which associates a based pattern with a predicted one, (ii) explanation-building, that is carried out by building an explanation of the case, and (iii) time-series, where a variable is analysed over time. The thesis uses an explanation-

building analytic strategy, given that the way external stakeholders are managed to ensure project success during the COVID-19 crisis is being explained.

3.2 Contextualization

3.2.1 URBACT Programme

URBACT is a European programme which promotes territorial cooperation, mutual learning, and experience exchange, while fostering a sustainable and integrated development. URBACT is one of European Union's (EU) many territorial cooperation programmes, which promote networking of public stakeholders all over Europe (URBACT, 2021a).

The programme is co-financed by the member states, Norway and Switzerland, and the European Regional Development Fund. The member states contribute accordingly to their total population in comparison with Europe's, and by local contributions of regions in proportion to their involvement (URBACT, 2022a).

The URBACT cycle distribution is similar to the EU's multiannual financial framework distribution, given that the majority of the programme's funds come from EU funds.

Table 2 - URBACT cycles and respective budgets

Cycle	Multiannual Framework	Budget
URBACT I	2002 – 2006	28,4 M€
URBACT II	2007 – 2013	67,8 M€
URBACT III	2014 – 2020	96,3 M€
URBACT IV	2021 – 2027	79,7 M€

URBACT networks are approved through competitive calls for proposals, where different entities apply jointly and have the chance to obtain funding in their project. Whereas the first two URBACT cycles have already finished,

URBACT III is still operational and has a significant number of projects in progress. URBACT IV is estimated to be approved in Autumn 2022, given the rigorous process of reviewing the programme and having it approved by the European Commission (URBACT, 2022b).

The main beneficiaries of the programme are the cities of the 27 member states, as well as Norway and Switzerland. The entities which may obtain funding, *i.e.*, the network's internal stakeholders, are mostly public, namely municipalities, intermunicipal communities, local, regional, and national agencies, public universities, or public research facilities. On the other hand, the projects promote external stakeholder inclusiveness through the URBACT Local Group (ULG), being these external participants mainly public agencies, private entities, civil associations, the academia, NGOs, and politicians (URBACT, 2021a).

URBACT provides each network with a Lead Expert (LE) to support partners in implementing their activities, both regarding the thematic and methodological content. They are expected to work in accordance with the networking framework and use tools provided by the URBACT programme (URBACT, 2021a). As LE must ensure that the URBACT methodology is followed, they gather a substantial amount of information from the whole network to evaluate their progress.

Each URBACT call for proposals promotes and funds one type of network, being a total of three kinds, varying in the methodology and objective:

1. Action planning network (APN) – development of an integrated action plan to present to the government and possibly implement it;
2. Implementation network – implementation of an integrated action plan developed beforehand;
3. Transfer network – good practices transfer from a successful project to their territories.

3.2.2 URBACT Programme in Portugal

In Portugal, the Directorate General of Territory is the national authority that manages the URBACT programme. URBACT's connection group in Portugal gathers both DGT and the Agency for Development and Cohesion, as well as the Commissions for Coordination and Regional Development and is controlled by the National URBACT Point, with the objective of promoting the programme's synergies with other European funding programmes. The main responsibilities are to: (i) Establish communications about the URBACT programme; (ii) Disseminate URBACT results; (iii) Support a continuous dialogue with local, regional and national authorities regarding an integrated and sustainable urban development, considering the objectives, activities, and results of URBACT; (iv) Support the capacitation actions from URBACT.

Portugal has a strong representation since the beginning of the URBACT programme. In URBACT II, 16 different cities in Portugal participated in 21 networks, representing approximately 30% of the totality of the networks. Regarding the latest URBACT programme, Portugal's presence was the most impactful. In a total of 83 different networks of projects, Portugal was the third most represented country, being Italy and Spain the only countries with more participation (URBACT, 2022a).

