



Applying the Faro Convention Principles to deliver  
Heritage-based Urban Development:  
**The COMUS-Project**

Community-led Urban Strategies in Historic Towns (COMUS)

*COMUS partner training workshop in Soroca, Republic of Moldova*

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*The opinions expressed in this work are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Council of Europe.*

## Abstract

Across Eastern Europe, there is a significant number of small and medium-sized towns with historic urban areas and valuable cultural heritage assets. Today, and almost without exception, such towns are facing various and serious challenges. These often common challenges include economic downturn, emigration of skilled people, ageing populations, physical degradation etc. In this context, preserving and reactivating heritage sites – whether they are historic, spiritual or industrial – implies the double challenge of dealing with low investment in capacity and rehabilitation, and limited availability of skills and resources. Sites that had previously been distinguished by their heritage value and cultural importance, in terms of local and national identities, have become neglected or even derelict. Others suffered due to the legacy of centralised planning systems, characterised by deficits in capacity and resources at the local level to deal with the growing responsibilities of decentralisation. In many cases communities have become disconnected from the cultural heritage, which defines their locality. Experience with participatory practices and local community engagement in preservation and reactivation of the cultural heritage to support cultural, socio-economic urban development is in its early stages. The COMUS project “Community-Led Urban Strategies in Historic Towns” set out to address these challenges and demonstrate how cultural heritage and its regeneration can provide opportunities for the financial, social and cultural development of historic towns (Heritage-based Urban Development). The project represents a starting point to apply an alternative approach, based on a strategic and structured process, focussed firmly on community needs and interests. This initiative must also be situated as introducing approaches embedded in the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, the “Faro Convention”, 2005. In this article the methods and methodology used are explained, to clarify the scope, structure and process involved, in a detailed and systemic overview.

## INTRODUCTION: Setting

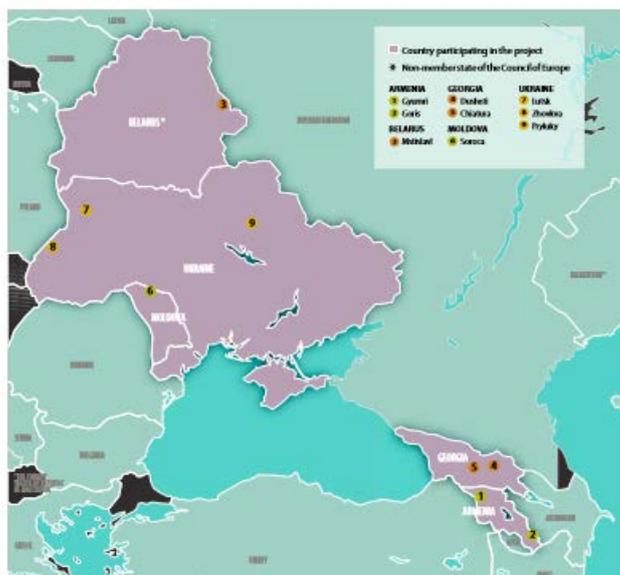
Between 2009 and 2011, a pool of 45 historic towns in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine were inspired to join the “Pilot Project for the Rehabilitation of Cultural Heritage in Historic Towns” (PP2 – a joint action of the EU Commission and Council of Europe, Technical Assistance and Consultancy – cultural and natural heritage - Programme), part of the [Kyiv Initiative Regional Programme: Black Sea and South Caucasus](#). “The aim was to work with each other in an era of post Soviet transition to create democratic and engaged societies, and rebuild trust and confidence across the region” Under the banner

of “Heritage for a new urbanity” 25 of these Pilot Towns produced Preliminary Technical Files recording, mapping and assessing the condition, and the potential of their cultural heritage assets to function as a structural component of integrated (economic, social, environmental) urban renewal.

