

Case study ID

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BENN - BERLIN ENTWICKELT NEUE NACHBARSCHAFTEN

CASE STUDY SHORT SUMMARY REPORT

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Berlin Entwickelt Neue Nachbarschaften

Case Study at a Glance

BENN (Berlin Entwickelt Neue Nachbarschaften/Berlin Develops new neighborhoods) is a program initiated in 2017 by the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development and Housing. It was created in response to the arrival of many people fleeing to Berlin since 2015, with the goal of establishing social cohesion and integration within districts. The program has evolved through different phases; the first phase ran from 2018 to 2021, followed by a second phase starting in 2022. The number of neighborhoods has also changed over time, starting with three BENNs in three neighborhoods in 2017, expanding to 20 neighborhoods by 2019, and currently operating in 23 quarters across Berlin, and some locations may have been extended or relocated in the second phase.

The BENN program can indeed be considered a significant example of how the public sector and civil society collaborate. It started actively by public sector that supports and helps to organize civil society and paves the ground for civil society activities ranges from the most individuals, grassroots efforts to large, institutional organizations – all playing a role in building social cohesion and democracy.

BENN's main objective is that neighbors and refugees get to know each other, support each other, and jointly shape their district. Its approach is structured around four general goals: fostering encounter, promoting empowerment and participation, activating voluntary engagement, and strengthening networking for neighborhood development. Implementation is carried out by local BENN teams, which are contracted organizations (Träger), *not considered civil society actors themselves, but rather supporters and moderators for local civil society*. BENN teams work from local offices and are guided by steering rounds involving the Senate Administration, the respective District, and the local BENN team. They develop action plans (Handlungskonzepte) and actively support local initiatives by providing space, organizational help, and sometimes funding. Activities include communal cooking, language cafés, gardening, and neighborhood forums. Despite its successes, the BENN program faces several challenges. These include limited cooperation from some public departments, bureaucratic delays, and a small, often short-term project budget. Sustaining volunteer-based initiatives is difficult, as is reaching marginalized groups. The broader political climate, such as misinformation and opposition, adds pressure.

This report was prepared by the team of TU Dortmund University within the UPRUN project. The team of TU Dortmund University 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

The case study examines a public neighborhood development initiative in Berlin, Germany. It shows an empowerment-oriented program initiated by the public sector, launched in 2017 by the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development and Housing to strengthen social cohesion and integration in neighborhoods surrounding large refugee accommodations. The program is implemented in cooperation with the respective district administrations and operates through locally based BENN teams that facilitate participation, community engagement, and dialogue among residents and local actors.

Our case study shows how an empowerment-oriented program initiated by the public sector can contribute to the emergence and consolidation of civil society initiatives that ultimately foster neighborhood social resilience. In line with our understanding of empowerment as both a process that enables individuals and groups to develop skills, agency, and collective capacity, and as an outcome that increases their influence over social conditions, the BENN program provides institutional support for participation, dialogue, and local engagement in neighborhoods. By encouraging residents to articulate their interests and organize collectively, the program fosters community initiatives and networks that contribute to stronger social cohesion and more resilient neighborhood structures.

For the preparation of this case study, we drew on extensive empirical material. At the time of conducting the research, the BENN program was active in 23 locations across Berlin, making it a largely distributed program across different neighborhoods of the city. This provided broad access to up-to-date information on activities, programs, and reports for each BENN area through publicly available online resources. These materials allowed us to gain insights into the ongoing initiatives and local practices implemented in different BENN neighborhoods. In addition, to better understand the institutional arrangements and guiding logic of this program, we consulted available analytical resources discussing its framework and objectives (Kuder & Schaal, 2019). These materials outline the program's goals and implementation processes, which we interpret as reflecting a gradual shift from supporting social inclusion toward enabling political participation within neighborhood contexts.

In addition to document analysis and online resources, we conducted semi-structured interviews with key actors involved in the BENN program at different governance levels. These included an interview with a representative from the Berlin Senate administration engaged with the program's conceptual development and strategic coordination. The remaining interviews were conducted with representatives from local BENN offices in different Berlin neighborhoods. These actors are directly involved in facilitating local initiatives, coordinating networks of neighborhood stakeholders, and supporting participatory activities aimed at strengthening dialogue, cooperation, and resident engagement. To ensure confidentiality, all interviewees and specific locations are presented in anonymized form.

