

OECD Member States delegates, dearest people from the UN Agencies, representatives from civil society, the private sector and colleagues from local authorities

As an alderman or let's say alderwoman for equality and diversity I'm honored welcoming you on this interesting webinar – sharing some little reflections with you. Living in diversity is one of our key challenges in which we kind of succeed, but I must confess we still have a large path to follow. And thereby the grounds are in motion: never forget that we live in times of polarization and strong and intense global changes, where old receipts need to be adapted to new ingredients, to a new way of cooking – kitchen inclusive. We have an unique vision on living together in diversity and are roomed for our approach, but now we have to walk the talk and work on higher levels of participation, inclusion and social cohesion.

As you might already know, our small city Mechelen has a relative small but very diverse population. One on two new citizens has foreign roots, coming from 130 countries.

We share a rich past and a diverse future. Thereupon we are located between the capital and the port of Europe. Between Brussels and Antwerp – so three things about the future of Mechelen is clear to me: Mechelen will keep on changing, keep on welcoming different worldviews, keep on refreshing it's culture with new influences coming from anywhere in the entire world.

To, me as an actual alderman for diversity and equality, there is one thing that will remain constant in this flow of change: our main focus, as a city, will be on 'our community' – which is ONE community, an inclusive community that gathers all different individuals and groups who live in Mechelen. That is the community of our citizens – the people who stay at our ground.

People who sometimes have a background of 1, 2 or more generations living here, people who are new arrivals and even people who only have temporally plans or our even obliged to stay in our beautiful city – it does not matter. This starting point of equality is the main pillar on how we look at our citizens.

Cities are a ground for change and so is Mechelen. People who arrive here change, by accepting and adapting cultural values. But our city changes too, when we valorize the reciprocity of this process. Citizenship is a relation of reciprocity and that requires hospitality. And that is key in our approach. An approach wherein we not only give new arrivals a warm welcome, but we also try to activate new citizens to participate, to contribute, to share narratives. We also take care that this process can happen in a global discourse of respect, free from prejudices and discrimination.

Therefore I would like to share some little local reflections on some recommendations formulated in this webinar, on human mobility, migration and development. On how we manage the impact of migration, on how we promote our inclusive, safe and sustainable society in the context of urban hospitality of new arrivals.

- First we try to develop a positive discourse on migration in our city. We share for e.g. narratives about migrants coming to our city. On how they bring spice and colour to our culture, on how we can see similarities in their history and cultural luggage. These narratives also have an inclusive nature. We share a website with our citizens named "De Mensen Maken De Stad", translated: "our citizens make our city". By sharing stories from people with a different background, but with similar issues we introduce a kind of universalism, a kind of openness, a local culture that tends to sophistication.

- Another example in how we show hospitality is in the way we organize our local refugee shelter. Our city not only facilitates this shelter, together with the Red Cross, but we also provide a coordinator. A coordinator who facilitates initiatives who grow bottom up. Initiatives taken by engaged civil groups individuals (like Welcome in Mechelen) or the refugees themselves. The coordinator also organizes activities to bridge these refugees to our public life, our social cultural and school offer. The refugees can follow lessons in dutch from day one. Have the refugees participate in activities, classes and volunteering. They must feel accepted as full-fledged citizens, although their stay is only temporal.
- We are convinced that learning the local language is key in the process of migration. It's the main key to develop further skills and access to employment. Therefore we invest in partnerships with engaged citizens, like welcome in Mechelen and expert organisations concerning migration – we also take care of the psychological wellbeing of these people, who often are traumatized or had to cope with sustained stress.
- My last reflection concerns COVID 19. The worldwide impact was and is still huge and is an enormous stress test on our policy. But I would say: never waste a good crisis. In Mechelen we learned some crystal clear lessons, for e.g. the importance of language accessibility, clear communication and the role of ethnic-cultural organizations/key en brigde figures to transmit this communication. It's a disease of our age – but as a government we also have to deal with the consequences of fake news and impact of social media. We now start to see unemployment rates rise, we also see «hidden» poverty to become visible, because some organizations were closed due to covid-19.
- But we also saw, and that was heartwarming to me, an overwhelming solidarity during the lockdown. Many citizens from all kind of origin volunteered to take on care tasks.

Hereby I would like to express my appreciation for the hard work done by IncluCities. It is from high importance that we bridge the gap in the necessary human and financial resources, knowledge and experience by learning from do's and don'ts. Thanks to IncluCities our cities can contribute to the development of improved EU policies on migration that better reflect local needs and realities.

My dearest colleagues, when we talk about our vision on inclusive society, we can only face the future if we share knowledge. I'm glad this platform of solidarity exists, that we can keep on inspiring each other – that we can translate recommendations in actions – to make our city, our world a better place.

Thank you!