The [COMUS project – “Community-led Urban Strategies in Historic Towns”](#) (EU Eastern Partnership Programme 2009) was conceived to capitalise on this valuable resource, to ensure ownership and encourage ongoing mobilisation of heritage values in the wider process of urban (re)development. Once again the brief invited 5 countries, Belarus replacing Azerbaijan in this exercise, to engage in multi-lateral cooperation to build on and extend the PP2 experience. Nine historic towns were selected at national level and charged with the mission to pilot an adapted governance model and participative approach - community involvement – targeting better integration of heritage protection and management into local urban, economic policies and strategy.

*“From a European perspective, the richness and diversity of the heritage in these pilot towns represents an important resource for development. COMUS therefore does not target heritage as such, but rather the role of heritage in other sectorial policies, such as urban and regional planning, environment and sustainable development in general.”*

Extract from COMUS Template for agreement between partners – Guidelines for the project Inception Phase 2015.



Countries participating in the COMUS project

## Cultural Heritage Today: Communities, Perception, Holistic Understanding

Today cultural heritage is perceived far more broadly than was the case by previous generations — including the pioneers of the preservation movement — as is its protection and safeguarding for future generations. For the urban context, “Traditionally, planners viewed historic areas as a collection of monuments and buildings to be preserved as relics of the past, whose value was considered to be totally separate from their day-to-day use and city context” (Siravo 2014:161). This materialistic approach to heritage was rooted in the physical appearance of monuments, material conditions and a traditional understanding of heritage preservation as a mainly material science, the province of conservators. Laurajane Smith has labelled this the “authorized heritage discourse” (Smith 2006). Throughout the world, but especially in Europe, this perception of cultural heritage remains very strong.

The traditional approach to the identification and delineation of cultural and natural heritage as properties, is firmly embedded in the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (the World Heritage Convention - UNESCO 1972). Under “Definitions”, Article 1 simply embraces monuments, groups of buildings and sites as “cultural heritage”. In retrospect the 1964 Venice Charter and its founding doctrinal text — adopted by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in 1965 — with its passing references to “setting” and “some socially useful purpose” (ICOMOS 1964) may be interpreted as presaging a shift in direction. Extending this position Article 5(a) of the 1972 Convention expressed the aspiration “to adopt a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programmes”. The major shift, establishing fuller comprehension of a dependent relationship between “heritage” (tangible and intangible) and communities, is a far more recent interpretation. 2005, for example, saw the adoption of the Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (the Faro Convention - Council of Europe 2005). Under “Aims of the Convention”, Article 1c reads: “the conservation of cultural heritage and its sustainable use have human development and quality of life as their goal”. Referring to society as “constantly evolving”, “the need to put people and human values at the centre of an enlarged and cross-disciplinary concept of cultural heritage”, and “the need to involve everyone in society in the ongoing process of defining and managing cultural heritage”, the Faro Convention articulated a sea change in perceptions. Also UNESCO recognised in the framing of the 2005

Conventions (UNESCO 2005a ; UNESCO 2005b ) “the fundamental role of civil society”, an issue that later reappears in the editions of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, but which was only introduced retrospectively.

The modern understanding of cultural heritage is fluid and dynamic. At its core, it represents a holistic understanding that perceives cultural heritage as “a social and political construct encompassing all those places, artefacts and cultural expressions inherited from the past which, because they are seen to reflect and validate our identity as nations, communities, families and even individuals, are worthy of some form of respect and protection” (Labadi and Logan 2015: xiii). From an initially object-based approach, heritage is now understood as representing a system of diverse entities with an increasingly strong emphasis on communities and the varied use of heritage by them over time (Kalman 2014). In the context of the COMUS Project, this paradigm shift has important implications, most noteworthy in terms of the role and integration of communities and stakeholders in the process of heritage-based urban development. (Council of Europe 2016) Together with today’s understanding of management and communications, evolving from traditional, linear cause-and-effect models to incorporate complex, systemic processes, a door has been opened to encourage exploration of different approaches and techniques, paving the way for the introduction and development of the COMUS Methodology. Strategies for the integration and coordination of stakeholders, encompassing community participation, and focused on generating benefits for local communities and improving the quality of life, are at the heart of the COMUS Project, but are also recognised in several other urban heritage networks, like the Organisation of World Heritage Cities (Göttler and Ripp 2017, Ripp and Rodwell in preparation).



