

Social Platform

This ESRC small grant project will pioneer the application of an innovative action-research tool – *the social platform* – to territorial policies in the field of urban agriculture.

Recently adopted within the EU FP 7 Coordinated Action “Social Polis” (<http://www.socialpolis.eu/>) to enable academics and stakeholders to collaboratively attempt to shape the EU’s future research agenda, a social platform is best described as an ‘action-based focus group’ aimed at uncovering data and consolidating action.

Over a one year period and the core of work package (WP4) that is transversal to the whole research, the social platform will seek to facilitate a learning environment for different stakeholders interested in collaboratively building capacities and designing policies to have impact on policy design and policy implementation.

A well-known weakness of academic research in general is the ability to translate knowledge in languages and tools that can be used by policy makers, civil servants and citizen’s organisations to produce social change. The *social platform* will address precisely **these limits** by:

- Exploring and challenging the language barriers between academics, civil servants, policy makers and citizens.
- Creating a learning environment co-led by the participants in which their roles in collective learning, generating empowerment and widening networks are made explicit. Knowledge transfer among different stakeholders (from community organisations, government institutions and grassroots groups) will be achieved by specific training packages which include excursions, seminars and workshops and the co-production of (1) a User Guide - “How to set up your UA project” and (2) a Policy Brief and Implementation Guide for policy makers - “How to support socially and environmentally just UA projects in your city”.
- Creating a space for debate, exploration of conflict, and negotiation outside the conventional political arena: rather than a weakness, the non-coercive element of the platform is a strength which can overcome the known limits of many participatory urban and environmental policies which tend to be ‘deserted’ by key stakeholders.

This Social Platform on urban agriculture is designed around **three different types of meetings**:

- *Convivial events*: excursions to explore urban agricultural sites and innovative projects. Each excursion day offers different visits to different projects and is organised with a minivan and locally produced catering. It may include on-site activities such as harvesting/processing/eating.
- *Seminars*: public lectures, mutual presentations, seminars with invited speakers from case studies analysed in phase 2 and 3.
- *Workshops*: round tables, focus groups facilitated by the PI using “World cafe” (Brown 2005) and “open space” discussion techniques (Owen 2008).

A **preliminary calendar** of the platform (see also workplan document) includes:

- 1) Platform launch with keynote speakers (Jeffrey Hou and Andre Viljoen)..
- 2) Convivial event 1: excursion to an innovative institutional UA project in the city region.
- 3) Seminar 1: overview of UK innovative UA projects from research WP1 and WP2.
- 4) Workshop 1: policy lessons from innovative institutional projects in UK (from WP2 and 3).
- 5) Convivial event 2: excursions to UA sites promoted by a local organisation in the city region.
- 6) Seminar 2: local experiences in UA: socio-economic meanings and community resilience.
- 7) Workshop 2: Leeds City region policy support to UA: an overview.
- 8) Convivial event 3: excursion to informal/grassroots UA projects.
- 9) Seminar 3: learning from neglected needs and conflictual practices in UA.
- 10) Workshop 3: demands for policy support, institutional constraints and conflict reconciliation.
- 11) Platform evaluation with all stakeholders. Drafting (with the active role of participants) the user’s guide and the policy brief/ implementation guide for policy makers.