

## **SOCIAL AND TERRITORIAL IMPACTS OF THE INTEGRATED PARTICIPATION PROGRAMME IN BELA VISTA**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the impact and effectiveness of the Integrated Participation and Development Programme “Our Neighbourhood, Our City”, implemented by the Municipality of Setúbal in the city’s public housing neighbourhoods. The research specifically focuses on residents’ perceptions of the programme’s outcomes, emphasising improvements in the neighbourhoods’ public image, quality of life, and social cohesion. A mixed-methods approach was adopted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the programme’s effects. The methodology combined strategic tools such as SWOT analysis and problem tree construction with empirical instruments, including a questionnaire administered to 129 residents and a focus group involving representatives from the different neighbourhoods. This triangulation allowed both quantitative and qualitative insights into the social, symbolic, and relational transformations generated by the programme. The findings indicate that 93% of respondents recognised the programme’s contribution to enhancing the neighbourhoods’ image, with significant improvements noted in neighbourly relations, communication between residents, perceived safety, and the maintenance of shared spaces. Cultural, educational, and health-related initiatives were also perceived as positively impacting community life. The programme demonstrates a capacity to strengthen social cohesion, foster community engagement, and promote a sense of collective responsibility among residents. Overall, the research concludes that the programme represents a best practice in social intervention, highlighting the decisive role of community participation in transforming territories historically marked by stigmatisation and social exclusion.

**Keywords:** Intervention programme, Social housing, Social exclusion, Community participation, Evaluation of social programmes.

**JEL Classification:** R10, R50

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## 1. Introduction

The issue of social housing in Portugal is intrinsically linked to historical processes of urbanisation and migration in the 19th and 20th centuries, when population flows from rural areas moved to urban centres in search of better employment opportunities (Duarte, 2023). This phenomenon, common to several European cities, generated a series of housing pressures that led to the construction of social housing estates intended to meet basic accommodation needs (Alves, 2022). However, these areas have often become spaces where social inequalities are reproduced and territorial stigmatisation persists, reflecting patterns of urban segregation similar to those observed in other international contexts (Born, 2023).

The literature highlights that social housing estates, originally conceived as a housing solution, have, in many cases, become territories of increased vulnerability (Horgan, 2020). Frequently identified problems include social exclusion, precarious community relations, insecurity, deterioration of the built environment, and a lack of robust social support networks (Carreiras, 2018). Furthermore, the persistence of negative public narratives has contributed to reinforcing the marginalisation of these spaces and to the crystallisation of social stigma associated with their residents (Meade, 2021).

In response to these challenges, the academic debate has emphasised the importance of participatory approaches in the revitalisation of stigmatised urban territories (Correia et al., 2023). Concepts such as community empowerment (Kramer et al., 2024), the right to the city (Jones et al., 2020), and spatial justice (Mahon et al., 2023) have been mobilised to underscore the relevance of direct population involvement in urban transformation processes (Kearns & Whitley, 2020). Within this framework, public policies and social intervention programmes face the need to move beyond exclusively top-down models, favouring collaborative methodologies that promote shared responsibility and active citizenship (Uyttebrouck et al., 2023).

It is within this context that the “Our Neighbourhood, Our City” (PNBNC) Programme was implemented by the Municipality of Setúbal in 2012. Targeting the municipal neighbourhoods of Bela Vista, Alameda das Palmeiras, Forte da Bela Vista, Quinta de Santo António, and Manteigadas, the programme adopts an integrated approach based on residents’ participation and the co-creation of solutions to common problems. This approach is distinctive at the national level, positioning the community as the central agent of transformation, in close collaboration with municipal management.

Despite the theoretical and practical relevance of community participation experiences, Portuguese literature remains limited in terms of the empirical evaluation of social intervention programmes in public housing contexts (Pinto & Guerra, 2013). Existing studies tend to prioritise structural analyses of housing policy (Silva et al., 2024) or socioeconomic diagnostics (Santos et al., 2022), leaving open the question of the actual impact of these initiatives on social cohesion dynamics, quality of life, and the perception of territorial image.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following research question: in what ways has the “Our Neighbourhood, Our City” Programme contributed to the social, symbolic, and relational transformation of Setúbal’s municipal neighbourhoods? The study hypothesises that community participation, when properly structured and supported, constitutes a key factor in enhancing the image of the territories, reinforcing social cohesion, and improving the quality of life of residents. At the same time, it considers that limitations in the engagement of specific groups, such as young people, may constrain the reach and sustainability of the outcomes achieved.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Social Housing and Territorial Exclusion

