

# TOWARDS INCLUSIVE URBAN FUTURES

## The Integrative Role of Local Development Agencies in Urban Regeneration



# Towards Inclusive Urban Futures: The Integrative Role of Local Development Agencies in Urban Regeneration

This paper is developed by UN-Habitat Flagship Programme 'Inclusive Communities, Thriving Cities' team.

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P. O. Box 30030, 00100 Nairobi

[www.unhabitat.org](http://www.unhabitat.org)

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## Author

Alexandre Arcos Pujades

## Project Manager

Javier Torner Ruiz de Temino

## Design and Layout

Toka Abufarag



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Image 1. Outdoor play area with active users. © Freepik





## Introduction

Urban inequality and poverty have been pressing issues in cities across the globe for decades, as rapid urbanisation and socio-economic disparities present unique challenges for local governments and communities. In recent years, urban regeneration has emerged as a powerful planning process to address these challenges by providing a comprehensive and an integrated approach to revitalize struggling urban areas. However, the implementation of urban regeneration initiatives is often fraught with complexity, requiring a deep understanding of the local context, diverse stakeholder engagement, and a long-term vision for sustainable development.

This report delves into the historical evolution of urban regeneration, the concept of local economic development, and the critical role played by Local Development Agencies (LDAs) in implementing successful regeneration projects. By examining the various types of LDAs relevant for urban regeneration, the report highlights the unique attributes that make them well-equipped to address the multidimensional challenges of urban inequality and poverty.

Moreover, the report emphasizes the importance of adopting an integrated and human-centred approach to development. This approach not only recognizes the need for spatial, temporal, and sectoral integration of regeneration efforts but also ensures that all stakeholders, including the public administration, civil society, community organisations, private sector, and academia, are actively engaged in the process. It is through this collaborative and holistic approach that LDAs can effectively deliver urban regeneration initiatives that improve the quality of life for all residents, reduce socio-economic disparities, and promote sustainable urban development.

By providing an in-depth analysis of the various strategies and mechanisms employed by LDAs, this text aims to offer valuable insights for policymakers, urban planners, and practitioners seeking to implement successful urban regeneration policies, catalytic projects, plans, and programmes. Drawing from six exemplary case studies of urban regeneration initiatives conducted by LDAs across diverse international contexts, the report showcases the innovative approaches and best practices that have been adopted by these agencies to address the complex challenges of spatial inequality and poverty in different cities. These lessons can serve as a foundation for designing context-specific solutions that contribute to creating more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable urban environments.

### Defining the Problem: Causes and Consequences of Spatial Inequality

In the last three decades, countries have made spectacular advances reducing poverty<sup>1</sup> and inequality. According to the *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2022* (World Bank, 2022), the number of estimated people living under the poverty line in 2019 represented an 8.4% of the world population down from a 38% in 1990. In that same period, global inequality decreased from 69 to 62 Gini index points.

Nevertheless, when looking at intranational and intraurban inequality, the picture is quite different. In most countries, the divide between the wealthiest and the poorest deciles is at its highest levels in 30 years, and more than

three quarters of world's cities have become more unequal over the past 20 years (UN-Habitat, 2019). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic shock has reversed some of the progress described in the first paragraph.

In recent years, the spatial dimension of inequality has emerged as a defining characteristic of urban landscapes. Cities, often lauded as engines of growth, have simultaneously become epicentres of stark disparities. These spatial inequities manifest, not only in terms of income distribution, but also in access to opportunities, services, and overall well-being. While some urban zones flourish, benefiting from economic transformations, others—especially older industrial areas or monofunctional residential districts—face decay and neglect.

<sup>1</sup> Defined as the percentage of people living with less than US\$2.15 a day.

The economic transformation of cities, driven by global economic shifts and technological advancements, has a dual-edged nature. On one hand, it spurs growth and innovation, creating prosperous business districts and upscale residential areas. On the other hand, it can exacerbate spatial disparities, leaving behind zones tied to declining industries or outdated infrastructures. Such transformations can lead to the emergence of affluent pockets alongside areas of deprivation, mirroring both vertical (among individuals or households) and horizontal (among groups with different identities) forms of inequality (Stewart et al., 2009).

The rise of urban poverty and inequality, therefore, is an increasingly relevant topic particularly due to the accelerated pace at which the process of urbanisation is taking place. By 2050, more than two thirds of the world's population is expected to live in cities, and the majority of that growth will occur in the least developed regions.

Spatial inequality in cities is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that manifests differently in developed and developing countries. The urban poor tend to face a plethora of specific problems such as a limited safety net, overcrowded and low-quality housing, difficulty accessing basic infrastructure and services, expensive food and drinking water, voicelessness and lack of influence in governance processes, as well as tenure insecurity (UN-Habitat, 2022). This complexity becomes particularly evident when considering the decay of specific urban regions that become isolated from the broader city's socio-economic fabric.

Some of the most remarkable symbols of urban poverty and inequality in the developing world are the informal settlements and the slums. These contiguous settlements are characterised as having inadequate housing and basic services. Despite the poor conditions of these areas, they offer the most affordable option for all types of migrants, unemployed youth and individuals enduring economic downturns. The prevalence of this type of settlements in developing regions can be explained by ineffective macroeconomic policies that lead to low rates of economic growth or the inability to distribute wealth when it is actually created, high levels of income inequali-

ty, intense unplanned urbanisation that can be caused by economic stagnation, underperformance of crops, high levels of unemployment, financially weak municipalities, unsatisfactory governance and incoherent urban planning policies; and lack of investment in water, sanitation and energy infrastructures (Arimah, 2010).

In developed countries, urban inequality is rooted in the advent of the "New Economy" (Nijman & Yehua, 2020). Around the 1990s, after decades of deindustrialization, supply shocks, the deepening of globalisation, and the rise of political parties' critical of state interventionism, a new model of production emerged to sustain economic growth. The so-called New Economy is even more urban-centred than the preceding model and has been driven by the digital revolution. The activities that characterize it are normally related to finance, accounting, consulting, marketing, culture, and high-tech industries. A growing demand of highly educated, white-collar employees and a persistently declining demand for manufacturing, blue-collar jobs have reshaped the structure of cities in the developed world. The contemporary city is less a place of production and more a place of consumption. The constant inwards flux of young and well-paid professionals as well as the desire to market cities to attract tourists and investors has dramatically increased the prices of accommodation in city centres and in areas surrounding economic and political focal points. This lack of affordable housing has, in turn, pushed low-income groups away from centric zones and forced them to move to more marginalized, risk-prone, and disadvantaged areas. As a result, many forms of inequality (of access to high-paying jobs or to green areas, of quality of air, etc.) and segregation (residential, racial, of skills and education level, etc.) have appeared during the last years.