Table 3 - Countries with most presence in URBACT networks

Country	Networks Present	%
Italy	72	86,75%
Portugal	57	68,67%
Spain	64	77,11%

Out of 83 total projects, Portugal participated in 57 and a Portuguese entity was eight times the Lead Partner, placing fourth best, behind the UK[2] (10 projects), Italy (14), and Spain (16). This amount is four times the number of

[2] As of URBACT IV, the United Kingdom will no longer be a beneficiary.

projects which Portugal was a Lead Partner during URBACT II, representing a significant evolution from two to eight.

Regarding the geographic distribution of the cities which participated in projects, during URBACT II, the North and Centre of Portugal represented 17 out of the 21 networks with Portuguese participation. In URBACT III, these two regions represent 45 of the 57 networks, corresponding to 78,95%.

Table 4 - Portuguese regions' presence in URBACT networks

Region	URBACT II	URBACT III	Evolution
North	9	31	+22
Centre	10	14	+4
Lisbon	4	6	+2
Alentejo	1	3	+2
Algarve	0	3	+3
Total	24[3]	57	+33

3.2.3 Network Cooperation

Transnational exchange of practices and ideas between the different partners of a network are the core of each URBACT network. To effectively achieve this, URBACT projects are divided into two phases. During the project's first phase, the partners gather several times, as seen in the table below, to get to know each other and understand the projects methodology.

Table 5 - Occasions where network is gathered in Phase I

Activity	Objective	Participants
Kick-off Meeting	Get to know the partners; discuss expectations for the project.	Everyone
URBACT Conferences	Understand the URBACT methodology.	Everyone
Expert and Lead Partner Visits	Analyse the contextualization for baseline study; see political commitment.	Expert and Lead Partner
Final Meeting Phase I	Present baseline study; introduce local groups; share expectations for phase II.	Everyone

[3] In URBACT II, there were networks with more than one Portuguese city. This feature was changed in URBACT III.

Having network meetings is important to better understand the necessities and the state of the art of each partner, which will be used in the baseline study: the end of first phase report where the LE profiles each partner and shares the expectations for the second phase.

Given that partners of the project have the same aim during the second phase, the development of an Integrated Action Plan (IAP), there are regular network meetings so each partner can show the progress done and discuss obstacles found and share solutions. The meetings are usually in each partner's territory and last 3 days, being an opportunity to (i) network, (ii) identify best practices from each partner, and (iii) understand the reality present in each partner's territory.

In parallel to the transnational meetings, the URBACT methodology highlights the importance of coordination meetings. These meetings, which contain one representative of each partner and the LE, have the objective of monitoring the overall development of the network and anticipate future problems (URBACT, 2021a).

3.2.4 URBACT Local Group

The ULG, consists of a network where external stakeholders, which belong to the territory's society, gather with the main objective of supporting the development of the IAP through their knowledge and experience, demonstrating the concerns and desires of the community they represent (Aaltonen et al., 2010). Due to URBACT's integrated vision for an urban sustainable development, the programme fosters the participation of all relevant external stakeholders, being each internal stakeholder, *i.e.* each partner's project team, held responsible for the creation of the ULG (Aaltonen et al., 2010; Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020).

The ULG usually consists of public entities, private entities, community associations, and the academia and R&D entities. Their value to the project is of co-producing city strategies together with the city administration. Their contribute is essential, as policies built in participatory ways tend to be more relevant, efficient and better designed than those without any co-creation or consultation (URBACT, 2021b). Furthermore, due to the influence and impact that the IAP will have on the community, having a stakeholder-inclusive approach allows external stakeholders' legitimacy to be acknowledged.

Having a work group which gathers feedback from a significant number of entities across the different types of actors may be challenging, nevertheless the best IAPs come from the most complete work groups. The number of entities in the ULG results in an IAP that goes in line with the desires of a bigger sample of actors. On the other hand, to please the different types of actors and improve the quality of the work group and consequently the IAP, it is imperative to include the different entity types. Throughout the duration of the project there are numerous ULG meetings, where the partners get together with the different internal and external stakeholders in the work group to gather feedback to include in the development of the IAP.