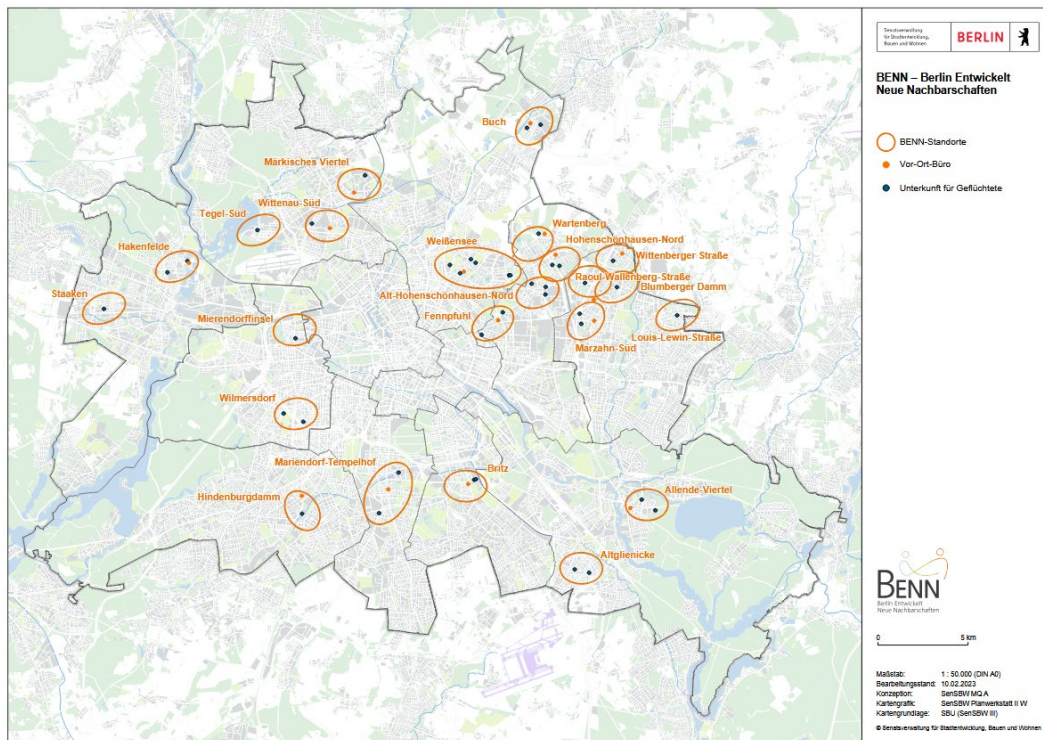
Compendious summary

1. Introduction

In essence, "BENN" refers to the specific Neighborhoods where the publicly initiated BENN program is implemented to foster interaction, integration, and collaborative neighborhood development between long-term residents and newcomers, supported by dedicated local teams (Träger) acting as facilitators and moderators for civil society.

The initial idea for the BENN program originated within the public sector in Berlin. The primary impetus for the program was the significant arrival of many people fleeing to Berlin since 2015. This influx led to changes in city districts and neighborhoods, presenting both opportunities and the potential for conflicts. The public sector recognized the complexities that neighborhoods, particularly those with large refugee accommodations, might face. As a result, the program was a public sector response conceived in 2016 and formally initiated or launched in 2017 by the Senate Department for Urban Development and Housing. The head of the team responsible for BENN in the Senate Department personally developed the concept for the program in 2017.

Figure 1: Distribution of BENN-Teams local offices in Berlin's Neighborhoods



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Initially, Senate Chancellery found that it would be beneficial to utilize the established Quartiersmanagement (neighborhood management) model, which was already (initiated in 1999) well-established in Berlin, to facilitate the integration of the newly arriving refugees. Quartiersmanagement (QM) in Berlin promoted neighborhood development by actively involving residents through participatory methods. At the action level, QM organizes workshops, public forums, and advisory bodies/ Quartiersrat (like neighborhood councils) where composed of residents and local stakeholders,

to guide decision-making. They provide small to medium funding to support resident-led initiatives that improve public spaces, foster social ties, and address local challenges. This collaborative approach ensured that development reflects the community's priorities and encourages active citizenship.

Adopted from QM approach, the BENN program officially started in 2017, with the goal of the promotion of social cohesion and integration within urban districts, in three neighborhoods, and the program was designed to address the challenges and opportunities this presented in neighborhoods, particularly those with large refugee accommodations. Initially, the focus was specifically on the integration of newly arriving refugees, leveraging the established Quartiersmanagement model for this purpose. Over time, the definition of integration within the program expanded to encompass the participation of all residents in all aspects of life within the neighborhood. It then scaled up to 20 locations across Berlin, and since early 2022, the BENN program has been active in 23 neighborhoods across Berlin, all situated near large refugee shelters. Some of the original sites from the first phase were extended, while others were relocated as part of the second phase's adjustments, see figure 1.

In summary, while BENN seeks to enhance social cohesion and integration within urban districts in the form of socially oriented and dialogue-based participation processes and by fields of action including; Encounter and active togetherness, Empowerment and participation, Communication and dialogue, Networking and neighbourhood development (vhw,2019;8), the specific implementation and priorities within BENN neighbourhoods are influenced by its unique social and urban structure. For example, a BENN in an area with high-rise buildings and mixed social strata (high poverty alongside well-situated residents) might focus more on grassroots activation and addressing basic needs like the "Unbezahlbar" solidarity shop, while another in a more affluent area might have different engagement dynamics. The teams conduct analyses, including demographic profiles and network analyses, to understand the specific needs and existing capacities in their area. Also, based on the character and requirement of each neighborhood, it supports a range of initiatives that directly involve public space and urban development. These initiatives span from direct improvements to public areas to the creation of social spaces and the empowerment of residents to shape their living environment

2. Actors and Collaboration

The BENN program operates as a state-funded however multi-stakeholder initiative. While the size and context of each BENN neighborhoods differ, the primary stakeholder configuration remains largely unchanged. However, in response to specific thematic challenges, supplementary public or private actors are incorporated into the existing governance framework to ensure responsive and context-sensitive interventions. The focal point of the mechanism of collaboration is Träger (Service Provider) at each neighbourhood, where All these actors are interconnected.

The involved public actors in the BENN project include Berlin Senate Chancellery (Senatskanzlei, also Senate Department for Urban Development and Housing (SenSW/Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, Bauen und Wohnen), as well as District Offices (Bezirksämter) as the key cooperation partners, GesoBau (a social housing association), and Other Senate Departments:

- » Berlin Senate Chancellery (Senatskanzlei) was the one who conceptualized the BENN program in 2016 as an explicit initiative. This highlights their position as a high-level governmental body that identifies strategic needs for the city. Also it provided the initial impulse for the BENN program, suggesting the use of the established Quartiersmanagement model for refugee integration. In essence,

the Senate Chancellery served as the catalyst and provided the overarching political and strategic mandate that led to the development and implementation of the BENN program by the Senate Department for Urban Development and Housing.

