

# CASE STUDY

## BRAGA (PT) – ST. JOHN'S (CA)

IURC - NA

JULY 28, 2023

**Thematic Network(s): Ecological Transition-Green Deal**

**Thematic Cluster(s): Nature Based Solutions; Sustainable Urban Agriculture**

**Cross-cutting challenge(s): Energy Transition & Climate Change**

**Topic keywords: urban agriculture, urban farming, depopulation, fire prevention**

# BRAGA – ST. JOHN'S

## IURC – CASE STUDY

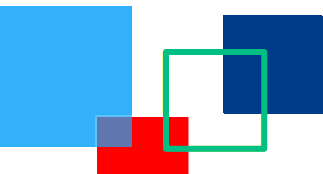
*A Canadian model of urban farming sparks a strategy for the prevention of fires and the generation of incentives for repopulation in Galicia and the Northern region of Portugal.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Three of the worst fire seasons in the EU have been suffered in the last six years. This demonstrates the upward trend indicated by experts, a situation due in part to the effects of climate change but aggravated in the region of Northern Portugal and Galicia by the progressive abandonment of the rural areas and the consequent cessation of productive activities traditionally linked to the forestry area.

Braga is located at the heart of this vulnerable region. As an important business and cultural centre in northern Portugal, the city has the vision to reassure its position as a model for sustainable tourism and economic development, which is facing the challenges posed by increasing deforestation and the decay of its neighbouring rural areas. In search of best practices to deal with this challenge, a delegation from Braga paid a visit in the spring of 2022 to its Canadian partner, St. John's, the capital city of the most Eastern province in Canada, Newfoundland & Labrador, to explore their experiences with urban farming and its impact in the forests and rural areas surrounding the city.

### St. John's Learning Centre Kitchen Barn 2022



# CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

The deterioration of forests is closely interrelated with the socioeconomic problems of the Northern Region of Portugal and its neighbour Galicia in Spain. To address the progressive abandonment of the rural areas and the consequent cessation of productive activities traditionally linked to the forestry area, cities in these regions face the challenge of the exodus of the rural population. The exodus leaves unattended forest areas, intervened by human beings for centuries, thus increasing ecological, demographic, and economic problems, challenges that must be attended to respond to forestry decay. A single solution does not seem easy, since human and environmental factors must be considered. This is a challenge that requires a versatile response, defined by the needs of each area.

The study visit of a delegation from Braga and EIXO ATLANTICO to St. John's sparked an idea to replicate the success story of the [O'Brien urban farm](#), as an agriculture incubation program for new entry farmers, at the forefront of the vision to strengthen forest and rural areas around cities in the Northern region of Portugal.

## O'Brien Learning Centre Community Garden in Winter & Summer of 2022



The O'Brien farm is a success story with several initiatives of interest to its European partners:

- ✓ **New Found Farmers** is its agriculture incubation program for new entrant farmers. Started in 2021, this is a 5-year cooperative program designed for beginning farmers to learn by doing to obtain skills, experience, and knowledge as they move towards independent farm operations.
- ✓ **Community Gardens, the Seeds of Sustainability.** This urban farm believes in supporting and educating residents to grow their own fresh and healthy food by giving access to plots with a soil mix suitable for vegetable production, land access, and a water source.
- ✓ **Farm Learning Centre,** a space for learning and development, offering agriculture enterprise education and mentorship that supports the provincial goals for improving food security. This space is also designed to serve as a unique tourist attraction based on experiential learning.
- ✓ **Cloudberry Forest School** is owned, operated, and staffed by certified forest school practitioners, registered Early Childhood Educators, and certified primary school teachers. The school prides itself on its international calibre of education, staff qualifications, and programming. Their mission is to connect people to place through experiential, play, and land-based learning in a primarily outdoor context, available to children as young as 18 months straight up through to experiential outdoor learning sessions for adults.

# RESULTS AND IMPACT

Following the study visit to Canada, EIXO Atlantico is proposing its network of cities to replicate St. John's urban farm model to address their challenges, aiming to combat forest fires through an integrated strategy involving universities and local governments. The objective is twofold, addressing the climate impact of deforestation and an aging, declining population in small municipalities and attracting a younger population to develop urban farms as a frontline against increasing fire crisis next to poorly populated areas.

## Braga & Eixo Atlantico study visit to St. John's



To achieve these objectives, the Spanish and Portuguese cities in the region will receive technical assistance from their Canadian partners aiming to adapt their best practices in urban farming, starting with a pilot replicating the O'Brien experience in St. John's. The project includes training the general population, with special attention to the inhabitants of the areas affected by forest fires, on how to contribute to the prevention of this phenomenon and respond appropriately in case emergency. This exercise also contributes to the general awareness of the social responsibility in the prevention of forest fires.

The foundations for this pilot are based on a technical proposal drafted by O'Brien Farm's director for the replication of their successful model in Galicia and Northern Portugal. To this end, *EIXO ATLANTICO* is seeking EU funding from INTERREG SUDOE in alliance with other partners from neighbour regions at various levels of government and academia.