To develop a complete IAP, the ULG must analyse the local challenges and find solutions to those, considering these in the development of the document. Furthermore, the ULG must promote information and idea exchange between different societal sectors, thus promoting networking learning; and communicate the results at a local level, informing the community about the practices done in the network.

To promote a dynamic work group, URBACT arranged some tools which may maximize the benefits of the ULG to the cities. The aim of the URBACT Toolbox is to support a participative development of the IAP and reduce the complexity related to it.

3.3 The Food Corridors Case

3.3.1 Network Characterization

Food Corridors is an APN whose main objective is to develop an IAP considering the different feedback of community entities and representatives. The IAP's theme will be about the creation of a network of cities committed to the design of food plans that extend from the urban and peri-urban areas through a corridor that facilitates an urban-rural connection. This approach enhances the generation of production and consumption environments founded on a base of economic, social and environmental sustainability (URBACT, 2019). As the project finishes, the IAP will then either be implemented using own local funding or be used to leverage public funding.

The Food Corridors project is carried out under the URBACT III cycle. The network is aligned with recent initiatives that promote rural and urban reconnection through different axes, with food always present. The name 'corridor' was chosen as it is created in a process where subjects, objects, ideas, knowledge, and resources intervene with an innovative and participative methodology (URBACT, 2020).

The project initially consisted of eight different partners from various countries: Partner 1 (Lead Partner) from Portugal, 2 from Romania, 3 from Italy, 4 from Slovenia, 5 from Greece, 6 from Hungary, 7 from Estonia, and 8 from Spain[4]. The Lead Partner (LP) is responsible for the overall administrative, co-ordination, management, implementation, financial and legal responsibility for the project, acting as the link between the Managing Authority and the project partners (URBACT, 2021a).

[4] Partner 8 completed only the first phase of the project. The municipality's government changed and chose to withdraw from the second phase.

3.3.2 The Project during the Pandemic

Food Corridors was a project which was inevitably impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Alongside other URBACT networks which were operational in March 2020, there was the need of a continuous flexibility both for each individual partner and the networks as a whole. Whenever a problem arose, the partners were forced to adapt the work plan previously stipulated to answer accordingly.

However flexible the partners and networks were, the two main pillars behind the URBACT methodology, the participatory approach and the knowledge exchange, were drastically affected. The social distancing regulations, as well as lockdowns, invalidated the organisation of the ULGs properly. Regarding the knowledge exchange pillar, the in-person meetings in each partner's territory where different practical activities were held, was impossible to maintain.

It was only a matter of time before the network realized that to better adapt their operations to the pandemic, an effort would be needed not to postpone the operations, but to re-think the methodology, making sense of the new paradigm.

The solution to counter the problems relied on digitalisation, which brought numerous advantages that were not previously considered. The project's budget which initially was allocated to travelling expenses now aimed at digital tools and outsourcing expertise to enrich the operationalization of the project. The network's capacitation and the use of effective and efficient communication instruments was made possible, through the means of different digital tools.

The tools used during the evolution of the project encompassed a variety of activities, from project monitorization, to communication, and engagement at a network and local level. The project management tool used as a repository was Basecamp (https://basecamp.com/) and its features included document sharing, scheduling activities (ULG meetings, transnational meetings, coordination meetings), a message board to communicate with each partner or with a group,

and a To-do list where each member can see their deliverables. To conduct online meetings, Webex (https://www.webex.com/pt/index.html) was the chosen platform given its diverse features, such as scheduling meetings, digital security, breakout rooms, audience polling, integration with other programs, and overall video and sound quality. To engage with the network during the meetings, several digital tools were used. The LE and LP used Mentimeter (https://www.mentimeter.com/) several times to do interactive presentations, which could collect polls, data, and opinions from participants using smart devices in real-time. The main use of the tool was to analyse data and get insights regarding the main audience trends. Miro (https://miro.com/) was also used as a real-time collaboration platform, where members of the audience could join a zoomable canva and plan projects, using a template created by the meeting coordinator. The platform Hopin (https://hopin.com/) was used to conduct digital events in capacity-building moments, having the possibility of easily switch between online meeting rooms where different themes are discussed. To develop some deliverables, such as the IAP Roadmap, Canva (https://www.canva.com/) was the chosen platform, due to its user-friendliness, appealing designs and templates, and the possibility of several people co-working at the same time.