School children waiting for the cable car in the old mining town of Chilatara

## Heritage as resource for urban development

During recent years international organisations, heritage cities, networks and a broad range of scientists have developed a common understanding that (built) cultural heritage can serve as a powerful resource for urban development (World Bank 2001, Elnokaly and Elseragy 2013, Gustafsson and Polesie 2013, Sacco 2014, Consortium 2015, Labadi and Logan 2015, Loulanski and Loulanski 2016, Ruoss 2016, UNESCO 2016). This is about to stimulate a paradigmatic change in the perception of urban built heritage. Whereas built heritage is still often associated with preservation and its related strong regulations, it was and unfortunately still is often perceived as an obstacle to development.

Desired changes in the urban system (often modern buildings or infrastructure) cannot, or not in the desired way, be implemented because local, national or even international policies are setting limits. In this process, often the development narrative is strong and associated with a “modernization” of the urban system. When at a usually later point during this process limitations of change to listed or relevant structures appear, this leads to a negative connotation of built heritage (Rodwell 2015). Even when the concept of contemporary uses in old buildings is accepted this does not guarantee avoidance of these obstacles or change of fixed mindsets.

A different strategy is to start by understanding built cultural heritage as an asset and resource for development (understood in a sustainable way with economic, social and cultural as well as environmental benefits). This principle has been used by several projects of different scope (Gustafsson 2009, City of Regensburg; Ripp 2011, Sacco 2014) and was also the starting point for the COMUS Project. (Built) Heritage is hereby understood as a means rather than the end of a process. The objective is to improve the quality of life for the (local) communities. Heritage and everything that it is used for, is a way to achieve this objective. The modern and holistic understanding of urban heritage together with the strong notion on the role of communities has been the two starting points underpinning the development of the COMUS Methodology.

### COMUS: The Project

The reasoning behind the COMUS initiative reflects a general evolution in urban management processes across Europe, moving away from traditional sector determined city development solutions (EU Bristol Accord 2005, Leipzig Charter 2007, URBACT Hero project 2008-2011). An integrated and participative governance model is increasingly recognized as a more effective means of

stimulating sustainable urban regeneration and growth – responsive to the real interplay of social, economic, environmental and cultural challenges (Ripp and Rodwell 2016). In this sense treatment of cultural heritage is not simply about preservation, where individual sites or monuments only require listing, protection and conservation. The historic urban landscape and associated cultural (intangible) heritage is rather a prime resource, an essential part of a joined-up approach being adopted to secure smarter, inclusive and sustainable city futures. In towns and cities with historic quality and strong traditions, cultural heritage can be a mainstream driver in the urban development process, through interaction with planning, tourism, environment, social, housing... policy sectors. World Heritage and European trends confirm this, and indicate that ultimately the integrated approach also presents us with the prospect of a tool to counter, mitigate, avoid the eventual excesses or unintended transformations which can be associated with uniquely heritage driven urban economies such as Bruges, Venice, Barcelona, Dubrovnik... (re. Venezia Autentica).

COMUS in this respect looked to add value to on-going projects in the Eastern Europe/Trans Caucasian region, where the selected Pilot Towns present interesting heritage credentials but are in a very elementary phase in terms of benefiting from this asset or developing community interest or engagement. The project is being implemented in pilot towns where local authorities and stakeholders face serious difficulties in improving living conditions, creating social cohesion or supporting/generating economic activities - and where preservation of the natural and cultural heritage also raises issues at national level.