- » Senate Department for Urban Development and Housing (SenSW/Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, Bauen und Wohnen) plays role as a responsible for conceiving and developing the BENN program. It sets conceptual guidelines, oversees the program's implementation, evaluates measures against broader urban development goals (like housing construction), and participates in steering rounds. The Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, Bauen und Wohnen is not just a stakeholder—it is a principal architect and enabler of BENN. Without its leadership, the program would lack the urban development focus and institutional coherence that give BENN its innovative and cross-sectoral character.
- » The District Offices (Bezirksämter), are fundamental partners in the BENN program, providing a local governmental framework for the program's strategic direction, overseeing implementation, facilitating cross-sectoral links, and playing a role in the approval and support of local projects, even amidst bureaucratic complexities. Their involvement ensures that the program is deeply connected to local needs and integrated within existing municipal structures. They also provide financial and organizational Support for local initiatives. In addition, they play a crucial role in Integration with Broader Urban Development Programs and Coordination Platforms. The "Bezirkskoordination" (district coordination) for BENN can also be simultaneously responsible for implementing other federal and state funding programs, such as "Sustainable Renewal" and " Social Cohesion ", within the same district or quarter. This organizational overlap ensures that BENN's efforts are not isolated but are instead part of a comprehensive, multi-faceted municipal strategy for urban and social development in the area. One of the key strengths of BENN is its close coordination with the district office. Each district office has a dedicated BENN coordinator who serves as the direct point of contact. Communication between the BENN teams (Träger) and the coordinator is fast and cooperative, and the teams are usually well-informed about plans from other institutions, upcoming investments, and available resources. At the same time, they are able to relay needs and requests that fall outside the BENN framework, ensuring these can be addressed through other appropriate channels.
- » GesoBau is one of Berlin's six municipal housing companies focuses on providing affordable housing and fostering vibrant, socially inclusive neighbourhoods. Indeed, it is a social housing association that serves as a strong partner, owning a large percentage of housing stock in some BENN areas and proactively establishing roles like "Quartierskoordinatorin" to support neighborhood initiatives that strengthen social cohesion and encourage resident participation for social cohesion. For instance, in the Märkisches Viertel(one of the BENN neighborhoods) fig,1, GESOBAU and BENN jointly released a collection of local stories to celebrate the area's 60th anniversary, highlighting community identity and shared history.
- » As one of the partners in this BENN case, GESOBAU and BENN (Service Providers) jointly ensure that the Märkisches Viertel is positioned to be competitive and fit for the future in the long term and continues to develop sustainably, the cross-departmental project "Zukunft Märkisches Viertel" has been working intensively on this issue. Between 2008 and 2015, GESOBAU invested in the sustainable renovation of the Märkisches Viertel, making it a showcase project for the sustainable modernisation of large housing estates worldwide. According to GESOBAU (2025), Five years after the work was completed, GESOBAU once again asked itself the question: How can the Märkisches Viertel be positioned as competitive and future-proof in the long term and developed sustainably? What prospects do we see for the economic and social development of the neighbourhood? In this

regard they have defined their objective 8 sectors ranging from environmental protection to social integration, and their main objective in social integration is based on moving from participation to cooperation meaning that the residents of the Märkisches Viertel should see themselves as active and valued co-creators of their district and neighbourhood. They aimed that in future, the relationship between Gesobau AG and the residents will move from "for" to "with". Active participation and voluntary commitment should also become a matter of course outside of the elected tenant committees. Content focus expansion of low-barrier, neighbourhood contact points, promotion of participatory processes and small-scale projects that invite interaction, promotion of volunteer involvement, and establishment of a Märkisches Viertel participation fund.

- » Other Senate Departments also play roles in this project. BENN interacts with other Senate departments, such as the State Office for Refugee Affairs (LAF), the Senate Department for Social Affairs and Integration, and the Senate Department for Education, to collaborate across sectors on needs and issues identified in the neighborhoods. *In essence, BENN acts as a bridge and facilitator, but the Senate departments are the enablers, providing the structural, financial, and strategic support necessary to turn local community ideas into reality.* A concrete example that highlights BENN's cooperation with other Berlin Senate departments is its response to the dual challenges of rising inflation and the arrival of Ukrainian refugees. To help meet the increased needs in the community, BENN received additional financial support from the Senate Department for Social Affairs (Senatsverwaltung für Soziales). This extra funding enabled the launch of initiatives such as the "UnbezahlBar" in Marzahn-Hellersdorf District —a free shop and counseling center offering essential items and a space for social connection. Importantly, UnbezahlBar is part of the "Netzwerk der Wärme" (Network of Warmth), which was itself created and led by the Senate Department for Social Affairs to foster solidarity and support in the community.
- » Träger (Service Providers/ the Core of BENN in the each neighborhood) are the organizations contracted by the Senate Department to implement the BENN program on-site in the neighborhoods. These Träger are selected through a Europe-wide tender process rather than receiving direct grants. They can come from various backgrounds, including urban planning firms (like BENN Hindenburgdamm), charity-based organizations, social service providers (like BENN pad gGmbH), or church communities (like BENN Evangelische Apostel-Petrus-Gemeinde in Märkisches Viertel). *They are not seen as civil society actors themselves, but rather as supporters and moderators for civil society. This means they can facilitate and provide resources to initiatives, but they typically do not become active members of those initiatives, maintaining a distinct role alongside the district administration.* They bring expertise in urban development or social projects. Träger are diverse and have different approaches. Some Träger have prior experience with "Quartiersmanagement" programs and are already focused on broader urban development. Their specific approach can vary; for example, an urban planning office might focus more on creating platforms and supporting existing initiatives, while directly offering social services is left to other organizations. However, all of them are asked to develop a "Handlungskonzept" (action concept), outlining their strategy and goals for the specific neighborhood, which must be approved by both the district and the Senate Department. They are tasked with fostering social cohesion and integration within the neighborhood, particularly in areas with large refugee accommodations. ***Their activities are structured around four main action areas: Encounter and Active Togetherness, Empowerment and Participation, Communication and Dialogue, Networking and Neighborhood Development.***
- » Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) Partners like the DRK (German Red Cross) and Volkssolidarität are actively involved in some BENN neighborhoods, for instance, in operating the

"Unbezahlbar" solidarity shop in Marzahn neighborhood, which also work closely with civil society Alliance Democracy and Tolerance (Bündnis für Demokratie und Toleranz).