Nevertheless, a negative impact on the quality of the transnational experience and learning exchange results was felt, given the lack of motivation that once existed in the on-site and territorial meetings.

Difficulties were also felt at the local level, both regarding the composition of the ULG, and maintaining an active participation and political commitment for each territory. Furthermore, being the theme of the IAP related to the food industry, several amount of external stakeholders had put their operations on stand-by, thus delaying or putting an end to contact between the partners and local entities.

4. Project Success Criteria Identification and Analysis

4.1 Project Success Criteria

As mentioned in the literature review, project success has been an evolving definition which may differ from project to project (Bryde, 2005). Thus, correctly defining the project success criteria, is the bottom line to measure project success. In the Food Corridors case, the success criteria considered were in line with the main objectives of the URBACT programme: networking and learning through territorial cooperation while promoting a local participatory approach.

Even though the main result of the project is the development of an IAP, the methodology throughout the project's progress is equally as essential as the achievement of the IAP. The next section of this paper highlights the success criteria based on the network and local level, considering the importance of embracing a participatory and idea-exchange approach.

After having identified the success criteria for each level, KPIs will be set to monitor the progression of the project to achieve project success. Each work package (WP) has KPIs associated to its expected outcome and if these are not achieved, there is an underperformance of the WP.

4.1.1 Network Level Success Criteria Identification

To measure the project's success at a network level, the success criteria identified was the partner's engagement, which was then evaluated considering two distinct KPI. The first KPI at the network level is the number of transnational meetings which were done during the project's progress, being usually set to one for each partner. As the Food Corridors network consists of seven partners for

phase II of the project, the number of transnational meetings was originally set to seven.

To monitor the network as a whole and considering every component of it, the number of coordination meetings, are the second KPI at a network level to be measured. In practice, the coordination meetings are done just prior to the transnational meetings, in a face-to-face manner and in the territory where the transnational meeting is being held. These are usually conducted under these circumstances to ensure that all the entities are present and to avoid further traveling expenses. Networks usually conduct as many coordination meetings as the number of transnational meetings, which in the Food Corridors case was originally planned to be seven (URBACT, 2021a).

4.1.2 Local Level Success Criteria Identification

At the local level, having periodic meetings with a complete and structured ULG is vital to gather the best feedback possible for the development of the IAP. The project's success criteria at the local level is the stakeholder's inclusiveness and participation. Similarly to what happened at the network level, the WP at a local level also considered two different KPIs to evaluate its progress.

The first KPI is usually the one that varies the most according to each partner: the number of entities which participate in at least one meeting of the ULG. URBACT typically determines that a successful project is one that considers opinions and feedback from at least 17 stakeholders, through their participation in the ULGs. A further prediction was done prior to starting the stakeholder engagement, to promote brainstorming over potential stakeholders to include. It is important to note that different partners have distinct ambitions regarding the number of stakeholders which they want to engage in the project.

The second KPI measures the number of times the ULG has been summoned to give feedback, through the amount of local group meetings each partner has.

Typically, some weeks after each transnational meeting, there is a ULG meeting to apply the feedback gathered into the IAP development. This results in a total prediction of seven ULG meetings in the network, given the seven transnational meetings.

4.2 Success Criteria Evolution and Analysis

4.2.1 Network Level Analysis

The natural face-to-face dynamic of the transnational meetings was interrupted, given the inability to travel to the different partner's territories. Given that having a high exchange of ideas is a fundamental pillar for the programme's success, different tools were adopted to support online exchange of ideas and best practices.