*Mapping exercises in Mstislavl, Belarus, help the understanding of heritage sites in the overall context of their surroundings.*

## Project objectives

The principal aim of COMUS was therefore to stimulate social and economic development by enhancing the cultural heritage resources in historic towns. More detailed objectives were set out as follows:

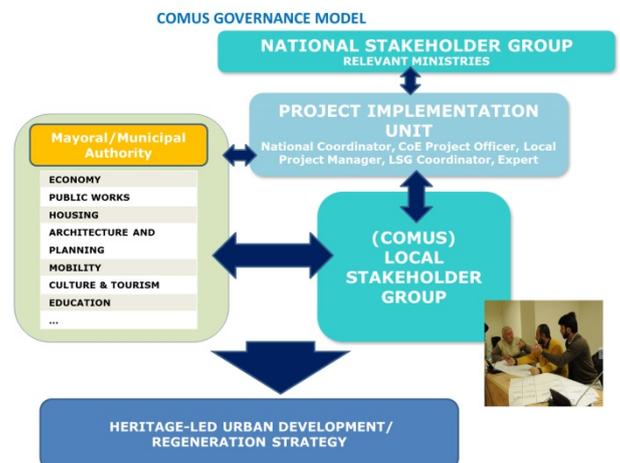
- \* To raise the importance of heritage - particularly as a potential resource for reinvestment and economic activity in towns, through identification and interpretation of the distinctive features that define their attractiveness and competitiveness;
- \* To foster an integrated approach - by setting up synergies between all levels of authorities in order to combine their capacities in implementing common heritage-led urban projects, but also encouraging them to include heritage as a factor of development in national and local sectoral policies;
- \* To manage existing urban constraints and pressures - through the identification of priorities so that any dysfunctions can be confronted in time through relevant rehabilitation strategies based on the quality of social relations, the desire to live together in harmony and the respect for multicultural and trans-generational relations;
- \* To introduce public debate and direct participation of inhabitants in the decision-making process – through the experimentation of strict rules for the sharing of responsibilities between inhabitants, elected representatives and technicians;
- \* To make the best use of the existing urban fabric to foster a new kind of modernity – through the adaptation and recycling of old buildings with sustainable solutions, in order to halt degradation of the historic environment, and encourage inhabitants to take better care of their buildings in their own economic and general interests.

## COMUS Activity and Governance Model

In order to optimally support result-based activity at the local level, the project set out a step process of tasks to be carried out in each Pilot Town. Broadly this involved:

- the setting-up of a management and operational structure; updating the PP2 Preliminary Technical Files (in the case of Mstislavl, Belarus, the PTF survey/analysis was carried out within COMUS);
- developing a strategic Reference Plan (analysis, vision and objectives, definition of actions required to deliver objectives);
- identifying and assessing priority actions, and finally;
- reviewing project process and achievement.

This translated into 4 phases of activity, with guidelines for each phase provided by the COMUS organisational level to explain and structure the exercise. In collaboration with the respective National Authorities, an interactive management framework was designed to administer and direct the project. With a view to facilitating multi-level and cross-cutting input and accord for the local initiative this included the establishment of a National Stakeholder Group represented by a National Coordinator, the appointment (by the CoE) of a national coordinating and supporting Project Officer, designation of a Project Manager and local Project Implementation Unit for each Pilot Town, creation of a Local Stakeholder Group and provision of a pool of consultative local, national and international experts.



Underpinning the very philosophy of the COMUS project was the ambition to establish real community involvement. Inspired by local group working piloted in the EU URBACT programme, each Pilot Town was therefore obliged to build a local stakeholder group (LSG) with LSG coordinator. The intention was to create a participative structure to accompany the whole step process - to effectively co-produce the integrated urban/heritage strategy and determine priority actions and activities required to deliver such a locally accepted development approach. More importantly this representative body it was hoped would function as a bridge, a channel to catalyse engagement of the wider local community.