- » Academic and Research Institutions: While not primary direct actors in the BENN program's day-to-day operations, academic assessments and evaluations are conducted to study the program's impact and effectiveness, such as a research implemented by TU Berlin team (Canedo & Elmouelhi, 2023) in Märkisches Viertel, as one of the main BENN target neighborhoods.

3. BENN Project Design and Approach: Mechanisms for Fostering Civic Engagement

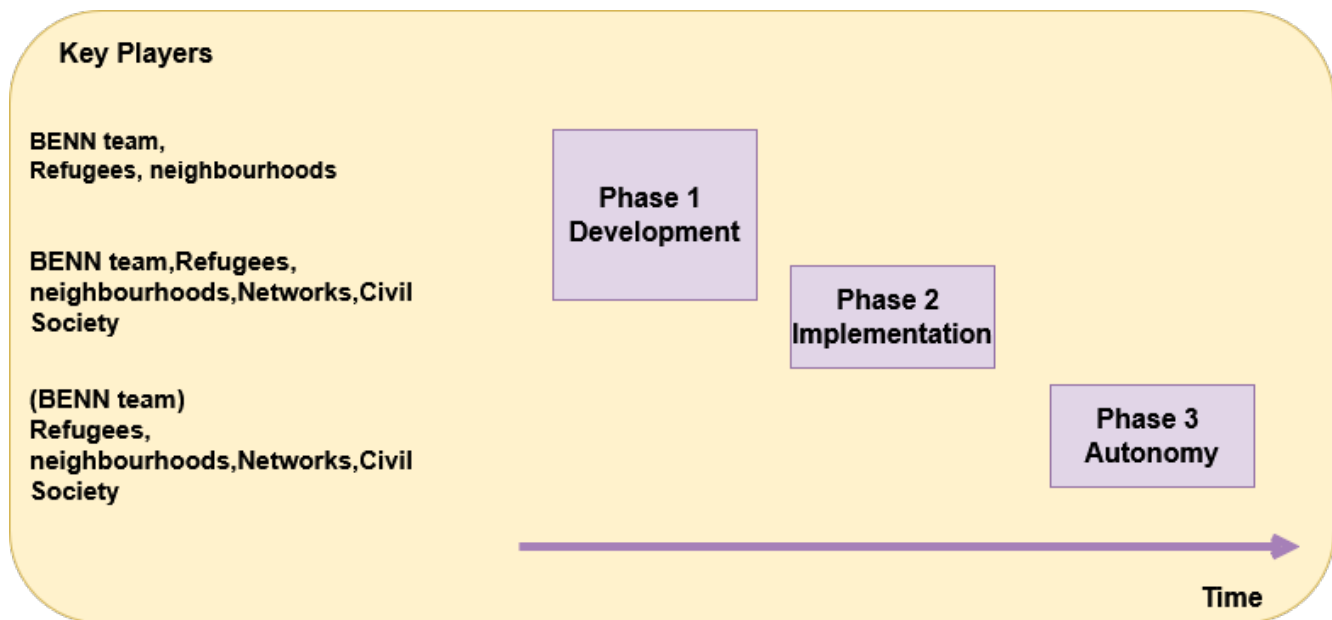
The BENN program supports areas in Berlin located near large collective accommodations for refugees (Gemeinschaftsunterkünfte – GUs). These neighborhoods often face complex challenges due to rapid demographic shifts layered onto pre-existing social, cultural, and economic issues.

Social integration remains a major concern. Many long-term residents express fears, skepticism, or even rejection toward refugees, often fueled by unfamiliar cultural norms and limited interaction between groups. Everyday encounters between refugee and local children, for example, remain minimal, and both communities can experience loneliness and social isolation. Communication barriers further complicate integration. Misinformation and prejudice spread easily, especially when trust in official sources is low. Residents often rely on informal networks rather than institutional channels, undermining effective outreach and creating gaps in understanding. Physical and spatial issues add to the strain. Infrastructure is frequently inadequate, with a lack of public meeting places, youth facilities, and basic amenities like bicycle parking. Poorly managed public spaces and noise complaints can lead to further tension, while large-scale urban design decisions may unintentionally reinforce social divisions.

These challenges highlighted the complex and dynamic nature of integration and neighborhood development, requiring adaptable strategies and strong collaborative efforts from all stakeholders involved.

In this regard the state-funded initiative (BENN) implemented in cooperation with Berlin's districts has worked to build social cohesion and integrate all residents, regardless of their background, through on-site teams, community activities, and structured collaboration with local authorities and civil society. The program itself is designed with clear phases. The first implementation phase began in early 2017 and ran until the end of 2021, followed by a continuation in 23 Berlin neighborhoods starting in 2022. This demonstrates a planned, multi-year progression. Also, the program's definition of "integration" has also evolved, initially focusing on integrating newly arrived refugees with their surrounding neighborhoods, and later expanding to encompass the participation and inclusion of all residents in all areas of life. This signifies an incremental broadening of scope over time. The cooperation among the public sector, "Träger" (implementing organizations), and civil society within the BENN program and the project design and approach for initiating mechanisms for civic engagement shows a multifaceted approach, balancing top-down conceptualization with bottom-up responsiveness and active community involvement, evolving process, structured across distinct phases within BENN neighborhoods. BENN's approach to civic engagement is fundamentally incremental and phase-by-phase, ensuring a structured yet adaptive pathway from initial trust-building and social activation to self-sustaining community participation and broader democratic influence within Berlin's neighborhoods.

Figure 2. Three phases of BENN's work



Own illustration redrawn from (Kuder & Schaal, 2019, pp,12.)