Furthermore, there was an increased simplicity to organize and operationalize transnational meetings, due to decreased logistics related to travelling, accommodation, and partner's availability. Consequently, transnational meetings were held with a higher frequency than normally, where the partners needed to travel to each territory. The Food Corridors network saw an increase in the number of transnational meetings from 7 to 12, where the network gathered online to share the main IAP developments and problems. This variation is natural, considering it was necessary to obtain the normal quality of the transnational meetings, which was compromised due to the inability to work on-site towards the same goal.

Table 6 - Performance of Transnational Meetings

Network	Original Objective	Transnational Meetings	Variation
Food Corridors	7	12	+5

The objectives and the influence that the coordination meetings had in the project's progression gained a significant amount of relevance with the pandemic. The previously bureaucratic and formal meetings incremented in importance, as the network needed to discuss the project's future progress considering the volatility of the travel and health policies throughout Europe, particularly each partner's country. During the coordination meetings, the LE also shared the URBACT Secretariat's updates regarding the network's management, such as budgetary expectations, digital tools to be used per type of activity and meeting, and postponed deliverables.

Consequently, one representative of each municipality gathered with the LE approximately once every two months to monitor the progress of each WP. On a quarterly basis, the work plan for the following quarter would be updated, considering the evolution of the pandemic. Given the need to closely monitor the project's progress, the number of coordination meetings naturally increased from 7 to 13 meetings.

Table 7 – Performance of Coordination Meetings

Network	Original Objective	Coordination Meetings	Variation
Food Corridors	7	13	+6

When comparing these two KPIs to URBACT's project success criteria regarding the network exchange and learning, it is possible to conclude that the Food Corridors network had a positive and successful performance, due to their continuous communication, exchange, and participation in transnational and coordination meetings.

4.2.2 Local Level Analysis

The number of entities per ULG, as mentioned before, is the most variable KPI in the project, due to the uniqueness of each partner's approach to local stakeholders, as well as motivations and ambitions with the project.

During an exercise in the project's first phase, the partners established the number of entities they intend to bring together in the ULG in the second phase. As expected, this amount varied from partner to partner, showing however a tendency to be reduced when comparing to the real entities present in the ULG in the second phase. This natural variation happens as the partners had to numerate the ULG members before the impact of the pandemic, which lead to difficulties when approaching the entities and inviting them to take place.

As the partners of the Food Corridors network had different ambitions regarding the size of the ULG, the correct way of measuring the variation of members in the ULG was using a relative approach (%), dividing the variation with the original objective set for each network.

When analysing the entity variation in the ULG in the table below, it is possible to see the drastic difference in some of the partners, such as Partners 2 and 6, whose variation was both over 70%, meaning they had a very difficult time in engaging with external stakeholders. On the other hand, some networks were affected to a lesser extent, such as Partners 4 and 5, who still managed to engage and exchange feedback at least once with 13 entities. Partners 1, 3, and 7 were the least affected by the pandemic, having a variation of less than 20%.

Table 8 - Performance of entities per ULG

Partner	Original Objective	Entities per ULG	Variation	Variation (%)
1	22	21	-1	-4,5%
2	18	5	-13	-72,2%
3	39	33	-6	-15,4%
4	24	14	-10	-41,7%
5	24	13	-11	-45,8%
6	23	3	-20	-87%
7	80	68	-12	-15%

The periodicity of the ULG meetings is as important as the ULG's constitution. Given the digital capacity and tools used to perform more transnational meetings, it is expected that the number of local group meetings would follow the same path. However, this was not the case, as the number of ULG Meetings held during the duration of the project was significantly impacted by the pandemic. The face-to-face feedback exchange natural of these activities was compromised given the constraints some territories had regarding travel bans and working limitation and transitioning the meetings to an online format was a difficult task for some.

When analysing the meetings held, some partners stand out, such as Partners 1, 3, 6, and 7, who had a positive or null variation. However, as these meetings may have more or less external stakeholders providing their feedback, the average entities per meeting was also calculated. The average entities per meeting reveal different results in some cases, where the partners which engaged better with their external stakeholders were Partners 1, 3 and 7, with over eight average entities in their meetings.