In the five countries participating in COMUS (Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) such stakeholder participation presented a relatively new model of involvement in local policy and decision making, and especially in the field of cultural heritage. This real lack of participative tradition, capacity and experience meant that of necessity the initial impulse has to be categorised as top-down. The idea was that the group would meet regularly to focus on understanding the full potential role of heritage, bringing their local knowledge and experience

into a process of initiating action and activity - so over time assuming ownership and responsibility to ensure incorporation of the bottom-up perspective.

## **Applying a “COMUS Model”: Some Words on the Scope of Models**

If in the real world in a specific urban setting there is a challenge or a problem it is (sometimes) possible to find a solution. If the challenge or problem is also present in SIMILAR urban settings, a model, based on the solution that was successful in one specific case, can be developed, adapted, and transferred. In this sense it can be useful to target the same challenge or problem in a similar urban setting. It is important to understand that the transferability of every model has limitations, and these limitations are rooted in the specific qualities, the structure, the context, the actors involved or absent, and many other parameters that usually DIFFER from case to case. Each model describes methodologies and tools that are relevant in specific cases with specific preconditions. If models from one setting are tried to be used in a divergent setting, where all parameters and preconditions are different, the model may quickly prove to be ineffectual and will likely face various limitations (Van Gigh 2003, Gustafsson 2009).

## **Other Models for Heritage-based Urban Development (HbUD)**

In different settings models for heritage-based urban development have already been developed:

**A.** The HerO-Model: In the URBACT II funded European project HerO (Heritage as Opportunity 2008-2011) nine European heritage cities developed a methodology formulating Integrated Heritage Management Plans to balance the needs between preservation and socio-economic development. Partner cities were of different size and economic background, located across Western and Central Europe. Stakeholder involvement followed URBACT methodology and was organized in a structured and explicit way. As one result a guidebook on the HerO methodology was produced (City of Regensburg; Ripp 2011).

**B.** The Halland-Modell: Starting in Sweden and then expanded to countries in the Baltic region and Eastern Europe, the objective of the Halland Model from 1993-2003 was to stimulate sustainable development through preservation projects, including the training of construction workers in traditional building techniques. In this way, cultural heritage was used as a stimulator for job creation and skills training, resulting in a multitude of consequences which redefine the framework of growth

and sustainable development. (Gustafsson 2009) (Gustafsson and Rosvall 2008).

Together with the COMUS Model, these examples share a number of common factors:

- \* They are explicitly exploiting built cultural heritage as a key component of urban development
- \* They are implementing an integrated approach, bringing together different uses, stakeholders, governance levels etc.
- \* They show signs of a systemic understanding of the field
- \* They are not using a traditional preservation-centred narrative, where the safeguarding of cultural heritage is the final objective, but a new narrative, where cultural heritage is more a tool and instrument to reach other objectives

But there are also notable differences in the three approaches. The management-plan approach used in HerO adopted a more traditional, but albeit cross-sectoral and integrated approach while already giving special attention to the Scoping phase on the ground e.g. through instruments like peer-review. In the COMUS-Project the whole exercise to complete the PTFs (Preliminary Technical Files with basic inventories and maps of the local heritage assets) was crucial, due to the fact that there was not enough available information like maps, heritage inventory, description of heritage, archive material, etc. to start the design of local processes. The making of the PTFs was an important part of the scoping phase, because without proper knowledge of the urban heritage at hand, it is impossible to design the process and choose the right tools, methods and experts. The management-plan approach from HerO for example was targeted towards achieving tangible results in a short time (three years), without explicitly aiming to improve policies at local and national levels. Retrospectively these approaches also share other weaknesses, such as certain inflexibility, insufficient attention to existing and desired governance structures, not integrating enough capacity building for key persons, etc. Because of these imperfections and the limitations experienced in other HbUD approaches, such models do not necessarily provide an easy or complete solution. One model that is successful in a specific place may not transfer easily for use in a different setting. Ferillii, Gustafsson and Sacco derived, from the application and assessment of the Halland Model in Sweden and several Eastern-European and Baltic states, a useful set of actions that they describe on a higher level of abstraction related to different policy fields with capacity to stimulate development (Ferilli, Gustafsson et al. 2011).