The previously described spatial inequities present in modest districts or neighbourhoods can exert a deep and longstanding pernicious influence in the lives of their citizens. For example, in their overview of relevant literature on *Spatial Context Effects*, Galster & Sharkey (2017) gathered a considerable amount of evidence of the enduring effects that inhabiting certain urban contexts can have on academic performance, the propensity to engage in dangerous behaviours, teen fertility, physical and mental

health, labour force participation and earnings, and criminality.

## A Solution: Urban Regeneration

Urban forms of inequity already pose a challenge for authorities of all regions and government levels and are expected to become even more so in the coming years. Measures to tackle this challenge include: i) programmes of affordable housing for low-income households that provide below-market financing, technical assistance or organisational skills for communities; ii) land regularization and acquisition; iii) improved provision of basic services such as health education, and basic infrastructure such as energy, water and sanitation, drainage or waste management; iv) income generation through micro-financing, training of workers and entrepreneurs, and fostering cooperation and networking among entrepreneurs; v) attraction of private investment by properly marketing the city or by offering a pipeline of bankable public-private partnerships; vi) guaranteeing that local civil servants acquire the necessary expertise and skills; vii) enabling all citizens to participate in decision-making processes; or viii) strengthening the normative and regulatory framework that governs urban development (Mitlin, 2000; Hamid & Villareal, 2001; Department for International Development, 2001).

UN-Habitat recognizes urban regeneration as one of the most comprehensive and effective tools to promote inclusive, resilient, safe, and sustainable cities, tackling together various inequality- and poverty-related challenges such as adequate housing provision, crime reduction, and restoration of the physical environment.

As a subset of urban policy, regeneration is applied to those areas that experience economic decline, social malfunction, environmental unwellness, or infrastructure deterioration. Thus, urban regeneration<sup>2</sup> can be tentatively defined as a “comprehensive and integrated vision and action which seeks to resolve urban problems and bring about a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area that has been subject to change or offers opportunities for

improvement (Roberts, 2017).” Therefore, urban regeneration refers to a combination of physical and socio-economic measures that can help to restore, integrate, redevelop, and revive parts of the city and connect their transformation to the overall urban system.

More recently, the concept of *Integrated Urban Regeneration* has appeared as an expansion of traditional regeneration practices emphasizing the need to address every facet of sustainable development to tackle the interconnected trends that perpetuate poverty in underprivileged areas. It is defined as “an area-based and integrated public policy action characterised by a multi-agent collaborative process whose objectives are the lasting improvement of the economic, physical, social, climate, and governance dimensions of a vulnerable urban area, and the construction of local capacity to increase the resilience level.” (De Gregorio, 2021). In fact, urban regeneration serves as a holistic approach and a crucial urban planning tool that needs to adapt to the rapidly evolving challenges of climate change, urban health, swift digital transitions, the evolving cultural landscapes, and growing spatial disparities (UN-Habitat, 2021).

To achieve impactful urban regeneration in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, UN-Habitat underscores a three-pronged approach encompassing urban planning and design, urban economy and finance, and urban legislation and rules. Key success factors include (UN-Habitat, 2018):

- **Spatial nuances:** Urban regeneration must be rooted in the local context, ensuring plans are participatory and mirror local cultural identities. Such initiatives should dovetail with overarching city strategies; optimizing resource allocation.
- **Developmental directives:** Resettlement should be a last resort, ensuring any such measures uphold transparency. On-site development, particularly in housing, is advocated, promoting a socio-economic mix, enhancing local vibrancy, and fostering inclusivity.
- **Land dynamics and civic spaces:** A blend of residential, commercial, and recreational spaces is imperative. Such multiplicity not only revives urban spaces but ensures sustained municipal returns. Public spaces, in particular, if reflective of local heritage, can be

<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused with urban renewal, which has a more specific definition. Although frequently used interchangeably, renewal refers to the physical transformation of urban areas through redevelopment, renovation or reconstruction of buildings, infrastructures, and public spaces.

powerful regeneration catalysts.

- **Infrastructure and connective fabric:** A sustainable urban blueprint demands efficient transport networks, with an emphasis on pedestrian and cyclist corridors. The seamless integration of public transport is crucial for fostering urban cohesion.
- **Community centricity:** Regeneration's efficacy is amplified when communities are at its core. Their insights, cultural tenets, and heritage lend authenticity to regeneration efforts, ensuring respect for historical and societal nuances.

These factors underscore that urban regeneration, especially of an integrated nature, necessitates a holistic, multifaceted approach, anchored in local nuances but with a vision for sustainable, inclusive futures.

The above-mentioned definitions are, nonetheless, flexible and apt to be subjectively interpreted. Not surprisingly, the meaning of urban regeneration has differed across countries, sectors and decades. After the Second World War and during the 1950s, urban policy concentrated, first, on repairing the devastation of the war in the affected European countries, and secondly, on clearing slums and replacing them with standardized, multi-storey and densely populated modernist public housing. This focus on reconstruction and mass slum clearance would last until the 1970s. Nevertheless, in the 1960s, many disapproving voices raised against modernist architecture advocating for a more humane and integrative vision of urban regeneration. At that time, social concerns started bringing more attention. The higher volume of available social data allowed authorities to better understand the reality of their citizens. The influx of migrants from former colonies to France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, as well as the secular racial segregation of the United States, were heightening social tensions. At the same time, historic preservation was given greater importance (Couch et al., 2013; Jonas & McCarthy, 2009; Roberts, 2017).