Social housing and territorial exclusion are global phenomena that affect contemporary societies, manifesting in similar patterns of socio-spatial segregation and urban marginalisation (Andersson et al., 2022). International research indicates that the concentration of vulnerable populations in specific territories generates complex exclusion dynamics that go beyond mere housing issues (Bramley & Watkins, 2016). Within the European context, studies show that many social housing estates eventually become spaces of accumulated disadvantages, including high unemployment rates, low levels of education, and public health problems (Rodríguez-Pose & Storper, 2020). Additionally, mechanisms of territorial stigmatisation strongly influence residents’ opportunities for social mobility, erecting invisible barriers to access to the labour market and quality public services (Lens, 2022). International literature has also identified processes of “ghettoisation” across various urban contexts, from French suburbs to British housing estates, revealing

transnational patterns of spatial marginalisation (Rey, 2017). In Portugal, social housing neighbourhoods reflect these global patterns of territorial exclusion, showing a concentration of socioeconomically vulnerable populations in peripheral areas, often characterised by deficient infrastructure (Branco et al., 2025). The Portuguese specificity lies particularly in the rehousing processes of the 1990s and 2000s, which frequently led to the relocation of populations to areas lacking adequate facilities and with weak connections to urban centres (Branco & Alves, 2020).

## **2.2 Stigmatisation and Public Image of Social Housing Neighbourhoods**

The social construction of negative images associated with social housing estates is a widely documented phenomenon in both international and national literature (Sisson, 2024). Raynor et al. (2020) highlight the broad generalisations that tend to associate social and economic pauperisation with social housing residency, emphasising that this reality is multifaceted and multidimensional. Territorial stigmatisation operates through multiple mechanisms, including sensationalist media coverage, peripheral location of the estates, and distinctive architectural characteristics (Creţan et al., 2025). These factors contribute to social representations linking these areas with marginality, violence, and social disorder (Hynes & Dreher, 2025). Maricchiolo et al. (2021) identify a notable paradox in residents' relationship with their territory: while they value their housing, they simultaneously express negative perceptions of the neighbourhood in which they live, evidencing an affective dissociation between private space and the surrounding community. This phenomenon highlights the complexity of identity dynamics in stigmatised contexts, where residents must constantly negotiate between positive appropriation of their housing and rejection of the negative image associated with the broader territory (Kang & Koo, 2024).

## **2.3 Social Intervention in Public Housing Neighbourhoods**

Addressing social exclusion in public housing contexts requires integrated approaches that go beyond purely physical or assistential interventions (Saran et al., 2023). The specialised literature underlines the importance of participatory strategies that actively involve local communities in identifying problems and co-creating solutions (Weldrick et al., 2025). Evaluating social intervention programmes is fundamental to understanding the effectiveness of the policies implemented (Mavrot et al., 2025). According to Guerra (2002), cited by Silva et al. (2017), six central criteria guide such evaluations: relevance, adequacy, effectiveness, efficiency, equity, and impact. These criteria allow a multidimensional analysis that considers not only quantitative outcomes but also implementation processes and qualitative impacts on community life (Douglas et al., 2024). The sociologist's role in social intervention is particularly relevant in these contexts, given their capacity to problematise social realities and construct objects of study amenable to intervention (Moreau, 2022). Intervention sociology, as defined by the authors, refers to a professional practice in which the practitioner positions themselves, at the request of the client-system, at the centre of a concrete situation, involving the actors who are part of it, with the aim of carrying out a specific mission (Abrantes et al., 2022).

## **3. Sample and Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study followed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive analysis of the “Our Neighbourhood, Our City” (PNBNC) Programme. This choice was justified by the need to capture both the measurable dimensions of the programme's impact and the subjective perceptions and lived experiences of the participating residents.

### **3.2 Population and Sample**

The target population consisted of residents participating in the PNBNC across the five intervention neighbourhoods: Alameda das Palmeiras, Bela Vista, Forte da Bela Vista, Manteigadas, and Quinta de Santo António. These areas house approximately 4,422 inhabitants and display considerable diversity in terms of age, ethnicity, and sociocultural characteristics. The sample comprised 129 residents/participants, selected through convenience sampling during community meetings, festive events, and direct contact within the neighbourhoods. Although non-probabilistic, this strategy allowed access to active programme participants, providing valuable insights into their perceptions and experiences.

### 3.3 Data Collection Instruments

A variety of data collection instruments were employed to enable triangulation of the information obtained. SWOT analysis was applied to identify the programme's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, offering a strategic overview of internal and external conditions. The problem tree facilitated mapping of the causes and effects of the central issue, the negative image of the neighbourhoods, allowing a systemic understanding of territorial dynamics.

The questionnaire, administered to the 129 participants, included items on sociodemographic profile, awareness of and participation in programme activities, as well as perceptions of territorial changes. A focus group, conducted with seven residents representing the different neighbourhoods, allowed for the in-depth exploration of emerging themes and validation of perceptions collected via the questionnaires. Participant observation was carried out during community meetings, programme activities, and site visits to the intervention areas, providing additional data on local dynamics and practices.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data were organised and analysed using Excel, allowing calculation of frequencies and percentages. Qualitative data underwent content analysis, with thematic categorisation of narratives collected both in the focus group and through participant observation.