This comes to show that reviewing exclusively the meetings held is insufficient, given that in some cases, such as Partner 6, there was a null variation in the meetings held, however only an average of 3 different entities per meeting, thus failing to engage in a stakeholder-inclusive view.

Table 9 - Performance of meetings held and entities per meeting

Partner	Original Objective	Meetings Held	Variation	Average Entities per Meeting
1	7	8	+1	11
2	7	4	-3	2,75
3	7	10	+3	8,60
4	7	4	-3	5,75
5	7	3	-4	6,33
6	7	7	0	3
7	7	13	+6	17,38

As seen above, the partners reacted differently to practicing stakeholder-inclusiveness in their territory. While some were able to engage with a considerable number of external stakeholders despite the COVID-19 crisis, others had an increased difficulty in doing so. As aforementioned, a successful project for URBACT, concerning the participatory approach, must engage with at least 17 stakeholders, which was the case for Partners 1, 3, and 7. In the following section, the differences between partners that lead to them succeeding or failing in meeting project success will be analysed.

5. Drivers to achieve Project Success during the Pandemic

5.1 Prior External Stakeholder Engagement and Management

The number of projects and programmes similar to URBACT are growing and the EU is continuously investing in projects that work in a network or consortium of actors. Given this, some stakeholders have a network beforehand to engage in these types of projects when needed. These 'predefined' networks are comprised of all kinds of stakeholders which, according to the project *locus*, are then categorized in internal and external stakeholders. The main goal of adopting this approach is facilitating the initial stakeholder engagement, as these steps were already taken in another project's sphere. Furthermore, other advantages include an increase in the economic viability and in the capability of local communities to shape their living environment.

External stakeholder engagement during the pandemic was one of the main difficulties felt, especially for the partners who were new to the work group dynamic or those who were yet to engage with local entities to take part of the ULG. This was the example of Partners 2, 4, 5, and 6, who did not have a previously formed group and were forced to engage with stakeholders from the beginning. As this process was only aimed for the beginning of the second phase, during the summer of 2020, the partners needed to respect the COVID-19 regulations and keep social distancing, working from home. Consequently, there was an added difficulty in performing the steps of external stakeholder engagement, as some of the actors had their operations on stand-by, and others prioritised different issues, given the less urgent nature of the project. This

resulted in an overall lack of interest or availability to participate and a consequence lack of stakeholder-inclusiveness.

However, the impact of the pandemic's restrictions was to a lesser extent for Partners 1, 3, and 7. Partner 1 had already engaged with local stakeholders, promoting some meetings before the end of the first phase and arrival of the pandemic to plan for the second phase in advance. Consequently, the communication held after the COVID-19 outbreak was a continuation of the past engagement, resulting in an average higher presence of stakeholders in each meeting, as well as one of the least felt variations in the number of stakeholders engaged in the second phase when compared to those predicted.

Partners 3 and 7 methodology concerning stakeholder network formation corresponds to the one abovementioned. These two partners already worked alongside several entities, such as private actors, community associations, the academia, research centres, schools, and other relevant external stakeholders. After acknowledging the methodology and project theme, their internal stakeholders prioritised which external stakeholders to engage according to their importance on the project, resulting in an overall stakeholder satisfaction and cooperation. Given the previous close relationships between the network of stakeholders, there was a reduced impact in the stakeholder engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When considering the average number of stakeholders per meeting, these three partners also outperformed the rest, given the ease in engaging with stakeholders to be a part of the meetings and sharing their feedback.

5.2 Digitalization

The EU allocates a substantial amount of funds to the digital transformation of entities across the member states. However, not all actors realized the potential present in the digitalization of operations. From March 2020 onwards, this

opportunity surfaced for a significant number of entities, given the need to adapt to the crisis and embrace alternative communication and work methods. Inevitably, the level of digitalization also played a relevant role in ensuring external stakeholder participation. The network had a variety of profiles with distinct digital maturity, causing an inevitable influence in stakeholder management.