The second half of the 1970s was a time of economic unrest, especially for industrialized cities and regions that relied heavily on a few sectors. The 1973 oil crisis evidenced the agony of the Fordist mode of mass production and the Keynesian approach to public policy. It

also became apparent that the renewal of decayed urban areas was not simply a matter of physical restoration, but a multidimensional issue that had to integrate employment, training, and educational opportunities for citizens. Therefore, the new objective of regeneration in the 1980s was to rejuvenate the economic structure of the city and to foster local economic development. In the Anglosphere (Jonas & McCarthy, 2009; Roberts, 2017; Ruming, 2018), but also in East Asian (Chen, 2013; Hsu & Chang, 2013) and African (Houghton, 2013; Obeng-Odom, 2013) developing economies, public-private partnerships became an increasingly popular mechanism to procure public infrastructure and services. Consequently, the private sector turned into the leading actor in the process of urban transformation while the state stepped back, assuming a role of mere enabler and facilitator. Continental Western Europe did not follow the same path; France gave more power to regional and local authorities while considerably increasing public expenditure and intervention. Germany, on the other hand, witnessed the development of a new, more sensitive, and community-centred approach to regeneration that aimed to protect working class areas (Couch & Fraser, 2003; Couch et al., 2011). In Latin America, Mexico adopted a market-led approach, transforming Mexico City from a national industrial centre to a global nexus for finance and specialised consumption (Kanai & Ortega-Alcázar, 2009); Chile set a public housing financing policy funded by the national budget (Rodríguez & Sugranyes, 2007); and in Brazil, the renewal of cities such as São Paulo took place both by the action of the market and by that of the government (Batley, 1982).

During the 1990s, international organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union became more concerned about the preservation of the environment and advocated for more sustainable forms of development. This perspective influenced the urban regeneration field and shed light on the existing tensions between local economic development and environmental sustainability. In parallel, it was recognized that the process of urban development should take into account the views of all relevant stakeholders: academia, civil society, non-governmental organisations, public administration, and private sector.



Image 2. Tree-lined bike and pedestrian path in an urban area. © Freepik





In the last decades, urban regeneration has been recognized as one of the most comprehensive and effective tools, not only to enhance living standards for city residents, but also to make cities more attractive to potential visitors, new residents and investors in a growingly interconnected and globalized economy. To be successful in the present conjunction, a city must have a diversified economic structure, be internally and externally well connected, have a skilled labour force, be able to materialize long-term development strategies, accommodate innovative organisations, and offer a good quality of life (Couch et al., 2013; Moon et al., 2017).

The historical evolution of urban regeneration shows that this is a multidimensional, path-dependent, and ever-changing process that deals with the macroeconomic context, the physical conditions, the societal needs, and the environmental pressures of each particular time and space. Naturally, the implementation of such a complex process entails a series of challenges (De Magalhães, 2015):

- **Dealing effectively with structural socio-economic problems:** Frequently, the causes of urban regeneration problems and the consequences of their solutions go beyond the scope of urban policy and planning. The modern, integrated conception of regeneration is not concerned uniquely with the renewal and reparation of buildings and infrastructures; it normally addresses problems of a very different nature such as gentrification, provision of affordable housing and services, governance, involuntary resettlements, social exclusion, upskilling and job creation, training of the local population, etc.
- **Gathering the multi-disciplinary knowledge required:** Urban regeneration problems are characterised by their dynamic and diverse nature. In order to find a suitable solution for them, it is crucial to gather specialised knowledge from various disciplines and organisations and put it together in a cohesive plan that maximizes synergies and minimizes conflict.
- **Managing, listening, and facilitating action amongst stakeholders:** A city is a highly heterogeneous settlement where people with differing cultures, priorities, socio-economic status, and educational background live together. It is a task of urban regeneration practitioners to act as brokers between the conflicting groups of interest, ensuring that not even one of them,

especially vulnerable groups, is left voiceless or unable to actively participate in local governance processes and avoiding as far as possible zero-sum games or top-down decision making.

- **Governing diverse sources of financing:** During the last years, after successive economic downturns, the state is relying increasingly on private developers and communal associations for the provision and maintenance of public goods. The participation of so many actors adds complexity to the financial aspect of urban policy and makes it difficult to distribute risks and uncertainty. To this end, public authorities have been making use of mechanisms such as tax incentives, rezoning, public land ownership, land-readjustment, levies, or planning obligations.
- **Guaranteeing the long-term sustainability of interventions:** Although projects address present moment problems, their consequences may have lasting effects on the urban ecosystem. Urban regeneration interventions should be economically viable, meet communities' demands, be accompanied by an adequate governance model, and respect the environment. Therefore, a clear vision of what type of city ideal should be pursued is required to harmonize and successfully integrate all specific urban regeneration actions.

## Urban Regeneration and Local Economic Development

As previously discussed, the late 1970s and the 1980s were a period of economic stagnation and political experimentation, when the long-standing tendency of deindustrialization were coupled with price raises and massive layoffs. At that time, the concept of Local Economic Development (LED) gained popularity as a valid solution for the increasingly globalised, competitive, and rapidly changing economy that was in the making. Policy makers understood that certain problems could only be properly tackled at a regional or local level. Consequently, during the following decades, liberalisation, decentralisation, the "hollowing out" of the nation state, and the transition to less hierarchical and more participatory decision-making processes further increased the emphasis on LED (Beer et al., 2003).

Local economic development is "a process by which public, business and non-governmental sector partners



work collectively to create better conditions for economic growth and employment generation.” Its purpose is “to build up the economic capacity of a local area to improve its economic future and the quality of life for all.” (Swinburn, Goga & Murphy, 2006). This entails reducing social disparities between neighbourhoods, creating new jobs and companies adapted to the demands of the global economy, facilitating the exchange of information between the relevant actors, generating and attracting new sources of investment, etc.

In this context, urban poverty and inequality are perceived as one of the urging problems that LED should address, and urban regeneration as one of the tools it has at its disposal. In fact, urban development has been absorbed in many cases by regional and local economic development bodies. In the UK, for instance, at the end of the 1990s, these competencies were transferred, first, to the Regional Development Agencies, and later, at the beginning of the 2010s, to their successors, the Local Economic Enterprises (Roberts, 2017). Also, in South Africa, the Industrial Development Corporation supported the creation of a series of Local Economic Development Agencies in 2003 that had, among their goals, “to manage the spatial organisation of the area, in a socially efficient manner, through the use of inter alia public land and targeted private projects.” (Khambule & Mtapuri, 2018). The process moved in the opposite direction too, for in 1989, the Singaporean Urban Redevelopment Authority absorbed the Planning Department and the Research and Statistics Unit of the Ministry of National Development, something that allowed the agency to find more effectively an equilibrium between economic, social, and land development (Amirtahmasebi et al., 2016).