The different Phases and mechanisms of civic engagement through every phase can be summarized as follows:

1: Bottom-Up, Resident-Led Initiatives:

- *Responding to Resident Ideas:* this refers to that the BENN teams were explicitly tasked with inquiring about and supporting the implementation of ideas and needs from the people on-site. Residents are encouraged to propose ideas for actions and projects, and BENN assists with their implementation. Examples include:
 - A parent initiative for school path safety, where BENN financed the publicity
 - A resident's idea for an open-air cinema led to regular screenings
 - A group of Ukrainian refugees initiated a neighborhood game meetup
 - An initiative by a Ukrainian refugee led to the creation of "Unbezahlbar" (a free shop and consultation center) in Marzahn, which addresses basic needs like clothing and advice for financially struggling residents
 - The "Café International," founded by the Protestant Apostel-Petrus-Gemeinde, a BENN Träger in Märkisches Viertel, initially as a volunteer-run format for refugees and non-refugees to cook and meet
 - A "Sprachtreff" (language exchange meeting) in Marzahn, initiated by three local residents, where German native speakers help others improve their German through conversation
- *Coaxing Out Needs:* While some ideas come spontaneously, BENN teams often have to proactively develop ideas and "coax" out wishes and needs from residents, as engagement is not always high. This involves being highly approachable and responsive to individual and group concerns.

2- Proactive, BENN-Initiated Engagement:

- *Strategic Planning:* Each BENN team develops a two-year "Handlungskonzept" (action concept) that outlines their strategy, goals, and public relations plans based on an analysis of the quarter and

activating surveys. This overall concept guides their activities, recognizing that no single project can achieve all BENN goals, but rather the sum of activities

- *Developing Platforms and Formats:* BENN creates various platforms and events to foster interaction and participation. These included:
 - Neighborhood forums or comparable bodies to discuss ideas and needs and work on solutions
 - Cooking evenings and cultural presentations where people share culinary traditions and experiences, acting as a means of cultural participation and identity formation
 - Public space interventions like planting actions in community gardens or addressing issues like noise pollution from refugee accommodations by creating a pavilion for smokers
- *Targeting Hard-to-Reach Groups:* BENN utilized methods like milieu analysis and targeted communication strategies (e.g., door-to-door visits, street interviews, focus group discussions) to reach diverse and often socially weaker or politically skeptical populations who might not attend typical public meetings

3- Collaborative and Networked Approaches:

- *Leveraging Existing Networks:* BENN teams integrate into existing networks of local actors, institutions, and civil society organizations. They aim to connect and strengthen these networks, acting as a "facilitator of networking" or an "active network node"
- *Cross-Sectoral Cooperation:* BENN operates in close cooperation with the Senate Department for Urban Development and Housing and the respective districts. This involves regular "Steering Rounds" where the BENN team, district representatives, and Senate representatives discuss concepts, goals, and approve funds. They also collaborate with other Senate departments (e.g., Social Affairs, Education) and specialized agencies like the Landesamt für Flüchtlingsangelegenheiten (LAF)
- *Partnerships for Project Implementation:* BENN often partners with other organizations and initiatives to implement projects. For example, the "Viertelpunkt" (info hub/participation shop) in Märkisches Viertel is a joint project with the "Sozialer Zusammenhalt" (Social Cohesion) program, which has greater funding. This shared approach allows for larger projects that BENN's budget alone couldn't support

4. BENN structured progression and the overarching program implementation for engaging residents and fostering participation over time

The work of BENN teams at the local level is ideally structured into three distinct, sequential phases to build sustainable engagement

Phase 1: Building Trust and Structures

The aim was to establish BENN as a new, approachable actor in the neighborhood, initiate contacts with relevant individuals, institutions, and networks, and cultivate trust among both refugees and long-term resident. This phase emphasizes personal contact and active listening to understand the concerns and needs of residents. It involves identifying and mapping existing social networks and proactively reaching out to diverse "milieus," including those traditionally hard to reach. The aim is to activate and empower individuals to formulate their interests and participate. Examples include small-scale leisure activities like "Zoobesuche" (zoo visits). However, overcoming initial skepticism and a lack of trust in institutions, especially among those who feel unheard or disengaged was not easy. BENN's role in this phase is to build a foundational relationship.

Phase 2: Implementation

The goal is to sustain and solidify the processes, structures, and networks established in Phase 1. Crucially, this phase aims to transition from basic social activation to civil society inclusion and institutionalized political participation. In this phase BENN's role shifts from a primary supporter to a more neutral moderator, facilitating discussions, identifying conflicts, and helping groups find compromises. This involves *moving beyond informal social gatherings to more formal deliberative formats* such as men's and women's cafés, resident councils, and neighborhood forums. The intention is to create "intermediate spaces" that serve as a "school of democracy". Projects often arise from identified needs, like housing search workshops or community gardening initiatives. Key Aspect in this phase is that the "governance" of BENN activities, ensuring that various elements and actors (BENN team, local administration, civil society organizations) are interconnected and cooperatively working towards shared goals.

Phase 3: Autonomy (Autonomie)

The aim is that for the projects, processes, and networks initiated and nurtured by BENN to become self-sustaining, with responsibilities gradually transferred to other local actors and initiatives. In this phase BENN's role *recedes from direct internal involvement to that of a distant "carer" or external monitor, strengthening new "carers"* and existing community structures like associations and initiatives. This phase is critical for the long-term impact and sustainability of the program's efforts. **An example** is the "Café International" which transitioned back to volunteer management after initial BENN support. This comprehensive approach not only allows BENN programme to establish civic engagement fundamentally incremental and phase-by-phase, but also fosters collaboration between civil society and public sector.

5. Findings: Achievements and obstacles of the Public-Civic-Engagement

The BENN state-funded initiative operates through a public-civic partnership has demonstrated notable achievements while facing various obstacles, demonstrating an incremental approach adaptable to social integration and social cohesion context. Achievements could be recognized as follow:

» **Institutional synergy:**

Multi-level Government Cooperation referring that BENN is executed by the Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, Bauen und Wohnen (Senate Department for Urban Development, Construction and Housing) in close cooperation with the Berlin districts. This ensures that the program's conceptual guidelines developed at the state level are integrated with local needs and contexts.