## A new participative “COMUS Model” for 9 Pilot Towns...

The Local Stakeholder Groups are the key to understanding COMUS methodology and in fact the delivery of the COMUS project. Despite the initial unfamiliarity of the experience, the local groups are still in operation and it is the expectation that they will continue to operate as consultative steering bodies after the formal end of the project (June 2017). Formation was based on mobilisation of a group of local representatives from all walks of urban life (business and commerce, local authority, cultural heritage/arts sector, education, NGOs, citizens, media...). This group worked together to provide the municipality with policy input to guide heritage led regeneration practices in the medium to long term. In addition their role was to reach out and engage with the wider population, champion the project, tell the story which could raise awareness of cultural heritage, re-awaken dormant interest and generate “ownership” of heritage as a community asset. Already in the design of the project it was recognised that such a group, to have any real lasting impact, would need to have something around which to structure their rhythm of meetings and joint reflection, so that this could translate into useful outcomes for the town. The stakeholder forum was given the task of building a road map intended to confirm the role of heritage as a force for integrated urban development and to identify a coherent set of actions.

A project in **4 phases** with corresponding guidelines:

- \* **Inception phase:** setting up the operational structure based on: achieving heritage enhancement and habitat revitalisation (including urban landscapes and public spaces); addressing social concerns, traffic management, economic and service development, reduction of urban wastelands.
- \* **Planning phase:** producing a strategic framework (understanding, vision, objectives) and defining a list of concrete, concerted actions.
- \* **Project phase:** preliminary technical assessment of 5 actions with strong potential, Feasibility study for 2 selected priority (iconic, catalyst) projects.
- \* **Consolidation phase:** reporting and self-evaluation of process, plans for continuation and roll out

Via this step by step process and supported by technical expertise, each group was charged with producing a Pilot Town Reference Plan consisting of 3 components:

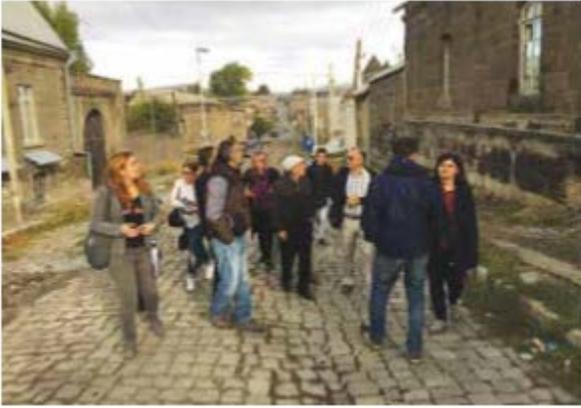
\* Analysis building on Preliminary Technical Files considering - level of influence of the Pilot Town in its geo-political context, relationship between project area and functional urban area, position of heritage in the urban development context, urban functions (existing and potential including mobility and public space), housing, capacity for intervention.

\* Setting of Vision and Objectives - shared perspective for future development with identification of guiding objectives

\* Catalogue of Potential Actions – 30 to 50 proposed concrete interventions (short, medium, long term: small-scale/large scale: soft/hard: quick wins, low hanging fruit).

The development of this Policy Making Tool was instrumental in structuring stakeholder group activity, ensuring that each meeting had a focus and position in the process, gathering inputs and ideas, setting targets and considering interventions, generating ownership of the strategy and communicating to wider community and specific populations (youth, ethnic groups, senior citizens...). In order to activate the strategic rehabilitation framework, during the project phase 5 priority actions were selected in each Pilot Town to follow a process of “Preliminary Technical Assessment”. These projects were chosen through dialogue between the Local Stakeholder Group, Mayor and Municipal Authority, National Coordinator and Project Officer. The “priority” label was based on consideration of a number of factors such as: the importance of the heritage element for the community; urgent need for protection; re-use or change of use; likelihood of chances for implementation; opportunity to attract funding/investment, and; the degree of influence the project could exert in changing the urban dynamic and driving COMUS objectives. Finally the two projects which most satisfied such criteria were subject of a Feasibility Study carried out by local experts with support from international specialists, appointed to advise and assist by the Council of Europe.