Specialised literature lists the “preparation of land and the development of sites for incoming or expanding firms” as one of the most effective measures to promote local and regional economic development (Beer & Clower, 2020). In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study *Organising for local development: the role of local development agencies* (2009), nine out of the sixteen analysed agencies provided “real estate, urban realm and infrastructure development”, and two of them provided “urban services or management.”

According to Beer et al. (2003), a considerable number of the studied agencies in Australia, England, Ireland, and the US reported participating in the improvement of regional or local physical structures such as roads, railways and utilities, as well as in the development of planning for business sites and premises, and in the process to influence land use regulations and planning decisions that impact on businesses.

In *Planning Local Economic Development* (2017), the authors devote a whole chapter to explore the concept of locality development and to expounding the connection between urban design and economic development. Urban design plays a pivotal role in enhancing the physical structure and socio-economic vitality of municipalities. By shaping vehicular and pedestrian networks, it promotes a harmonious blend of land uses—like residential, business, and community—that elevate functionality and boost property values.

While the design of buildings might change, the foundational patterns of land subdivision, encompassing streets, blocks, and lots, remain enduring fixtures in cities. These urban patterns, more permanent than the buildings they encompass, determine the spatial organisation for both public and private entities. Optimal urban design, characterised by interconnected streets and smaller blocks rather than sprawling superblocks and gated communities, fortifies robust local economies. This approach acknowledges the impermanence of individual buildings, fostering flexibility for evolving economic demands. Ultimately, for local economic development to thrive, urban design must prioritize adaptability, efficient territorial organisation, infrastructure layering, clear boundaries, and the creation of inclusive public spaces.

Some of the relevant urban development tools listed by Leigh and Blakely (2017) that enable and promote local economic development are:

- Land banking—the practise of acquiring parcels of land for future sale or development—and community land trusts—charitable organisations that retain land for a community, acting as guardians for assets like affordable homes and communal resources.
- Brownfield mapping, inventorying and revitalization.

- Zoning regulations that allocate ample land for commercial and industrial purposes, coupled with zoning tools (incentive zoning, overlay zoning, special districts) and guidelines in the local code that facilitate mixed use and flexibility in terms of height and density.
- Redevelopment of physical infrastructure by means of adaptive reuse or provision of basic services for old or underutilised industrial properties.
- Housing and neighbourhood improvement policies that offer varied housing options to accommodate every community segment and furnish households with services, from child care to community amenities.

As evidenced, spatial planning and design practices in general, and regeneration approaches in particular, are fundamental to achieve sustainable economic development in cities and regions.

## The Case for Local Development Agencies

Since mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, sub-national government levels have experimented with institutions and tools to find the best way to promote economic growth, social welfare, and sustainability. A popular option has been the establishment of Development Agencies, a term that normally refers to market-oriented public or quasi-public organisations with a certain degree of autonomy from government authorities that aim to develop a certain geographical area.

Development Agencies originated in Europe around the 1950s to address the post-war devastation. During the two following decades, they were established in the United States as a response to deindustrialization. In the 1980s and 1990s, many East Asian countries made use of Development Agencies to manage fast-paced industrialization and urbanisation. After the 1990s, Local and Regional Agencies have been appearing in more regions of the world to facilitate economic development (OECD/ Mountford, 2009). Local Development Agencies, therefore, can take multiple forms, focus their efforts on various areas, and perform a wide range of activities (see Table 1). Three types are especially relevant for the deployment of urban regeneration interventions.

- **Local Economic Development Agencies (LEDAs):** LEDAs focus primarily on enhancing the local economy's competitiveness and employment base. Their central mission is to attract new businesses, support local firms, and generate job opportunities in alignment with the area's economic potential. They may operate as municipal departments, public-private partnerships, or autonomous organisations, and often deploy tools such as financial incentives, infrastructure improvements, workforce development, and business support services (Beer et al., 2003).
- **Urban Development Agencies (UDAs):** UDAs are typically responsible for integrated urban planning and implementation in complex, rapidly evolving urban environments. They often combine functions such as strategic planning, land management, infrastructure delivery, and public-private coordination. Their purpose is not limited to economic development but extends to environmental resilience, social inclusion, housing and mobility solutions, and spatial equity. UDAs are generally municipally owned but operate with managerial autonomy, allowing them to be more agile than conventional public bodies. They can act as urban project developers, coordinators of multi-stakeholder processes, or stewards of long-term strategic plans (GIZ, 2022).
- **Redevelopment Agencies (RAs):** RAs usually concentrate their efforts on revitalizing and redeveloping economically struggling or underutilized areas within a city or community, often through large-scale capital projects and land assembly. They aim to turn these areas into economically thriving and appealing spaces by addressing issues such as blight, deteriorating infrastructure, and insufficient investment. Jonas & McCarthy (2009) describe these agencies as key tools in the U.S., where they have used mechanisms like tax increment financing (TIF), land acquisition and clearance, public-private partnerships, and incentive zoning to attract private capital (Jonas & McCarthy, 2009).

While their core mandates differ, in practise, the boundaries between these agency types can blur. For instance, a single agency may perform both economic development and spatial planning functions or evolve from a redevelopment authority into a broader urban development body as local needs shift.



It has been seen in previous sections that the complexity and interrelatedness of urban problems such as the presence of poverty and spatial inequality require integrated and holistic solutions such as urban regeneration. Crime, poverty, and ethnic issues cannot be neglected while restoring the physical infrastructure of a deprived neighbourhood. Climate-targeting provisions should be an integral part of strategies aiming at fostering local economic growth, and area-based interventions cannot ignore the wider sectorial, urban and regional contexts.

