

Migration and diversity on a city level
Brickstones to make it successful.

1. What kind of city is Mechelen ?

Mechelen is a town of almost 90.000 inhabitants in Belgium and part of the bigger urban area Brussels-Antwerp (3 million inhabitants).

Migration started in the sixties (mostly Moroccan) and accelerated since the nineties (Eastern Europe, Turkey, Central-Africa,...).

Today we have 132 nationalities, 30 % of the citizens have a migrant background, 20 % of all inhabitants are Muslim, 1 out of 2 newborns have a migrant background.

2. What is so special about Mechelen ?

8 % of the foreign fighters (between 3900 and 4200) who joined ISIS out of the EU came from the region Antwerp-Brussels. In contrast with other cities in the neighborhood, none left out of Mechelen.

In 2003 an extreme right political party got 32 %. Today 8 %. There was a very strong political polarisation towards diversity and migrants. Today we have the biggest acceptance rate of all Belgian cities towards our "integration policy".

15 years ago Mechelen had an outspoken negative connotation. The middle class left, criminality rates were very high, streets were dirty and 1 out of 3 shops closed. Today we are one of the reference cities in Belgium. Young middleclass families came back, street criminality lowered with 84%, poverty went down.

During the European refugee crisis we explicitly "demanded" that we also could give shelter to refugees. We wanted to do "our part". This was an opposite approach in comparison to most of the other cities.

3. What are the main ingredients that made this possible

3.1. Take concerns about safety issues seriously and invest in fighting criminality. When people feel respected and safe in the public domain, they will be more open for change in society and will have less difficulties with diversity. In a globalizing city the basic rules of behavior towards our fellow citizen have to be more monitored. This approach it is not a right-wing policy but a social one for me. People in poorer neighborhoods are the first victims when crime rates rise.

3.2. Create a new narrative that embraces diversity and see it as the new normal. When a city identity is based on nostalgia of a faded monocultural past that's melting away, everybody will be frustrated. The newcomers will be because they are excluded, the original inhabitants because they are confronted with a loss. We have to rebuild a common identity where everybody has its place. This is generated by sometimes symbolic gestures but also by a policy that treats everybody as full citizens.

3.3. Avoid group-thinking. A city cannot be reduced to the sum of "(ethnic or cultural) communities", but exists in the first place out of individuals: unique people with not one but different identities. You can find group thinking at the left and at the right side of the political range. Classical left group thinking has the tendency to see victims and deprived in all migrants, classical right often sees only criminals or people who abuse the social system. They are both blind for a growing middle class

with a migrant background. The success stories don't fit in their rhetoric. And exactly these role models help social mobility, motivates new generations and take away negative prejudice.

3.4. Counter segregation. Cities are too often archipelagos of monocultural islands. The risk of such a city is that it locks people up in what often is a caricature of one identity. Moreover the others stay strangers instead of co-citizens. Mixed schools, sports clubs, neighborhoods strengthen possibilities of building a common identity. Local policies can make a difference here.

3.5. Accept that in times of globalization and migration we all have to do efforts to make a superdivers city a success. Step away from one way direction approaches. Have the courage to say that we all have to integrate in the new reality.

3.6. A society has to be built on common values, fundamental principles like equality of man and woman, rule of law, freedom of expression. But today too often these principles and universal human rights are transformed by some in a weapon to exclude or stigmatize people. Where they should function as a bridge for emancipation and freedom.

3.7. Understand that a divers city can be attractive to all if it can keep one promise to all: "if you work hard, use your talents and do your best, then you can conquer a better future for yourself and your family". This promise is the core of a meritocratic society: "not your background but your future is important". It can create cohesion, a profound feeling of citizenship and positive proudness of belonging to a society. Racism and discrimination are a threat to that promise, because it are irrational things that spoil talent and block people at the bottom of the social ladder. Racism - in other words - destroys the core of an open society and the attraction of our civilization. Those who speak the most about "western values" often minimalize these and in that way betray the values they proclaim to defend.

3.8. Create programs that help newcomers to learn the local language, find a job or an education and give them a better insight in the functioning of their new environment. Also buddy-projects and a fast track to sport- or cultural clubs can facilitate creating a network that helps to be successful.