

Case study ID

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BASEL AND THE NEIGHBOURING REGIONS

CASE STUDY SHORT SUMMARY REPORT

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BASEL AND THE NEIGHBOURING REGIONS

Case Study at a Glance

Environmental issues are becoming very important to many people, and organizations are committed to making positive changes for nature and the environment. Using the example of Basel and the surrounding area, we show that personal experience of an environmental accident and the subsequent resonance of the topic of protecting people and nature can contribute to advocating for change at the local level that also contributes to global change.

This case study on the Basel region and the surrounding area shows that even through partial activities at the level of individuals or neighborhood activism, successes can be achieved. It cannot be expected that there will be a global, immediate change, but these partial successes show that this is also a path that leads to long-term success.

This report was prepared by the team of the Center for Philanthropy Studies (CEPS) at the University of Basel within the UPRUN project. The team of CEPS is responsible for the content and the accuracy of the statements presented in this report.

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Case Study Profile

Topic

- ☒ Community Gardening & Urban Agriculture
- ☐ Community Hubs & Cultural Activities
- ☒ Urban Design & Planning Processes
- ☒ Public Space Development & Management
- ☐ Local Economic Development
- ☒ Urban Regeneration & Rehabilitation

Scale

- ☐ Metropolitan / city region
- ☒ City scale
- ☒ Neighbourhood scale
- ☒ Block scale
- ☐ Building scale

Resilience Challenge

- ☒ Environmental and ecological resilience
- ☐ social & cultural resilience
- ☒ Infrastructure and technological resilience
- ☒ Economic & livelihood resilience

Duration

- ☐ Immediate (less than 1 month)
- ☐ Project-Based (1–12 months)
- ☐ Programme-Based (1–3 years)
- ☐ Strategic (3–5 years)
- ☒ Structural / Transformative (more than 5 years)

Stakeholders

- ☒ Community members
- ☐ Local government
- ☒ Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- ☐ Private sector
- ☐ Academic and research institutions

Type of Civic Engagement Supporting Neighborhood Resilience

- ☒ Resident-led and grassroots initiatives
- ☒ Collaborative planning projects or processes
- ☒ Advocacy and capacity building
- ☒ Volunteer and community service projects
- ☒ Short-term, more flexible project-based engagement
- ☒ Long-term, more institutionalized engagement (development of stable structures, etc.)
- ☒ Protest and resistance mobilization
- ☐ Art-and culture-based civic Engagement

Level of Civic Participation

- ☒ Information
- ☒ Involvement or participation
- ☒ Collaboration or co-creation
- ☒ Empowerment
- ☒ Resistance and protest-based empowerment

Empirical Basis and Methodological Approach

Environmental issues are becoming very important to many people, and organizations are committed to making positive changes for nature and the environment. Using the example of Basel and the surrounding area, we show that personal experience of an environmental accident and the subsequent resonance of the topic of protecting people and nature can contribute to advocating for change at the local level that also contributes to global change. For this case study, we collected information from various initiatives that concentrate on different parts of the environment, and social life.

This case study on the Basel region and the surrounding area shows that even through partial activities at the level of individuals or neighborhood activism, successes can be achieved. It cannot be expected that there will be a global, immediate change, but these partial successes show that this is also a path that leads to a long-term success.

As part of the case study, we conducted a total of three interviews:

- » **One interview with an activist**, who pursues implementation of environmental policies, and local changes like super block organization of residential places in a city.
- » **One interview with a representative of the public sector (responsible for urban planning and environmental issues)**, who introduced the perspective of the local public administration role in planning and environmental issues. This interview was also connected to a nonprofit organization that provides support to inhabitants to implement environmental projects.
- » **One interview with an inhabitant**. This interview provided interesting insights into how residents perceive urban planning issues in different parts of the city and the current understanding of environmental issues in a small city. The possibilities and limitations of resident participation in the planning of public spaces were also discussed.

Compendious summary

Introduction

On the night of 1 November 1986, a fire broke out in Schweizerhalle in the storage of the chemical company Sandoz in Muttensz close to Basel (Switzerland). A deposit containing 1,350 tons of various chemicals caught fire. Around 30 tons of pesticides entered the Rhine with the run-off water (approx. 10,000 to 15,000 m³) (Amt für Umweltschutz und Energie Kanton Basel-Landschaft, 2015; Schmider, 2016).