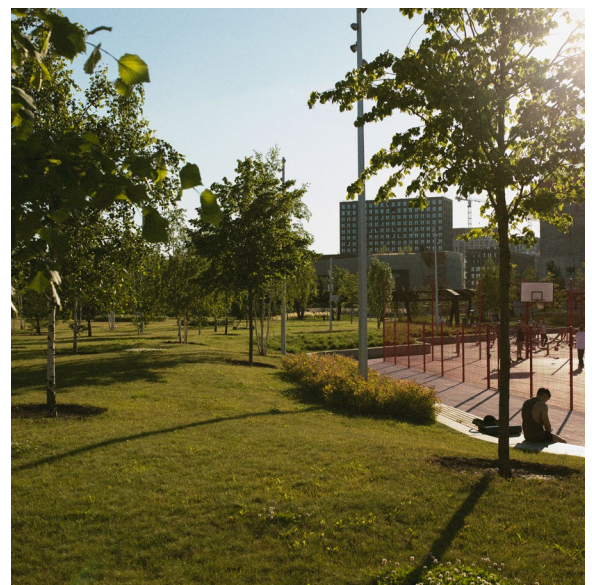
Local Development Agencies, with their hybrid nature combining public concerns and private methodologies, and their connection to all relevant stakeholders of an economy incorporate this comprehensive view of development. This is why they possess a series of attributes that position them as the most well-equipped actors to overcome the challenges of local development in general and of urban regeneration in particular.

- **LDAs specialize in monitoring the local economy and creating development plans:** These agencies focus on studying and analysing specific geographical areas, thus allowing them to have a deep knowledge on the needs of citizens, and the weak and strong points of the local economy. This enables them to identify potential challenges and opportunities in the local context and design tailored strategies to improve the quality of life for residents.
- **Tend to have a business mindset and can attract well-trained human capital:** With their business-oriented approach, these agencies can attract highly skilled professionals from different sectors who bring valuable knowledge and experience. This well-trained workforce is crucial in delivering effective and efficient solutions that align with the community's needs and expectations.
- **Can act as a broker between public administration, civil society, private sector, and academia:** Local Development Agencies can play the role of intermediaries between various stakeholders, fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing. They can help create partnerships and networks that bring together diverse perspectives, facilitating the development of well-rounded and innovative urban regeneration strategies.
- **Leverage private sector partnerships and investment strategies:** They possess the ability to attract private sector participation and leadership in local economic

development. They can identify local investment priorities and evaluate optimal financing methods, including managing costs and risk-sharing mechanisms with the private sector. Examples of such approaches include incremental tax levies or supplementary business rates.

- **Have a long-term vision:** Successful agencies understand the importance of long-term planning and remain involved before, during, and after project implementation. Their commitment to a long-term strategy ensures that urban regeneration efforts are sustainable and adaptable to future changes (OECD/Mountford, 2009).

**Image 3. Urban park with neatly planted trees and open grass areas.** © Freepik



**Table 1.** Activities typically performed by Local Development Agencies - Source: Beer et al. (2003) and OECD/Mountford (2009).

<b>Strategic Analysis &amp; Planning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analysing and monitoring the local economy</li> <li>Coordinating and leading local actors</li> <li>Coordinating government programmes</li> <li>Improving local economic development planning</li> <li>Coordinating activities of public-sector agencies</li> </ul>	<b>Policy, Advocacy &amp; Coordination</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acting as a lobbyist for the local area</li> <li>Infrastructure and investment advocacy</li> <li>Influencing land-use regulations and planning</li> <li>Providing streamlined approval/development processes</li> </ul>
<b>Finance, Investment &amp; Funding Access</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managing funding; directing lending and investment toward firms/projects</li> <li>Grant-aid management</li> <li>Facilitating access to funding and support services</li> <li>Subsidising relocation costs</li> <li>Providing financial intermediation and income generation</li> <li>Assisting firms to access venture capital</li> <li>Offering reduced rates, taxes or charges</li> </ul>	<b>Business &amp; Entrepreneurship Support</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying business opportunities</li> <li>Operating business incubators</li> <li>Assisting businesses with training or recruitment</li> <li>Local employment-creation programmes</li> <li>Providing general SME support</li> <li>Operating industrial estates or science parks</li> <li>Offering programmes to help people establish their own business</li> </ul>
<b>Land, Property &amp; Physical Infrastructure</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Redeveloping and managing land and property</li> <li>Improving local physical infrastructure</li> <li>Developing urban business districts</li> <li>Providing land or buildings</li> <li>Improving local telecommunications</li> </ul>	<b>Innovation, Clusters &amp; Technology Transfer</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assisting the development of industry clusters</li> <li>Promoting supply-chain associations</li> <li>Assisting with technology transfer, fostering innovation and creativity</li> <li>Assisting firms to meet quality standards</li> </ul>
<b>Marketing, Promotion &amp; Internationalisation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attracting foreign investment</li> <li>Promoting cross-border, inter-regional and international co-operation</li> <li>Assisting with major or special events</li> <li>Promoting tourism and regional facilities</li> <li>Assisting with national and international marketing</li> </ul>	



## Case Studies

This section presents a series of six case studies from different regions around the world, showcasing the role of Local Development Agencies in successful urban regeneration initiatives. The selected cases cover Southern Europe, Scandinavia, South America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and East Asia. These stories highlight the innovative strategies, methods, and collaborative efforts employed by LDAs in transforming declining urban areas into thriving, mixed-use districts. Each case study demonstrates the importance of a comprehensive, long-term vision, and a strong focus on sustainable Urban Development in various regional contexts.

Image 4. Outdoor market with plants and fresh produce. © Freepik



## Regeneration of the Norra Älvstranden Area in Gothenburg, Sweden

**Introduction:** Norra Älvstranden, once the hub of Gothenburg's shipbuilding industry, experienced severe industrial decline in the 1970s following global competition and the 1973 oil crisis. The area, left largely derelict, was a visible and symbolic wound in Sweden's second-largest city. Its transformation into a vibrant, mixed-use waterfront district stands as one of Europe's most ambitious and exemplary urban regeneration efforts, reflecting a deeply collaborative and strategic approach to reshaping the city's economic and spatial future.

**Objectives:** The primary goals of the regeneration initiative were to:

- revitalize a derelict industrial zone;
- reposition Gothenburg as a knowledge-intensive and innovation-driven city;
- diversify the city's economic base;
- and create an attractive, mixed-use urban environment that supports long-term prosperity, employment, and urban quality of life.

Importantly, the regeneration aimed not just at redevelopment, but at redefining Gothenburg's role in the global economy.