Steering Rounds that are recognized as a key mechanism for institutional synergy is the steering rounds that take place every two months. These rounds include representatives from the district, the local BENN team, and the Senatsverwaltung für Urban Development. This forum allows for the discussion of neighborhood needs and problems, aligns the program's goals, and ensures the approval of the BENN team's action concepts and the allocation of funds. The atmosphere in these rounds is described as very partnerschaftlich (cooperative) and generally without conflict

Cross-Departmental Exchange: The Senatsverwaltung responsible for BENN actively maintains a strong exchange with other relevant governmental bodies, such as the Landesamt für Flüchtlingsangelegenheiten (State Office for Refugee Affairs), the Senatsverwaltung für Social Affairs and Integration, and the Senatsverwaltung für Education. This ensures a resource-overlapping approach to address diverse needs in

the neighborhoods. Districts also hold interdisciplinary rounds to align with BENN's concepts and identify collaborative actions

Networking with Housing Associations and Other Public Actors: BENN actively collaborates with major social housing associations like GesoBau. GesoBau, which owns a significant portion of the housing stock in areas like Märkisches Viertel, has its own Quartierskoordinatorin (neighborhood coordinator) responsible for social coexistence. This partnership led to the establishment of the "Runder Tisch Stadtteilarbeit (Round Table Neighborhood Work)," bringing together all neighborhood and center organizations focused on social space-oriented work to coordinate efforts, avoid redundancies, and identify synergies

Strategic Funding Integration: BENN teams are aware of other funding programs and actively seek to integrate them for larger projects. For example, the "Viertelpunkt" information house, initiated by BENN Märkisches Viertel and Gesobau, was later taken over and funded by the "Sozialer Zusammenhalt (Social Cohesion)" program due to its larger budget. This demonstrates how BENN uses its limited resources to initiate projects that can then be sustained or scaled up through other institutional funding

Communication Hub and Information Transfer: BENN teams in their on-site offices act as direct points of contact for residents. They relay important issues and needs from the quarters back to the relevant district departments and the Senatsverwaltung, ensuring that the administration is informed about the local situation. Conversely, they bring information, offers, and supporting measures from these higher-level institutions back to the neighborhoods

Facilitating Public-Civil Initiatives: While BENN teams themselves maintain a neutral, moderating role and do not become part of political initiatives, they strongly support the organization of civil society by providing rooms, financial resources for materials (e.g., sports equipment, plants, paint), and organizational assistance. This includes assisting initiatives in articulating their interests and bringing them to the attention of relevant administrative bodies and housing companies

- » **Networking and Community Development:** BENN strengthens networks by actively cooperating with a wide array of local actors and organizations, complementing existing initiatives and creating synergies. They also act as crucial links between residents and administration, relaying community needs to district departments and the Senatsverwaltung, and bringing information back to the neighborhoods. They actively create and adapt meeting places and utilize public spaces for community activities, such as community gardens like "Beettinchen" and the "Viertelpunkt" information house.
- » **Trust making and Facilitating Dialogue:** The program prioritizes intensive public relations, exchange, and dialogue, using a variety of communication channels to reach all residents and stakeholders. They are explicitly tasked with correcting misinformation and prejudices, promoting media literacy, and strengthening awareness against racism and discrimination. They also support the development of communication skills and mediation in conflicts. Language cafés are a successful example of informal communication and integration
- » **Strengthening Social Cohesion and Integration:** BENN's primary goals have been to foster social cohesion and integration within neighborhoods, defining integration as the participation of all residents in all areas of life. It actively has created opportunities for encounter and dialogue, aiming to build new forms of community and solidarity, and strengthen a sense of belonging among diverse residents. A significant achievement is its effort to engage individuals who are skeptical or have lost trust in institutions and to normalize the increased diversity in neighborhoods resulting from the arrival of refugees. The program also facilitated social interaction and built trust by addressing "everyday worries" through low-threshold activities like

zoo visits, cultural talks, street festivals, and sports, which can then lead to more formal engagement.

Despite its successes, the public-civic engagement structure within BENN encounters several persistent challenges:

- » **Trust and Communication Deficits:** A significant hurdle is the pre-existing loss of trust in political institutions and decision-making processes at the local level, which often manifests as skepticism towards official initiatives. Moreover, Misinformation, rumors, and conspiracy theories, particularly concerning refugee accommodations, complicate communication and dialogue efforts within quarters. In addition to this, many residents were not aware of BENN's presence or purpose, or they might perceive it primarily as an interest group for refugees, hindering broader engagement across all resident groups.
- » **Challenges in Engagement Dynamics:** There is a persistent challenge in aligning the "everyday worries" of residents (e.g., immediate problems like housing or poverty) with the broader, more abstract goals of civic engagement (e.g., urban planning discussions)

Over-reliance on voluntary engagement can be unsustainable due to its non-obligatory nature, highlighting the critical need for stable, professional support from responsible agencies to sustain volunteer efforts. The program also proved that social inclusion does not automatically translate into political participation, requiring time and distinct strategies for each. However, Engagement dynamics also are challenged with the rising political polarization and far-right movements that present increasing difficulties, including targeted attacks on integration programs like BENN, making their work more challenging.

- » **Inter-institutional and Role-Related Challenges:** Despite cooperation, slow bureaucratic processes within public administration can impede the rapid implementation of ideas and responsiveness to immediate community needs. Also the lack of clear, binding inter-sectoral agreements among different administrative bodies (e.g., between the Senatsverwaltung and the Landesamt für Flüchtlingsangelegenheiten) can create friction, as institutions may prioritize their own agendas or claim insufficient capacity for cooperation.

BENN teams operate as neutral moderators and supporters, which restricts them from actively joining political initiatives, potentially leading to misunderstandings about their role or limiting their direct advocacy. The procurement process for BENN project providers (Träger) tends to favor larger companies, sometimes unintentionally excluding smaller, locally embedded social organizations that might have stronger community ties but lack the administrative capacity for such tenders, like potential civil society groups that can take the role as Träger.