Partner 7 already engaged with their stakeholders by videoconference and used digital tools prior to the pandemic. Consequently, the adaptation to the crisis was in place was the smoothest and most natural out of all the partners. When asked to comment on how the ULG was performing, Partner 7 mentioned that the virtual meetings were working extremely well and they were gathering positive inputs for the IAP development.

Partners 1 and 3, although not having digitalized their operations before the pandemic, had the means and resources to do it in March 2020, and viewed the crisis as an opportunity to engage in digital transformation. As a result, both partners adapted to the new paradigm and motivated their external stakeholders with interactive and participative digital activities. As a matter of fact, Partner 1 mentioned that "although most members were deeply affected by COVID-19, they maintain an active interest and willingness to participate in the project". Furthermore, the LP also acted as a facilitator and bought software licenses to help the network kickstart their work locally and overcome the initial struggle.

Regarding the participatory approach, the other partners were not so successful in implementing digital transformation and engaging with external stakeholders. They did not manage to get a diverse and complete feedback from several local actors, negatively impacting the quality of their interactions and their IAP.

The reasons for the lack of interaction were threefold. For starters, the partner themselves had a difficulty in learning how to use digital tools, leading to a

decrease in efficiency and quality of everyday operations and meetings. Secondly, when communicating with their ULG, they did not emphasize the potential of digital tools and failed to create an incentive for the work group to engage online. Partner 5 had most ULG members with relatively low digital proficiency, with Skype being the most technologically advanced tool used to communicate. To conclude, there were also partners whose digital resources, namely computers and tablets, lacked the necessary quality to efficiently engage in online meetings, resulting in a delayed process or even cancelation of some online interactions.

5.3 Results

URBACT considers a project as being successful if there is an exchange of ideas and learning at the network level and a stakeholder participation and inclusiveness at the local level. Given the presence of an unexpected event, in this thesis' case, the COVID-19 crisis, there was a need to rethink the approach and adapt to the newly formed paradigm. Results show that the project's success at the network level was achieved, as the different partners exchanged ideas and feedback at a higher frequency than initially planned.

At the local level, project's success was heavily conditioned, and some partners did not manage to include the number of stakeholders required by URBACT to consider the project as successful. However, when analysing the different behaviours, meetings, and engagement techniques, two drivers were essential for achieving project success: prior stakeholder engagement and digitalization.

On one hand, previous stakeholder engagement in other projects or before the unexpected event allowed a decrease in the COVID-19 impact, given the continuity associated to prior communications and operations. On the other hand, the partners who seized the crisis as an opportunity to digitally transform

and adapt their operations were those who promoted the stakeholder participatory approach and maintained the quality of the final IAP.

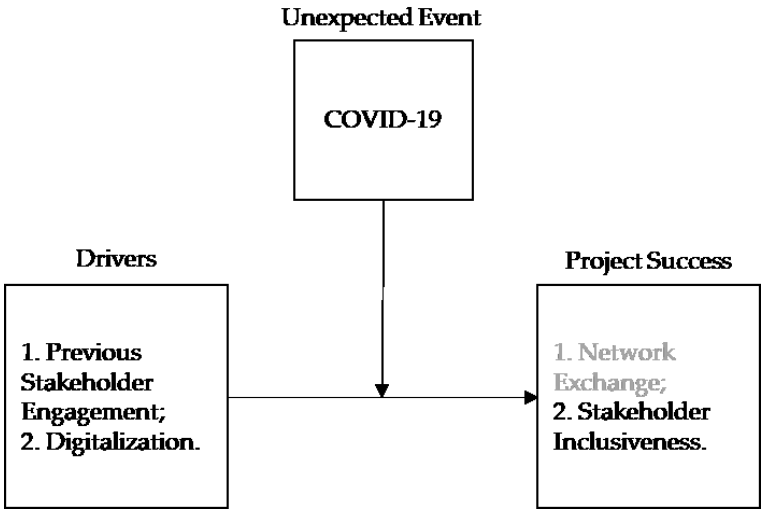

Figure 2 - Drivers to overcome the COVID-19 crisis and succeed in stakeholder inclusiveness