**Strategies and Methods:** The transformation was driven by public leadership, notably the City of Gothenburg, which eventually gained full ownership of the site and established **Norra Älvstranden Utveckling AB (NUAB)**, a city-owned, market-oriented development agency. Early failures gave way to a flexible, non-linear planning process with a strong strategic vision. Key methods included: collaborative planning with universities and major firms (e.g., Volvo and Ericsson), education-led regeneration by clustering technical institutions, creation of an IT and innovation cluster, and high-quality environmental and urban design. Meanwhile, redundant shipyard workers were supported through a separate, coordinated response involving retraining, early retirement, and job placement, decoupling social recovery from physical redevelopment. Crucial to success was a proactive, investor-friendly development agency, strong political commitment, and integration of transportation infrastructure.

**Outcomes and Achievements:** By the mid-2000s, Norra Älvstranden had become a thriving new quarter with over 6,000 residents, 15,000 workers, and 9,000 students. It attracted substantial private investment—over SEK 11 billion (around US\$1.5 billion at the time)—without new public subsidies. The area houses a cluster of knowledge-intensive firms, a vibrant educational hub, and high-end housing in a revalorized urban landscape. Formerly derelict shipyards now host science parks, business incubators, and cultural venues, while industrial heritage has been preserved and reused. The scheme has created more jobs than the area ever had in its industrial peak and significantly contributed to Gothenburg's competitiveness and image.

**Lessons Learned:** The case highlights several transferable insights: i) regeneration must be economically anchored and strategically planned with **a long-term perspective**; ii) **flexibility** and **inter-agency collaboration** are essential; iii) **education** and **innovation** should be central pillars of urban renewal; iv) **public leadership combined with private engagement** can produce resilient outcomes; and v) **treating workforce support as a stand-alone programme**, separate from construction work can allow each challenge to be addressed more effectively. Lastly, vi) the Swedish model of decentralization, where local income tax provides a strong incentive for economic development, played a pivotal role in sustaining commitment and aligning stakeholders' interests (Cadell et al., 2008).



## The 22@Barcelona Innovation District, Spain

**Introduction:** The 22@Barcelona project represents a landmark case of inner-city transformation through innovation-driven urban regeneration. Initiated in 2000, it sought to redevelop the derelict industrial neighbourhood of Poblenou into a thriving innovation district, building upon the momentum of Barcelona's Olympic legacy and broader ambitions to rebrand itself as a competitive, knowledge-based global city. The initiative was a response to decades of deindustrialization, underinvestment, and urban decline in one of the city's historically industrial quarters, once known as the "Catalan Manchester."

**Objectives:** The project's overarching aim was to rejuvenate a 200-hectare post-industrial zone into a high-density, mixed-use area that would stimulate economic modernization, urban livability, and social integration. Specific goals included:

- urban refurbishment through compact, environmentally efficient planning;
- economic revitalization by fostering knowledge-based clusters;
- and social refurbishment by integrating local residents and new professionals, promoting community cohesion and inclusion in the benefits of development.

**Strategies and Methods:** Barcelona City Council spearheaded the creation of **22 ARROBA BCN, S.A.U.**, a public-private agency entrusted with planning, infrastructure development, and promotional functions. The district was rezoned from its industrial classification ("22a") to "22@" to reflect the transition to knowledge-based economic activities. Development focused on clustering innovative firms in media, ICT, medical technologies, energy, and design. The plan emphasized compact urban form, integrating 4 million m<sup>2</sup> of new floor space, with 3.2 million for productive use and 800,000 for housing, public services, and facilities. Infrastructure upgrades included fiber-optic networks, sustainable waste disposal systems, and green mobility. Social strategies included the construction of 4,000 subsidized housing units, and support programmes like 22@Voluntariat and the 22@Network to build bridges between companies and residents.

**Outcomes and Achievements:** By 2011, 22@Barcelona had attracted over 4,500 companies—47% of them start-ups and 31% operating in knowledge sectors—generating more than 56,000 new jobs and revitalizing a formerly declining area. The integration of new infrastructure, public spaces, and green areas significantly improved the urban environment, while the reuse of heritage assets preserved the district's historical identity. The district became home to major firms (e.g., Microsoft, Telefónica), incubators, and university research centres, strengthening Barcelona's position in the global knowledge economy. Importantly, the project succeeded without extensive displacement, balancing business development with community needs.

**Lessons Learned:** 22@Barcelona offers key insights into successful urban regeneration: i) **strong public leadership and integrated planning instruments**—embodied in the 22@ company—enabled coherent development across economic, physical, and social domains; ii) **flexible yet strategic zoning and infrastructure planning** laid the foundation for attracting investment and innovative activity; iii) combining **top-down strategic direction** with **grassroots engagement and heritage preservation** supported long-term sustainability and inclusivity; and finally, iv) the case demonstrates the importance of connecting global competitiveness with local benefits, using urban regeneration as a tool not just for economic transformation, but also for social and spatial cohesion (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020; Barber & Pareja Eastway, 2010; Barceló Rota, 2005; Battaglia & Tremblay, 2011; López et al., 2011; Urban Sustainable Exchange, n.d.).

## The Regeneration of Porta Palazzo in Turin, Italy: The Gate – living not leaving

**Introduction:** Porta Palazzo, located in the historic centre of Turin, Italy, had long been one of the city's most socially and economically challenged neighbourhoods. Known for its open-air market—Europe's largest—this area was marked by informal economic activities, high crime, deteriorated infrastructure, and a transient population including a high percentage of undocumented immigrants. By the mid-1990s, it had become a symbolic space for urban exclusion. Its regeneration process began in the late 1990s under the EU-funded Urban Pilot Projects and continued through the URBAN II programme, aiming to transform the district into a more inclusive, vibrant, and socially sustainable urban space.

**Objectives:** The main goals of the Porta Palazzo regeneration were to:

- improve the area's physical environment;
- formalize and integrate the informal economy;
- foster cultural inclusion and social cohesion among a diverse population;
- reposition Porta Palazzo as a socially vibrant and economically dynamic area within the broader urban fabric of Turin.

A key concern was to integrate immigrants—often marginalized—into local social and economic systems while avoiding displacement.