The sample revealed a diverse sociodemographic profile, with a predominance of females (80%) and age concentrations among the 15–24 and over-60 age groups. In terms of marital status, there was an even distribution between single and married individuals, both representing 31%. Nationality analysis highlighted the multicultural nature of the territories, with 87% of respondents holding Portuguese nationality, alongside significant representation from Angolan (6%), Cape Verdean (4%), and Mozambican (3%) communities.

Regarding length of residence in the neighbourhoods, a strong sense of territorial rootedness was evident, as the majority of respondents had lived in these areas for over 30 years. Concerning employment status, the sample was predominantly composed of salaried workers (39%), followed by retirees (22%) and unemployed individuals (20%).

The results indicated a high level of programme awareness, with 88% of respondents reporting familiarity with the “Our Neighbourhood, Our City” (PNBNC) programme. This knowledge was primarily acquired through building or courtyard meetings (52%) and, to a lesser extent, via family and friends (28%). In terms of actual participation, 76% of respondents declared involvement in the programme's activities and projects, although only 42% were integrated into working groups or specific committees. Participation in training activities was lower (24%), indicating potential for expansion in this area.

The assessment of the programme's impact on improving the public image of the neighbourhoods was overwhelmingly positive, with 93% of respondents acknowledging the PNBNC's contribution in this regard, 55% of whom rated the quality of this contribution as “Good”. Analysing specific dimensions of change, the results showed consistent improvements: 57% of participants reported positive changes in communication between residents, 62% identified improvements in neighbourly relations, and the majority noted enhancements in perceived safety and cleanliness of shared spaces, alongside a broadly positive impact on cultural, educational, and sports activities. Health initiatives, particularly prevention and screening, were also recognised as valuable.

The renovation of buildings and housing yielded more ambivalent results, with some participants expressing frustration at the slow resolution of housing-related issues.

Regarding sustainability, the majority of respondents (85%) expressed concern about the continuity of the programme, considering that its termination would represent a setback in the achievements attained. This perception underlines the importance of institutionalising and sustainably funding initiatives of this nature. Key future challenges identified included the need for greater engagement of young people (endorsed by 60% of respondents), continued municipal support, increased overall resident participation, and the maintenance of the programme's transformative ambitions.

## 4. Results

The perception of territorial improvement reported by 93% of respondents represents a strong indicator of the success of the strategy adopted, aligning with the literature that emphasises the relevance of community participation in reshaping stigmatised social representations (Boelens et al., 2022). Improvements in neighbourly relations and communication among residents demonstrate that the programme was able to overcome social fragmentation dynamics typical of these territories, as highlighted by Son et al. (2023). This

outcome is particularly significant given the ethnic and cultural diversity of the communities, highlighting the programme's capacity to foster social cohesion in highly heterogeneous contexts (Tran et al., 2020). Despite these positive results, the SWOT analysis revealed limitations that warrant critical reflection. Low participation among young people emerged as a structural challenge that may compromise the long-term sustainability of the transformations achieved (Wang et al., 2025). This limitation is especially concerning given that young people represent the future community leaders and agents of change (Sheehan et al., 2022). Furthermore, the lack of development of digital social networks as tools for communication and community mobilisation constitutes a missed opportunity to engage younger population segments, who are accustomed to using these platforms (Stover et al., 2024). The programme also confirms the validity of territorially based participatory approaches that promote community empowerment over traditional assistentialist models, as demonstrated by Martinez et al. (2024). The organisation of thematic groups and the regular convening of residents' meetings illustrate effective methodologies for mobilising and organising local communities (Swart et al., 2023).

## **5. Conclusions**

The evaluation of the "Our Neighbourhood, Our City" Programme demonstrates broadly positive outcomes in transforming the intervention areas and improving the quality of life of the communities involved. The programme has significantly enhanced the public image of the neighbourhoods, fostered greater social cohesion, and developed civic participation skills among residents. This research provides valuable contributions to the knowledge base on social interventions in public housing contexts. Empirically, it offers both quantitative and qualitative evidence on the impact of participatory programmes in transforming stigmatised territories, addressing a notable gap in the national literature concerning the evaluation of housing policies. Methodologically, it highlights the effectiveness of mixed-methods approaches for analysing complex social programmes, combining strategic planning tools, such as SWOT analysis and problem trees, with social research techniques. From a practical perspective, the study identifies critical success factors and challenges inherent in the implementation of participatory programmes, providing useful guidance for practitioners and policy-makers. The findings also have theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they reinforce the relevance of community participation and empowerment theories in transforming dynamics of territorial social exclusion. The study thus contributes to consolidating the participatory paradigm in social intervention, demonstrating its effectiveness in altering social representations and community practices. Practically, the programme serves as a transferable model for other urban contexts, emphasising the importance of integrated strategies that combine physical, social, and cultural dimensions. The participatory methodologies implemented have proven to be adaptable and replicable in other territories facing similar challenges.

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