***"We believe multifaceted urban farms benefit their communities in two major ways: they certainly grow food, but they also grow doers and dreamers".*** Aaron Rodgers, General Manager at O'Brien Farm

This pilot is a step on the road to:

- Increasing population where it is currently in decline, by providing a livelihood.
- Attracting farming populations within and in the outskirts of small cities to act as fire control posts.
- Using urban farms to help maintain clean, watched upon, easy to evacuate neighbouring forests.

## SOME FIGURES FROM O'BRIEN URBAN FARM :

**8**

New agricultural businesses incubated since 2021

**200+**

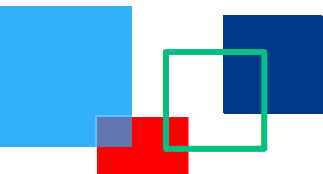
Families serviced with childcare/education through Cloudberry Forest School

**1,500**

Individuals using the farm, trails, gardens, museum, educational venue per year

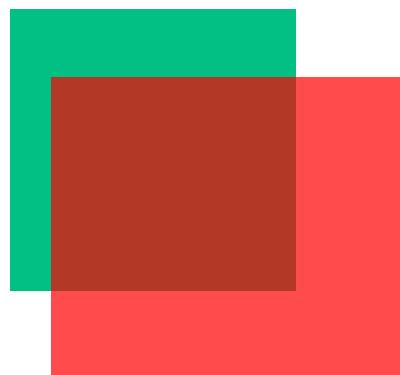
*"Our strategy to favour the development of low-density territories, fixing the population, and contributing to the cohesion of the territory, involves helping to create entrepreneurship initiatives that allow young people to live and work in low-density territories. The new forms of agriculture, especially biological and sustainable, are one of the elements on which we have reflected the most for its implementation, and the O'Brien Urban Farm is the solution to some of the questions that we had not answered and that we have known thanks to the IURC North America (Canada & USA) program."*

Xoan Mao, Secretary General, Eixo Atlântico



# LESSONS LEARNED

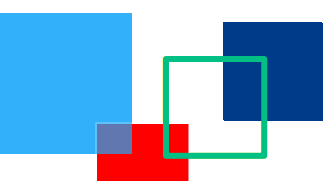
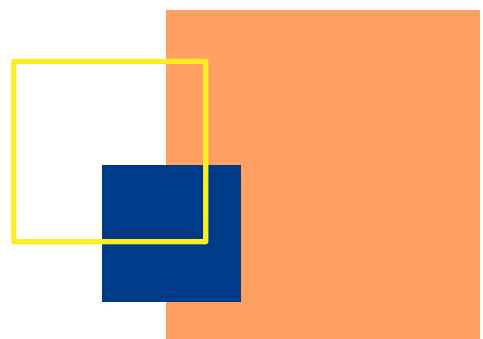
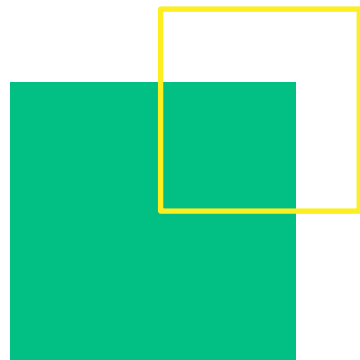
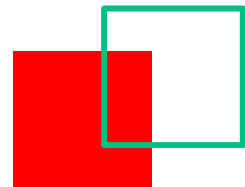
Urban farming can serve multi-level objectives, from firefighting to attracting a younger population and catalyzing economic development.



An innovative urban farm can be adapted for new purposes beyond those of the original model.

Creative education and business experiences from an IURC city were taken from its partner as an inspiration for a new project, with both cities learning from each other on innovative ways to enhance their social and economic environments.

The replication of successful models through pilot projects for innovative green initiatives, combined with access to public funding, is key for the development of green projects.



# THE IURC PROGRAMME

The International Urban and Regional Cooperation (IURC) programme enables cities in different global regions to link up and share solutions to common problems. It is part of a long-term strategy by the European Union to foster sustainable urban development in cooperation with the public and private sectors, as well as representatives of research and innovation, community groups and citizens. Through engaging in IURC, cities will have the chance to share and exchange knowledge with their international counterparts, building a greener, more prosperous future.

The IURC programme is an opportunity for local governments to learn from each other, set ambitious targets, forge lasting partnerships, test new solutions, and boost their city's international profile. Its activities will support the achievement of policy objectives as well as major international agreements on urban development and climate change, such as the EU Urban Agenda, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and the Paris Agreement.

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For more information, please contact us at [info-na@iurc.eu](mailto:info-na@iurc.eu)

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**Links to related outputs:**

[www.obrienfarm.ca/](http://www.obrienfarm.ca/)

[www.eixoatlantico.com/es/](http://www.eixoatlantico.com/es/)