A modification was made to Figure 1 and can be seen in the diagram above. For starters, there was a specification regarding the type of unexpected event, which is now one with the characteristics of the COVID-19 crisis, to what social distancing, operation interruption, and inability to engage on-site is concerned. The project success was then defined according to the URBACT and Food Corridors guidelines, being identified (i) network exchange and (ii) stakeholder inclusiveness as success criteria. To conclude, the drivers to meet project success in the stakeholder inclusiveness scope were identified as (i) previous stakeholder engagement and (ii) digitalization.

6. Conclusion and Limitations

6.1 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictive measures significantly impacted most sectors, having thus a considerable effect on the project. The resilience of the network of stakeholders was tested, at a time where there was a need to adapt to a new paradigm and change stakeholder engagement and management techniques. For starters, the majority of the project's operations moved online, due to the social distancing guidelines. Furthermore, the meetings between the network partner's and their ULGs changed their format and objective, and some were even cancelled or indefinitely postponed.

At a network level, the WP were adapted and the original objectives set for the transnational meetings and the coordination meetings were not only achieved, but almost doubled. However, the effect that carried out at a network level did not follow at the ULG level. As the ULGs were composed of stakeholders who did not belong to the projects network, *i.e.*, external stakeholders, several challenges rose and increased the difficulty with working with them. Nonetheless, some partners achieved a level of performance which showed dexterity and cleverness in managing external stakeholders albeit the COVID-19 crisis.

There were two characteristics which facilitated the internal stakeholder's management of the project and external actors: prior external stakeholder engagement and digital maturity of the project's team.

Overall, the difficulties felt were progressively reduced as the situation improved, leading to better results in 2022 but still failing to meet the ambitious ULG indicators set by the partners when the project was drafted.

6.2 Limitations and Further Research

This paper is naturally limited to being a single case-study, even if considering the impact of seven distinct external stakeholder groups. Future studies should gather samples from other project types where the roles of the stakeholders are different and the internal stakeholders belong to other sectors rather than the public.

Another limitation was regarding digitalization. The data was gathered solemnly from interviews to the LP and LE. To better understand the differences that levels of digitalization make, it is important to find a quantitative metric to measure it and then associate the partner's performance.

Further studies should also be conducted to address not only the quantity but also the quality of stakeholders, *i.e.*, define a qualitative metric which considers the stakeholder's relevance to the project according to its theme, potential value-added, and other variables. In this case, a high-quality network could be comprised of not only adequate stakeholders but also various different representatives of the community, which promotes a stakeholder-inclusive view.

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Annex

Annex I – Number of Entities per Meeting

Table 10 - Number of entities per meeting

	ULG Meetings												
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**
Partner 1	13	11	13	10	10	10	10	11					
Partner 2	4	3	2	2									
Partner 3	9	7	12	9	10	7	6	6	11	9			
Partner 4	5	4	7	7									
Partner 5	8	8	3										
Partner 6	3	3	3	3	3	3	3						
Partner 7	10	12	12	13	13	13	13	35	25	25	18	18	19

Annex II – Summary of ULG Meetings

Table 11 - Summary of ULG meetings

	Total Members	Member Prediction	Variation	%	Total Meetings	Average Members per Meeting
Partner 1	21	22	-1	-4,55%	8	11,00
Partner 2	5	18	-13	-72,22%	4	2,75
Partner 3	33	39	-6	-15,38%	10	8,60
Partner 4	14	24	-10	-41,67%	4	5,75
Partner 5	13	24	-11	-45,83%	3	6,33
Partner 6	3	23	-20	-86,96%	7	3,00
Partner 7	68	80	-12	-15,00%	13	17,38