Limited Budget for Investment: A BENN team typically has an annual budget of around 30,000 Euros for measures and actions. Financial support is fundamental for BENN to initiate and sustain its diverse activities, foster social interactions, empower residents, and facilitate local developments. While BENN heavily supports and relies on voluntary engagement, it is acknowledged that volunteer work is not inherently sustainable. Financial support is needed to support these volunteers and ensure continuity, as they "need some responsible agencies, organizations, projects, whatever programs, that support those volunteers". Therefore, the program's success is also dependent on overcoming the challenges of its relatively small budget, the need for external and integrated funding sources, and the imperative to invest in

qualified, stable personnel to build lasting trust and facilitate long-term community transformation.

6. BENN's Role in Urban Development and Social Resilience

Though primarily aimed at promoting social integration, the BENN program (Berlin Develops New Neighborhoods) significantly contributes to urban development through its “Networking and Neighborhood Development” (Netzwerkarbeit und Quartiersentwicklung) field of action. This work fosters positive neighborhood change and supports the acceptance of cultural diversity within communities. BENN helps improve physical infrastructure and social dynamics in districts affected by refugee settlement, aligning social integration with tangible enhancements in urban environments.

Physical Improvements in Public Space : BENN utilizes urban development funds to support smaller-scale public space projects that directly improve the living environment for all residents. With an annual budget of approximately 30,000 Euros per team for actions and measures, the program funds initiatives such as park facilities for activities like parkour, bicycle parking installations, and noise-reducing pavilions near refugee accommodations. BENN also contributes to community-led greening efforts like neighborhood gardens by financing necessary materials such as plants and paint, thereby encouraging shared outdoor activities like gardening and barbecuing.

Facilitating Resident Participation in Urban Planning: A key strength of BENN lies in fostering civic engagement and participatory urban planning. BENN offices serve as communication and contact hubs, connecting residents with local initiatives and administrative institutions, see figure 5. The program supports resident-driven projects aimed at redesigning public spaces, such as noise mitigation and safer street crossings. BENN also addresses broader issues like waste management and the lack of accessible green or youth-friendly areas. Projects like “Sauberes Reinickendorf” and the “Viertelpunkt” information booth – initially co-funded by BENN and later scaled into a larger program – illustrate how BENN helps elevate grassroots concerns to higher levels of urban policy and funding.

Networking for Strategic Neighborhood Development: To ensure comprehensive neighborhood development, BENN teams conduct in-depth network analyses to map out local stakeholders and emotional features, activities, identify collaboration opportunities, and reduce redundancy. They engage in regular coordination with district and Senate-level actors through steering committees, where they advocate for the alignment of local needs with broader urban development goals. This networking function ensures that both integration and spatial development are strategically coordinated and sustainably implemented across Berlin’s diverse neighborhoods.

BENN’s core activities play a vital role in fostering social resilience by strengthening social connections, promoting trust, empowering residents, and mediating conflicts. It has been widely recognized by interviewees as an “extremely successful” and “extremely important” initiative, particularly for its effectiveness in resolving societal tensions at the neighborhood level and bringing people together. While BENN’s primary mission is social integration, especially in areas impacted by refugee accommodation, its work extends well beyond this scope to include broader aspects of neighborhood and urban development. A central focus is fostering encounters and dialogue by organizing and funding low-threshold activities that facilitate everyday interactions among diverse residents. These initiatives are designed to cultivate community and solidarity, encouraging meaningful relationships that bridge cultural divides.

Empowerment and participation are also central to BENN's approach. Through its “Empowerment und Beteiligung” action plan, the program enables individuals, especially refugees, to articulate their

interests, develop their own initiatives, and participate in decisions that shape their neighborhoods. The goal is not only to support refugee integration but to engage the entire neighborhood in shared development efforts, promoting a holistic sense of community involvement. BENN supports self-organized interest representation and helps create the structural conditions necessary for inclusive participation.

Fig 3. BENN-Team participatory planning activities in Buch neighborhood



BENN Büro Buch. © Antonia Richter, BENN Buch, 2024

A foundational component of BENN's work is trust building and conflict resolution. Establishing trust between BENN teams, refugees, and long-term residents is essential for successful integration. The teams actively combat misinformation and prejudice, promote media literacy, and foster respectful communication to address fears and reduce discrimination. By challenging harmful narratives—such as those suggesting unequal resource distribution or neighborhood neglect—BENN helps create a more informed and empathetic community environment.

Finally, BENN is a strong advocate for civil society and voluntary engagement, recognizing their vital role in maintaining social cohesion. The program offers financial, organizational, and spatial support—such as meeting spaces—to local initiatives and associations, helping them bring their ideas to life. By fostering cooperation among various stakeholders and integrating diverse funding sources into a patchwork of financing, BENN ensures that community projects are sustainable and tailored to local needs. Through this multifaceted approach, BENN not only advances social integration but also contributes meaningfully to the inclusive development of Berlin's neighborhoods.

7. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

BENN Programme acknowledge that the dynamics of a neighbourhood are innumerable—and that's good news. They offer countless ingredients that can exponentially increase access to local resources, creating vast opportunities to strengthen the social capital of the community. In this sense, the neighbourhood can be understood as both a cause of and a solution to the social cohesion crisis.

How a neighbourhood is planned—whether it supports integration, civic engagement, dialogue, networking, compact living, and shared resources—can significantly reduce segregation and promote socially cohesive communities. The role of civil society is also crucial: grassroots initiatives that actively shape neighbourhood development can moderate fragmentation. However, their existence, shaping and effectiveness often depend on residents' sense of belonging and shared identity. Meaning that for newly arrived communities, reaching a level of full social inclusion takes time. It requires structured planning and context-sensitive strategies. Social inclusion is not a binary concept; it evolves gradually. Achieving meaningful integration depends on political will and expert-led programs that support both newcomers and long-established residents within the neighbourhood.