**Strategies and Methods:** The regeneration strategy was grounded in a multi-scalar, integrated, and participatory approach. It included physical interventions (infrastructure and public space upgrades), social programmes (intercultural dialogue, housing support, and vocational training), and economic measures (support for micro-enterprises and market modernization). Governance was structured around strong public sector leadership combined with public-private partnerships and the active engagement of NGOs. A defining feature of the Porta Palazzo regeneration process was the creation of a dedicated project committee, which later evolved into a Local Development Agency known as **The Gate**. This agency acted as the **central coordination platform**, facilitating dialogue between municipal departments, private actors, NGOs, and local residents. The Gate's role was both operational and strategic: it managed project implementation, coordinated funding from the EU and local sources, ensured community participation, and fostered trust in public authorities. Another distinctive feature was the use of localized regeneration agencies and community involvement mechanisms like neighbourhood offices, which fostered trust and ensured bottom-up participation. Cultural integration programmes, such as the Intercultural Centre and community events, were instrumental in bridging social divides.

**Outcomes and Achievements:** The project led to notable improvements in public infrastructure, housing conditions, and neighbourhood safety. Crime perceptions decreased, and there was greater cultural exchange among residents. Although the informal economy did not disappear, parts of it were formalized and better regulated. The market area became more organized, and new services were introduced. Porta Palazzo evolved into a testbed for socially inclusive urban policy, and the governance model influenced regeneration initiatives in other parts of the city.

**Lessons Learned:** Porta Palazzo demonstrates the **importance of addressing social sustainability explicitly** in urban regeneration, beyond physical renewal and economic growth. Successful elements included: i) sustained, **multi-level public engagement**; ii) investment in **social infrastructure and soft services**, not just hard infrastructure; ii) **inclusive governance** mechanisms (such as the tavolo sociale) that empower local actors; and ii) attention to **intercultural dialogue** as a tool for cohesion. However, challenges remained in scaling up these initiatives and securing long-term funding. The case also highlights the need for robust **monitoring frameworks** for social sustainability, as well as coordinated policies to avoid gentrification-driven displacement while still improving local quality of life (Colantonio & Dixon, 2011; Colantonio & Dixon, 2009; Curti, 2007).tax provides a strong incentive for economic development, played a pivotal role in sustaining commitment and aligning stakeholders' interests (Cadell et al., 2008).



## Santiago de Chile: Repopulation and Regeneration of the Municipal District

**Introduction:** In the early 1990s, Santiago's historic central district faced sharp population decline, degraded infrastructure, and a deteriorated urban image. From 1950 to 1990, the Santiago Municipal District (SMD) lost nearly half its population and a third of its housing stock. In response, the newly democratic municipal government launched the Santiago Repopulation Programme (SRP) in 1990—a bold urban regeneration initiative aimed at reversing these trends, reestablishing the city centre's residential role, and attracting middle-income residents back to the urban core.

**Objectives:** The SRP aimed to:

- halt depopulation and urban decay in central Santiago;
- activate a stagnant housing market through infill development;
- attract middle-income residents by improving quality of life and urban amenities;
- and rebrand Santiago's centre as a desirable, dense, and liveable area.

In parallel, it sought to leverage public-private partnerships and housing subsidies to stimulate investment and support social inclusion.

**Strategies and Methods:** Central to the programme's success was the creation of the **Santiago Development Corporation (SDC)**—a flexible local development agency governed by private law but aligned with public objectives. Acting as the executive arm of the regeneration plan, the SDC coordinated housing projects, brokered public-private partnerships, and mediated between developers, residents, and municipal agencies. It managed land banks, organized lists of pre-approved buyers, promoted housing subsidies (notably the national Subsidy for Urban Renovation or SUR), and produced market data to reduce investment risks. Pilot projects were launched in partnership with housing cooperatives to demonstrate latent housing demand. As private interest grew, the SDC formalized “repopulation agreements” with developers, streamlining permits, facilitating land access, and supporting targeted marketing.

**Outcomes and Achievements:** Over 20 years, the SRP transformed Santiago's urban core into one of the most dynamic residential areas in the country. From 2002 to 2012, the population of the SMD grew by 55%, and the housing stock nearly doubled. More than 123,000 housing units were built, largely in high-rise developments. The area became a preferred destination for young professionals, students, and retirees. Private investment was close to US\$3 billion, and the city collected over US\$43 million in building permit fees. The SRP also catalysed increases in municipal revenues and land values. Although gentrification concerns emerged—particularly due to the declining availability of affordable housing—public subsidies and early rehabilitation programmes (like REHA) initially mitigated exclusionary pressures.

**Lessons Learned:** Key takeaways include: i) sustained **public leadership and vision** are crucial for long-term transformation; ii) **regulatory and financial tools**—like tailored subsidies and flexible zoning—can unlock housing markets; iii) **public-private cooperation** thrives when anchored in institutions with the autonomy to innovate; and iv) managing urban repopulation requires **anticipating socio-spatial impacts** such as gentrification, and adapting tools to maintain inclusivity (Amirtahmasebi et al., 2016).

## Transformation of Singapore's City Waterfront: Golden Shoe District, Singapore River and Marina Bay

**Introduction:** The transformation of Singapore's city waterfront stands as one of the most comprehensive and iconic urban regeneration efforts in the world. Once marked by overcrowded slums, polluted waterways, and fragmented landownership, the area encompassing the Golden Shoe District, Singapore River, and Marina Bay has been systematically redeveloped over six decades into a modern financial centre and vibrant urban waterfront. This evolution was driven by strong central planning, extensive land acquisition policies, a robust public housing system, and effective public-private partnerships.

### Objectives:

- For the **Golden Shoe District**, the goal was to create a commercial hub that would bolster Singapore's international standing.
- The **Singapore River** project focused on restoring and repurposing a heavily polluted river to make it a centre for tourism and leisure activities.
- For **Marina Bay**, the objective was to develop a comprehensive 'live-work-play' ecosystem, fostering business, work, and leisure activities, and to position it as an investment destination on the international stage.

**Strategies and Methods:** Singapore's model relied on a powerful centralized governance structure, led by the Ministry of National Development and operationalized by autonomous agencies like the **Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)** and the **Housing Development Board (HDB)**. The URA—originally the Urban Renewal Department—acted as a state-led development agency responsible for master planning, land sales, conservation, and implementation oversight. The strategy combined extensive land acquisition (via the 1966 Land Acquisition Act), site clearance, resettlement policies, and the creation of comprehensive planning frameworks, including long-term Concept Plans and medium-term Development Guide Plans (DGPs). Private sector involvement was structured through the Government Land Sales (GLS) programme, which sold pre-approved development sites to private actors. The state also executed large-scale infrastructure projects, environmental cleanup (e.g., Singapore River), and implemented conservation policies, incentivizing adaptive reuse. Key reforms—like rent decontrol, planning transparency, and infrastructure upgrades—enabled market-friendly regeneration while preserving government control.

