USE-IT! (Unlocking Social and Economic Innovation Together)

The University of Birmingham, as part of a consortium bid led by Birmingham City Council, has won funding totalling €3.64m from the EU (ERDF) Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) programme to deliver USE-IT! (Unlocking Social and Economic Innovation Together). The UIA programme provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to solve their urban challenges.

A cross university, multi-disciplinary team led by CURS/GEES with support from TSRC and City-REDI will deliver work embedding and pioneering community based research, developing modules for use in tackling poverty by connecting residents to urban development opportunities and also carry out the evaluation of the whole programme including modelling macro-micro skills and poverty. Bringing these competences to USE-IT! will be crucial to developing capacity for communities to co-produce social and economic innovation and test the role of higher education as an agent of change in poor communities.

Integrating poor and migrant communities into urban development and capital infrastructure projects requires innovation and new ways of working collaboratively. New mechanisms that unlock the potential of poor communities and connect them to the resources needed to remain resilient and escape poverty are required. USE-IT! – delivers sustainable urban development by helping developers deliver regeneration benefits to local communities whilst empowering residents to engage and create the conditions to deliver social and economic innovation, we will do this through a number of linked work packages;

- Empowering and enabling community researchers to have leadership roles to influence change: 60 community researchers will be trained and 2 PhD students will be funded as champions for community empowerment and engagement;

- Hosting a range of events such as a 'state of the city' and 'community challenge' days to allow communities to work with the universities and stakeholders to define the problems and identify areas for social and economic innovation;

- Creating alternative and sustainable enterprise and employment structures enabling communities and the Third Sector to have greater roles in creating structures for overcoming poverty: a skills matching service and social entrepreneur lab will be used to match opportunities within poor and transient communities adjacent to large infrastructure investments;

- Working with high GVA partners whose sectors do not traditionally alleviate poverty, to bring Corporate Social Responsibility from an 'add-on' to a fundamental shift in the way 'business' is conducted and to identify sustainable models of community finance and asset building;

- Transferring and scaling up our learning by taking our innovation champions, community researchers and social entrepreneurs into a similarly deprived transect of the city-region and replicating and evaluating the model.

Using our mechanism of Community Researchers (CRs), USE-IT! will provide a model for unlocking available resource and innovation. Our CRs will be enabled to have leadership roles to drive and influence change. They will be trained in research and social innovation methods aimed at unlocking and linking opportunities in new urban developments, as well as identifying challenges and innovations to problems that traditional public policies have failed.

This will inform the creation of a matching skills service to enhance employment support and support for poor communities to spinout social enterprises that are socially innovative or build economic outputs from existing resources. We will also build on community assets to identify innovative forms of community finance that could be sustainably used longer term in this area and to support replication.

The wider partnership also includes Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust; Initiative for Social Entrepreneurs; KPMG; Birmingham Chamber of Commerce; Birmingham City University; Birmingham Voluntary Services Council; Canal and River Trust; Localise West Midlands; the Karis Neighbourhood Scheme; Smethwick Church Action Group; Co-operative Futures; Father Hudson's Care; Health Exchange CIC; and Citizen Coaching CIC.

USE-IT! has been developed out of research-led teaching module at postgraduate level at the University of Birmingham as part of the MSc in Urban and Regional Planning. By developing regeneration and sustainable development approaches that are embedded in a local context, USE-IT! aims to impact positively on poor communities and connect them to opportunities in large infrastructure projects happening in their area. For developers and the public-private sector, USE-IT! provides a mechanism of engagement to make this happen. USE-IT! therefore starts from a realistic and embedded proposition that demonstrates scalability and is transferable to other developed and developing world contexts. As almost 80% of the world's population will be urban by 2050, the need for the USE-IT! approach to urban development will grow.

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