

Speech by Mayor Jozias van Aartsen at the Conference on Migrants and Cities, 26 October 2015

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Anyone who opens a newspaper, watches the news on television or follows it on the Internet sees them every day: the large groups of migrants arriving in Europe on a daily basis aiming to continue their journey to the north. The end of this saga is not yet in sight.

Inevitably, many of these migrants will be heading for the big cities.

That's nothing new. Cities have always played an important role in the integration of migrants. Cities are social ladders. This is where many people obtain their first diploma in the history of their family. Cities offer more and greater opportunities for social mobility. That's why

That's why they attract so many people seeking a home. Migrants don't usually settle in rural communities: they are attracted to the big city. Also because they receive support from successful fellow countrymen who help them get on.

The city is important for migrants, but migrants are also important for the city. This is particularly the case when they bring qualities which the resident population do not possess, or not to a sufficient degree.

Knowledge can be such a quality. Chinese and Indian ICT experts and Polish tradesmen make an important contribution to the economy.

Orchestras, sports teams, universities and international institutions and companies reflect the world population and derive their strength and vitality from that cross fertilisation between cultures.

We not only need

We not only need top talents, but also young people who can take the jobs in cities which are left unfilled as a result of the shrinking and ageing population.

Cities are also doing a lot to help migrants, from a well understood sense of self-interest. They achieve a great deal. Many cities in

Northern and Western Europe, North America and Australia have seen the rapid emergence of an ethnic middle class which is having an increasing impact on the social, economic and political climate in the city. Important conditions for success are good and affordable access to education, for children *and* adults, and a flexible approach to cultural and religious diversity.

But many improvements

But many improvements can still be made. European and national legislation often unwittingly hinder integration. During the long asylum procedures, migrants are not allowed to work. Many years later when they are granted permission to stay in the host country, they have been out of employment for so long that in many cases they are doomed to a life of dependence. Diplomas obtained abroad are often not recognised in the host countries or are valued lower. Therefore it often takes far too long to find employment.

As a result of the wars in Syria, Iraq, Eritrea and other hotbeds, Europe faces a new influx of migrants. The cities need more facilities to offer all these people a future. This is not just a question of money, but also and particularly about making legislation more flexible.

So that it

So that it becomes possible to create jobs for people who do not yet have all their papers, but do have the skills and above all the willingness and enthusiasm to make something of their lives. Make it easier for young entrepreneurs to start up their own business. Give people the opportunity to work from the first day after their arrival. In recent years, we have witnessed the failure of our current system of accommodating asylum seekers and refugees. It is vital that they can start work fast. They can and want to do so. That is good for them and for the host nation.

Besides being able to work, there are two other matters that are supremely important for the proper integration of migrants. They must unequivocally accept the essence of a state under the rule of law.

And the separation

And the separation of church and state, the principle of secularism (what the French call 'laïcité') - the foundation on which our Western democracies are built.

Secondly: migrants must learn the language of their new homeland as quickly as possible. Perhaps, in this regard, we could learn from Israel, a country that can boast many years' experience of successful integration programmes and intensive language courses for the great numbers of people who have emigrated to Israel from around the world. Besides work, mastering the language is the master key to successful integration. Those who don't learn the language are condemned to the fringes of society and will hardly be able to make contact, or not at all. And it is this contact

And it is this contact with the population in their new country that is so important. A roof over your head, an income and safety is necessary, but not sufficient. People must feel welcome and valued.

Social initiatives are indispensable. Citizens working to help fellow citizens is an indispensable addition to government efforts.

This not only applies to newcomers, but also to the many who are caught between a rock and a hard place. Far too many people sit at home on benefits, seriously frustrated because they cannot fulfil their role as breadwinner or be an example for their children. Too many children grow up in a climate where inactivity is the norm. Too many people retreat into their own small worlds without meaningful relationships with people from outside their own ethnic or religious group.

They can and must

They can and must do something about this themselves, but society is also responsible for ensuring that people do not become isolated.

Time is running out; we must turn things around now. Whole-hearted acceptance of the basic principles of the rule of law, and being enabled to make a valuable contribution to all aspects of social, economic and cultural life. These are essential conditions for rapid integration with sustainable results.