**Outcomes and Achievements:** The redevelopment initiatives led to significant and distinct improvements in each area. The **Golden Shoe District** was transformed from a fragmented colonial-era centre into a dense financial hub with high-rise towers and public infrastructure, facilitated through land sales and incentives. The **Singapore River**, once heavily polluted, underwent a S\$300 million (approximately US\$140 million) cleanup and was redeveloped into a culturally rich, pedestrian-friendly destination, combining heritage conservation with mixed-use development. Marina Bay emerged from reclaimed land into a vibrant business, leisure, and residential hub with world-class facilities: the implementation of the Common Services Tunnel in **Marina Bay** exemplified the long-term approach to planning and development, laying the groundwork for future urban growth, and the Marina Barrage created a freshwater reservoir, doubling as a flood barrier, and facilitating water-related recreational activities.

**Lessons Learned:** This case illustrates the power of long-term, centralized planning and execution through capable development agencies. Key takeaways include: i) **public land ownership** and **fiscal prudence** enabled decisive action and sustainable financing; ii) **integrated planning** tools (Concept Plans, DGPs) aligned development with national priorities; iii) flexible yet firm **public-private partnerships** allowed the state to shape outcomes without losing investor confidence; iv) socially **sensitive resettlement** and **public housing** ensured inclusivity; and v) balancing heritage and innovation **preserved identity while enabling growth** (Amirtahmasebi et al., 2016).



## Mandela Bay Development Agency: Urban Renewal in Port Elizabeth, South Africa

**Introduction:** Port Elizabeth's inner city, particularly the Central Business District (CBD), experienced significant decline in the post-apartheid era, suffering from urban decay, disinvestment, and the loss of middle-class residents and businesses. In response, the **Mandela Bay Development Agency (MBDA)** was created in 2003 by the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality and the Industrial Development Corporation to serve as a dedicated, semi-autonomous vehicle to lead the city's urban renewal agenda. This case offers an innovative example of how a local development agency can successfully stimulate bottom-up urban renewal through inclusive planning, strategic infrastructure investment, and catalytic public-private cooperation.

**Objectives:** The main goals of the MBDA were to:

- reverse urban decay and capital flight from Port Elizabeth's CBD;
- attract private sector investment by initiating catalytic public infrastructure projects;
- diversify the local economy beyond its industrial base;
- and foster socially inclusive urban revitalization that benefits a wide spectrum of local communities.

A guiding principle was that public investment must be followed by private investment for renewal to be sustainable and impactful.

**Strategies and Methods:** The MBDA adopted an innovative, "from-concept-to-completion" approach anchored in integrated planning, market responsiveness, and strong stakeholder engagement. The agency's work began with a master plan for the CBD, identifying key nodes and projects with economic potential. Major capital projects were implemented with public participation and detailed urban design briefs, such as the 2006 R95 million (around US\$14 million) pedestrianisation and revitalisation of Govan Mbeki Avenue. The MBDA also introduced new tools like Special Rating Areas, informal trading kiosks, public space upgrades, and private security and cleaning contracts. To ensure stakeholder ownership and reduce implementation risks, MBDA established a Development Forum, a participatory "urban ideas cluster factory" where public, private, and community actors co-developed projects. The agency expanded beyond the CBD into townships like Helenvale and New Brighton using the same inclusive and pragmatic methodology.

**Outcomes and Achievements:** By 2013, the MBDA had invested R190 million (US\$19.8 million) in core CBD projects and catalysed R185 million (US\$19.2 million) in new business sales, 825 new jobs, and R61.5 million (US\$6.4 million) in added gross geographic product (GGP). Surveys showed a strong link between MBDA investments and private property improvements: 42.8% of residents and 12.1% of businesses attributed their upgrades directly to MBDA initiatives. Business confidence surged, with 56% of surveyed entrepreneurs reporting positive or highly positive views of the CBD operating environment. Over 1,100 new jobs were created between 2009 and 2013. Importantly, the MBDA's expansion into township areas helped mitigate political risks and ensured more equitable spatial development across Nelson Mandela Bay.

**Lessons Learned:** The MBDA's initiatives demonstrate the power of institutional innovation in urban regeneration. Its success stems from six key features: i) creation of an inclusive Development Forum to align interests and generate ideas; ii) a **full-spectrum development model** from planning to execution; iii) focused, phased **place-making** interventions; iv) dynamic, **locally rooted** urban renewal within a reflexive, collaborative setting; v) a strong culture of "**learning by doing**" and adapting in real time; and vi) **financial innovation** through long-term public land leasing and infrastructure-led value creation. The agency's hybrid public-private status allowed it to operate with agility while remaining connected to municipal priorities. (Oranje & Voges, 2014).

## Final Remarks

This report sheds light on the critical role that Local Development Agencies play in addressing urban forms of inequity by means of urban regeneration initiatives. LDAs, with their unique set of strengths, capabilities, and strategies, can lead the way in transforming urban spaces that suffer from socio-economic disparities.

The report highlights several key features of LDAs that make them particularly well-suited for tackling urban poverty and inequality, such as their local expertise, business-oriented mindset, ability to act as a broker between different stakeholders, capacity to leverage private sector partnerships, and long-term vision. These qualities, combined with the effective implementation of urban regeneration initiatives, can lead to sustainable and equitable local development.

The case studies selected demonstrate the application of those features in diverse urban settings. These examples showcase the transformative power of urban regeneration initiatives led by LDAs, which can improve the quality of life for residents, foster economic growth, and enhance the social and environmental aspects of urban areas.

In conclusion, LDAs play a pivotal role in tackling urban inequity through regeneration initiatives. Their unique capabilities, strategic approaches, and ability to foster collaboration among various stakeholders can lead to long-lasting, positive change in derelict, impoverished and declining urban areas. It is crucial for local and national policymakers to recognize and support the work of LDAs in urban regeneration efforts to ensure inclusive, sustainable, and equitable growth in our cities.



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