As a direct result, various chemicals poisoned the ecosystem in the Rhine River from Basel to Rotterdam, and life died out hundreds of kilometers away from the river from the place of the accident.

Figure 1: Pollution of Rhine after the accident



Source: SRF (2016)

In addition, over 1,250 people had to be treated for respiratory problems in the days just after the accident (Schmider, 2016).

In response, demonstrations were held in Basel to increase the safety of industrial plants, and the

responsibility of industrial enterprises for their impact on the environment and human life.

Figure 2: Demonstration for more responsibility for the environment and health



Source: Muster (2011)

It was the second accident that year to affect the international ecosystem (next to the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident)¹.

In the long term, there have been several changes. These were not just technical and procedural changes to ensure the safety of chemical processes. Residents realized how fragile the environment could be, and more people became involved in environmental protection initiatives. These attitudes were then also reinforced by the current debate on climate change.

Our case study thus focuses on how people can influence the environment in the urban

¹ The term «Tschernobâle» was used to name the fire accident in Muttensz. It is a combination of the names of Chernobyl and Basel (in French).

environment, through which initiatives and with what results - also in relation to the public sector.

Although we described one event that relates to a specific place and one disaster, in our case study, we will look at a network of movements

and initiatives that together form a coherent approach to environmental issues.

In our case study, we spoke to people from Basel (canton Basel City) and also in Binningen (canton Basel – County).

Neighborhood challenge

There are many various organizations in the Basel region that take care of sub-activities that can be addressed in environmental protection and climate change response. This is also evident in the number of various organizations working on interconnected issues like environment, social issues, economy, food, city, urban development, culture, community, and neighborhoods in Basel and the surrounding area. For example, the network “Basel Wandel” gathers 252 (mainly associations) organizations actively engaging in these activities (see, Basel Wandel, 2025). This number shows interest in environmental issues among the population and the very strong base of these organizations. On the other hand, these organizations need to cope with various issues in their activities. Among these, the interviewees identified the following groups:

Environmental challenges:

- The local accident in 1986 showed how fragile the environment, even in central Europe, can be.
- Global environmental issues might be difficult to grab by individuals or local organizations as they are global and influenced by activities done far away from Basel.

Internal and external organizational barriers:

- Lack of funding, especially for informational campaigns in nonprofits (Schubert, 2023).
- Occasional resistance within the community as not all people take environmental issues as important as they concentrate on other everyday life issues.
- Technical challenges related to infrastructure and ecological projects.

Societal challenges:

- Difficulty in maintaining engagement across generations. As some organizations were set up as a reaction to the fire in Schweizerhalle in 1986, it is evident that there is a need for a generation change in these organizations. The importance of involving younger generations to sustain project momentum is, thus, needed.
- Communication with local society (or society as a whole). When there are events or political steps needed, most initiative persons are overburdened by face-to-face communication and explanation of the positions of their organizations.

Response to the challenge

There was widespread awareness of environmental issues both in Switzerland and globally. The organizations in Basel do react in a way that they mobilize people in advocacy activities, and also in every day life's activities helping to protect environment.

Environmental challenges

The motto "Think globally, act locally" inspired community-driven initiatives in Basel City and Basel County's environmental legislation. Nevertheless, the way to this change was long and concerned also small steps the individuals had to take.

These steps concerned ecological issues such as waste management, composting, and promoting renewable energy, e.g., through building waste separation and composting facilities, photovoltaic (solar) projects to encourage renewable energy use, or addressing traffic issues and promoting sustainable consumption. Parallel to the environmental initiatives, it also related to social challenges, including enhancing community resilience and fostering local engagement.

At the community level in Binningen (a neighboring municipality to Basel), actions like the establishment of a startup offering energy consulting and collaboration with the municipality on composting initiatives enabled a wider understanding of the issues and possible solutions.

The movement from individual actions to a political change of the system is visible in the case of the Basel 2030 Climate Initiative. A local movement aimed at achieving climate neutrality by 2030. It emphasizes community-driven policy change rather than just individual action. It gained traction through public mobilization and awareness campaigns. This initiative succeeded in the political process in Basel – City, which became the Swiss city with the most ambitious plans concerning CO₂ neutrality in Switzerland.