The dynamic generated by this local involvement has also resulted in connecting with local citizens, through organisation of heritage themed activities: heritage walks, exhibitions, creative working with schools, competitions, media productions etc.) In this sense a wider momentum has been established channelling new initiatives in line with Faro Convention mobilisation and ensuring that COMUS has an ongoing legacy. A self-assessment exercise carried out by each group presents a broadly positive evaluation of the experience which has been successful in both changing perceptions and ways of working in the local historic context.



*Heritage walks with local stakeholder group members and experts, in Gyumri, Armenia. Black stone buildings represent the architectural distinctiveness of this town. Heritage preservation does not solely imply targeting specific listed buildings, but perpetuating specific construction practices, aesthetics and urban landscape.*

## Lessons

Review of the COMUS experience provides some valuable reflections to be taken into account when attempting to transfer or roll out the process in other historic towns and cities.

- Stakeholders should ideally be engaged as soon as possible in the decision-making process. The initiative clearly demonstrates that local communities are inherently interested in heritage and can be mobilised to play an active part in reviewing and transforming the approach to urban conservation and regeneration. The formation of a local stakeholder group organised around the question of building a heritage-led strategy, provides historic towns with a valuable additional tool to revive debate, develop identity, support and encourage community engagement.
- Such a stakeholder group needs to represent a cross-section of the community involving relevant sectors of local authority, private interests (i.e. business and retail), cultural heritage actors (science and arts), schools, ngo, property owners and citizens (groups, minorities).
- The group should be formed at the earliest opportunity so that that input can also be gathered to reinforce the design of the initiative.
- The programme of group meetings must be result focussed and requires careful preparation and experienced facilitation. The role of local group coordinator is extremely important.
- Work through difficult points or moments in the agenda, do not avoid difficult topics.
- Understand the relationship between the group and the municipal authority, Mayor and town council remain the ultimate decision-makers.

- Make the working of the group visible through organisation of events, media reporting etc.
- Stakeholders who have been involved in designing and developing an action will be more willing to consider and embrace change.

## Outlook: How and where to use the Comus Model

The COMUS Project was in a way more successful than its fathers may have prayed for before its birth. The process itself was like a generator to stimulate common understanding, but also social cohesion - while working with a high degree of flexibility towards a joint vision in each pilot town. As described earlier a model is not a universal remedy for every urban disease. But, taking into account the context, and individual factors of the COMUS Project it can serve as:

- a very practical blueprint of how to structure a heritage-based urban development process in cities that are located in countries in transition
- an example of how the consistent and rigorous implementation of the FARO Convention Principles can be used to generate successful heritage-based urban development processes
- a starting point in the countries that have already worked with COMUS to expand it to other cities, and continue the process in the COMUS Pilot towns - to stimulate funding for the identified actions and projects
- a good example to remind local, regional and national decision makers that built cultural heritage is not an obstacle but rather a resource for urban development

The COMUS experience and outcomes validated a set of technical and organisational principles, as reference for the development of a wider framework for intervention.

### COMUS Principles

#### Technical principles

1. Development of a cultural heritage-led urban development strategy
2. Detailed analysis of the current cultural heritage and urban situation
3. Identification and evaluation of priority heritage-led urban interventions subject to feasibility study
4. Joint collection of new uses for the heritage rehabilitation projects

#### Organisational principles

5. Community based set-up of a vertical and horizontal governance system
6. Thorough preparation of the development process
7. Capacity building of the team in charge

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