- » **The influence of spaces on social cohesion:** Neighborhood spaces influence social integration, and the reverse is also true—social cohesion is mirrored in the design and use of neighborhood spaces in a neighborhood where residents have more opportunity for dialogue and exchange and make trust one another through accessible shared spaces, citizen initiatives are more likely to pop up. For example Playgrounds developed through collaborative processes, such as in Märkisches Viertel, is a case proved that these spaces are designed to cater to children's needs and interests, naturally creating opportunities for parents and guardians from various backgrounds to meet and build trust in a shared, safe environment.
- » **Crucial Role of On-site Teams, Leadership role and Relationship Building:** It's often challenging for local governments to directly influence the potential or inherent resources of a neighborhood. Yet, BENN proved that every community already holds the essential tools needed to address its own challenges. What truly makes a difference is improving access—access to people, spaces, and opportunities within the local environment.

This is where the role of community building, social integration and social cohesion becomes essential. It's about strengthening both the willingness and the capacity of residents to connect with one another and engage with the neighbourhood network.

In the BENN project, the Träger assumes the key role of community builder—especially within highly diverse neighbourhoods where residents often lack a shared history, language, or cultural background. The Träger works to foster connection, trust, and participation across these differences. By creating inclusive spaces, facilitating open dialogue, and amplifying local voices, they help establish a foundation for a shared sense of belonging and collective identity.

Importantly, the work of the Träger is not limited to short-term engagement. It is oriented toward a long-term goal: supporting the community in gradually reaching a level of autonomy in neighbourhood management. This means empowering residents not only to participate, but also to take ownership, make decisions, and co-shape the future of their neighbourhood in sustainable and self-determined ways.

The Träger also plays a bridging role between hard-to-reach groups—those who may feel excluded, distrust institutions, or lack motivation to engage—and the broader goal of social cohesion. Social cohesion encompasses a wide range of dimensions: trust, social participation, mutual support, and a sense of belonging. While local governments and institutions can stimulate these to varying degrees, it is the Träger who helps translate policy into real, human connections on the ground. By linking individual needs, even resistance or distrust, with opportunities for connection and cooperation, the Träger makes visible and accessible the invisible threads that hold a neighbourhood together. In doing so, they empower residents not only to access resources but also to shape the future of their community.

- » **Resident-Driven Spatial Transformation:** which resulted in Trust, shared values, sense of belonging, shared resources and networks. BENN's approach includes actively soliciting ideas and needs from residents and then supporting their implementation. This means that the community's collective vision for their living environment directly influences spatial changes. Playgrounds: Developed through collaborative processes, Unbezahlbar, Gardening, Cooking Evenings and Language Cafés and similar other small changes are the cases from this category.
- » **Importance of Inter-Institutional Cooperation and Governance:** Effective institutional synergy requires strong cooperation between different levels of government (Senatsverwaltung, districts, various departments like refugee affairs, social affairs, education) and other public actors (e.g., housing associations like Gesobau) that BENN positively followed. Also Structured coordination mechanisms like regular steering rounds and round tables (e.g., "Runder Tisch Stadtteilarbeit") have been vital for aligning goals, sharing information, avoiding redundancies, and identifying synergies across different organizations and programs. Moreover having a direct responsible person as a mediator for the BENN programme in Districts vitally facilitated the process, budgeting, and time management for Träger.
- » **Financial support is a critical factor:** in the success of the BENN program, enabling a wide range of activities aimed at strengthening social cohesion and integration in neighborhoods. Meaning that access to public funding has been instrumental in realizing various projects within BENN uses its financial resources for enabling direct actions and projects such as; Social and Cultural Events, Support for Initiatives, and Physical Interventions.

Future Directions:

Overall, BENN is recognized as a successful program, particularly in its ability to foster social contacts and empower residents at the local level. However, its future effectiveness hinges on addressing limitations related to funding, institutional collaboration, reaching all segments of the population, and strengthening its impact on the physical environment through integrated urban planning approaches.

- » **Strengthening Communication and Countering Misinformation:** Further development communication strategies to actively address and clarify false information and prejudices and strengthen media literacy. This is crucial in combating skepticism and the spread of conspiracy theory particularly in politically charged environments.
- » **Enhanced Inter-Institutional Coordination and Long-term Vision including:**
 - 1- *Streamlining bureaucracy and establishing clearer, more obligatory cooperation agreements* between different public sector entities (e.g., urban development and refugee affairs) are needed to overcome administrative hurdles and ensure consistent support for BENN's goals

- 2- *Advocacy for longer-term program funding and increased capacities* (personnel, budget, spaces) to move beyond short-term projects and address complex, systemic issues that require sustained effort for lasting impact
 - 3- *Develop a clearer programmatic agenda for BENN*, distinguishing between direct social service provision and broader urban development/platform creation roles, to ensure consistent and effective action
- » **Professionalization and Stability of Teams:** Increased investment in experienced and stable staff for BENN teams, as frequent turnover undermines trust-building and long-term effectiveness are required. Also, its necessary to avoid prioritizing "cheap" solutions at the expense of quality and sustainability
- » **Deeper Engagement with Urban Planning and Design:**
- 1- *Greater integration of urban planning and architectural perspectives within BENN's work*, moving beyond social support to address the physical and spatial dimensions of neighborhood development and the provision of public spaces
 - 2- *Educating future urban planners and architects to think interdisciplinarity* and understand the social implications of spatial design, equipping them to engage more effectively with diverse communities and foster inclusive public spaces
 - 3- *Further research* on how the built environment (e.g., density, housing types) influences social dynamics and engagement in different BENN areas
- » **Empowering Civil Society for Long-term Autonomy:**
- 1. *Continue to foster resident-initiated projects*, even if they start small, and empower local groups to take increasing responsibility for self-organization
 - 2. *Work towards the autonomy phase (Phase 3)* where BENN-initiated projects become self-sustaining through local actors and networks, with BENN transitioning to a more supportive, monitoring role

Attachments

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