Public Participation Strategies

The interviewees knowledgeable of activities in both the public sector and nonprofits mentioned that the NPOs used multiple community engagement methods, including:

- **Flyers & Pamphlets:** Distributed at supermarkets and local markets.
- **Information Sessions:** Hosted discussions to educate and involve the community.
- **Collaboration with local groups:** Partnered with organizations advocating sustainable transportation, urban green areas and their enlargement, and climate resilience. The spread of awareness of environmental issues is so great that even the University of Basel actively participates in these activities (greening the roofs of buildings - see figure 3, or providing gardens for urban gardening).
- **Connecting neighborhood-level initiatives** – the NPOs organized localized working groups in each Basel neighborhood focusing on enlargement urban green spaces, advocating for bike lanes and fewer parking lots, watering and maintaining community gardens. This was done by small groups monthly or biweekly meetings to discuss and coordinate actions. Collaboration among various organizations enabled connecting several organizations with overlapping sustainability goals: (i) pro-bicycle & urban mobility groups advocating for more bike lanes, (ii) tree-planting initiatives focused on greening urban spaces, and (iii) environmental NPOs supporting broader sustainability policies in Basel.

Figure 3: Greening the roof of the university building



Source: Sustainability Office, University of Basel

Mechanisms of civic engagement

The project in Binningen used "Zukunftswerkstätten" (future workshops) based on Robert Jungk's Austrian model. These workshops brought together politicians, scientists, and residents to identify neighborhood challenges. The working groups focused on mobility, composting, renewable energy, and on the establishment of associations to formalize community involvement.

- **Municipal Collaboration:**

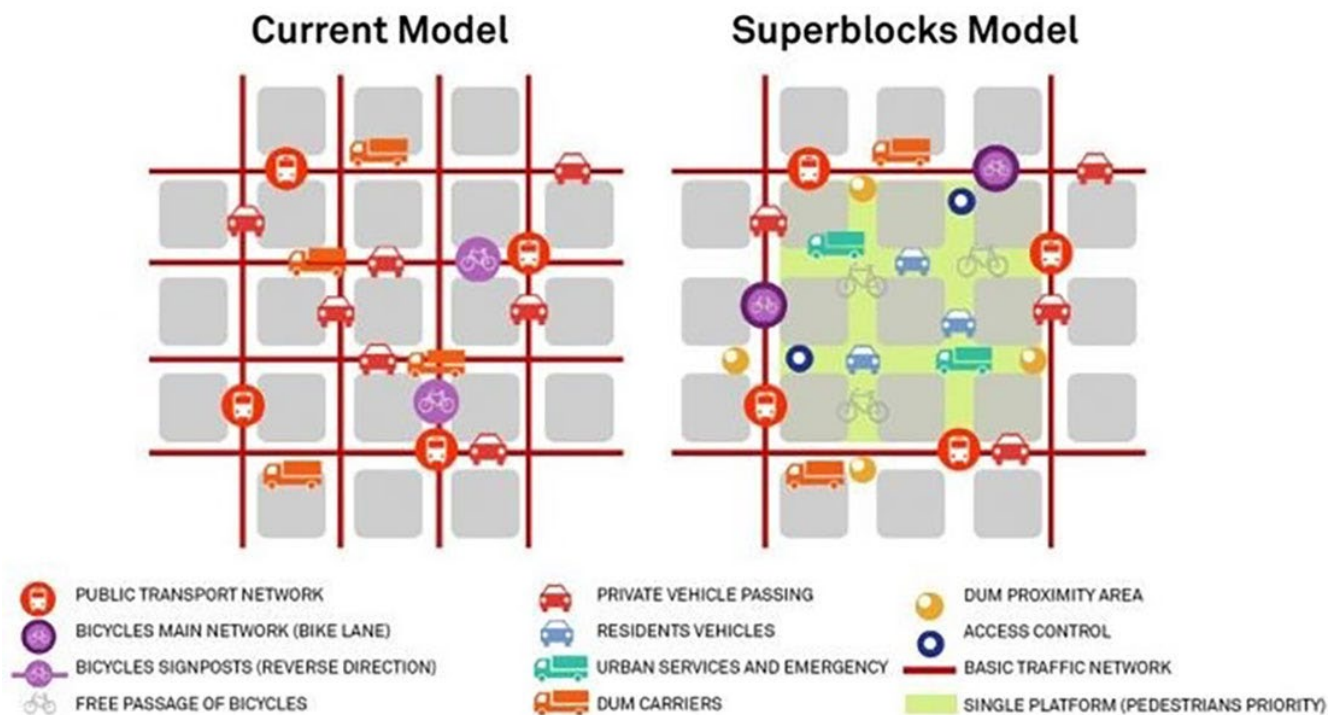
- The close relationship with the municipal council resulted in mandates, particularly in composting and renewable energy projects.
- The government's openness to integrating community projects into broader municipal strategies was critical.

- **Political and Institutional Backing:**

- Active participation of politicians in the board provided valuable insights and facilitated smoother project execution.
- Support from environmental legislation provided a regulatory framework for initiatives.

The environmental movements in Basel persuaded the municipality representatives to organize meetings to discuss green superblocks in Basel (the division of the city into functional parts where pedestrians use the streets and traffic is guided to another street). The discussion on superblocks enabled discussion among the public administration, environmental movements, NPOs, and local inhabitants.

Figure 4: Superblocks principle



Source: *Grüne Superblocks Basel* (2025)

Case study findings and lessons learned

Basel is the first canton or Swiss city to set the net zero goal for 2037 (the decision was made in 2022), which was the counterproposal by the cantonal parliament (it won with 64% of voters favoring this option). The city of Zurich has, for example, opted for 2040 (SWI, 2022). It can be taken as a success of the activists, although they wanted to achieve this goal earlier.

Constantly expanding the activist base was a principal component of the campaign strategy. With the climate strike, local groups were set up in all neighborhoods (Schubert, 2023). On several mobilization days, the “Basel2030” activists were in the city, going from door to door to talk to the population about climate heating and climate justice - with a great response.

In Binningen, the inclusion of municipal council members in leadership roles helped bridge community efforts with local governance. The initiatives achieved positive outcomes. For example, the institutionalization of composting processes, the successful rollout of the photovoltaic project, and the establishment of a weekly market contributing to local sustainability in Binningen. In Basel, success was in achieving the political plan for CO₂ neutral city by the year 2037.

On the level of community resilience, the projects helped build stronger social networks and encouraged collective action within the neighborhood. However, the lack of generational continuity posed a threat to the longevity of community engagement.

The success was achieved by changing the engagement from individual action to community mobilization. Many participants started with small-scale personal actions (e.g., reducing meat

consumption, and using public transport) but realized the need for broader, collective action. While initiatives like urban gardening seem small, they are part of a larger movement toward environmental consciousness and policy change.

Localized efforts seem to be the key to resilience. The most successful strategies involve decentralized, neighborhood-level action groups with strong ties to local governance. Moreover, urban sustainability has changed to a systemic issue. There is a need for policy and structural change – as we see in the case of the Basel 2030 movement that grassroots efforts can influence policy at the city level. Local community groups of various numbers of participants engage in various projects. For example, approximately 200 people in Basel were actively participating in the project of superblocks. The organization was structured into smaller neighborhood groups, facilitating local actions and discussions. These groups met regularly to address specific local issues.

Conclusion

This case study shows that even partial activities at the level of individuals or neighborhood activism can achieve success. It cannot be expected that there will be a global, immediate, change, but these partial successes show that this is also a path that leads to long-term success. The interviews show:

- The need for a stronger focus on generational change to ensure the sustainability of community projects. Encouraging engagement from all age groups to maintain a vibrant and active community association.
- Future considerations relate to exploring new strategies to adapt the project model to other neighborhoods and keeping an open discussion about the long-term resilience of the community and preparing for future challenges.
- The successful initiatives provide good information to advise other communities. It is important is to start with a strong engagement and realistic project planning, establish a solid financial base within urban planning frameworks, and emphasize long-term thinking and adaptability to changing societal needs.

The projects in Basel illustrate on how to achieve resilience through community cohesion and active participation, shared resources, and a collective approach to problem-solving. Many participants were motivated by personal experiences or local crises, demonstrating how adversity can catalyze positive community initiatives.

Attachments

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