# Conference proceedings



# Conference for mayors, councillors, experts and civil servants 'Local government approaches to diversity'

Informal meeting

19 April 2024

Conference Centre Lamot - Mechelen, Belgium

# Content

The Agency for Home Affairs of the Government of Flanders invited mayors and representatives of local governments in the EU and beyond to the conference "Local Government Approaches to Diversity" on April 19, 2024, in Mechelen, within the framework of the Belgian EU Presidency.

Today, our continent is more diverse than ever. This is due to the world's growing globalisation, which has reduced distances and led to increased mobility. Hundreds of thousands of newcomers arrive in Europe every year. As a result, Europe now has a population of 450 million, representing every nationality in the world. Europe embodies a broader spectrum of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as religious and philosophical beliefs, than ever before.

This increased diversity offers opportunities but also presents challenges. Municipalities have developed a range of initiatives and policies to address these challenges and build on the opportunities. The conference brought together these insights to learn from each other, exchange best practices, and explore how European local authorities can collaborate.



The conference presented inspirational initiatives, policies, and methods from Flanders and abroad. Participating local government representatives chose from a range of:

o   Plenary sessions that involved conversation and discussion between representatives of local governments and global experts on local diversity policies.
o   Parallel sessions, including workshops on city-to-city mentoring, network and buddy projects, language acquisition, e-inclusion and communication strategies, alongside bystander training and collective impact training sessions.
o   Site visits in Mechelen, which highlighted inspirational local initiatives fostering efforts to live together in diversity.

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT APPROACHES TO DIVERSITY

Conference for mayors, councillors, experts and civil servants

| | CENTRAL HALL | AUDITORIUM — AUDITORIUM SESSIONS | DIJLEZAAL — PARALLEL SESSIONS | BEGIJNENZOLDER — PARALLEL SESSIONS | HERTEN AAS — PARALLEL SESSIONS | VISITS — SITE VISIT IN MECHELEN | VISITS — SITE VISIT IN MECHELEN | CENTRAL HALL |
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| 8:00 | | | | | | | | |
| 9:00 | **Registration** 08:15 - 09:00 | | | | | | | |
| 10:00 | **Exhibition: Urban renewal is human work** 09:00 - 17:00 | **Welcoming remarks** 09:00 - 10:15 | | | | | | |
| 11:00 | | **Local governments: leading the charge for diversity policy** 10:15 - 12:00 | **City-to-city mentoring** 10:15 - 12:00 | **Inclusive communication in diversity** 10:15 - 12:00 | **Bystander training** 10:15 - 12:00 | **Mechelen, an inclusive city: a guided audio city tour** 10:15 - 12:00 | **Sport and prevention of radicalisation (theory session)** 10:15 - 12:00 | |
| 12:00 | | | | | | | | **Lunch** 12:00 - 13:00 |
| 13:00 | | **Addressing polarisation in diverse cities** 13:00 - 14:45 | **"Plan Living Together": supporting local efforts towards inclusion and diversity** 13:00 - 14:45 | **Language acquisition outside the classroom– good practices of non-formal adult learning** 13:00 - 14:45 | **Mentoring for labour market integration, lifelong learning, and stronger connections - Inspiration from practitioners** 13:00 - 14:45 | **Mechelen, an inclusive city: a guided audio city tour** 13:00 - 14:45 | | |
| 14:00 | | | | | | | | |
| 15:00 | | | | | | | | **Coffee break** 14:45 - 15:15 |
| 16:00 | | **Building diverse and inclusive cities: the role of architecture** 15:15 - 17:00 | **Beyond paper: the "Fellow Citizen" Project on diversity in city organisations** 15:15 - 17:00 | **Empowering newcomers through social integration and networking initiatives** 15:15 - 17:00 | **Introduction to the Collective Impact Model** 15:15 - 17:00 | **Language practice boat tour** 15:15 - 17:00 | **Sport and prevention of radicalisation (practical session)** 15:15 - 17:00 | |
| 17:00 | | **Conclusions of the day** 17:00 - 17:10 | | | | | | **Reception** 17:10 - 18:00 |

# 1. Auditorium sessions

The conference commenced with addresses from three distinguished speakers. **Gwendolyn Rutten**, Vice-Minister-President of the Government of Flanders and Flemish Minister for Home Affairs, Public Governance, Civic Integration and Equal Opportunities, opened the conference, briefly noting recent policy developments in Flanders regarding living together in diversity, with special attention to Plan Samenleven *(Plan Living Together)*. **Jeroen Windey**, Administrator-General of the Agency for Home Affairs of the Government of Flanders, presented the Agency's close collaboration with Flemish cities and municipalities regarding their efforts to make cities more liveable and socially cohesive. **Ylva Johansson,** European Commissioner for Home Affairs, concluded the opening session with a video message, talking about the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, highlighting the central role of local governments in implementing the Pact's rules and thereby contributing local efforts of solidarity and responsibility.

The following sections of this document include detailed reports on panel discussions, in-depth sessions, and workshops organised throughout the conference. We want to thank everyone who contributed their knowledge and expertise to this event and look forward to future joint ventures.

## *Local governments: leading the charge for diversity policy*

Mayors and local government leaders explored how cities and municipalities can spearhead inclusive change. They shared their insights into the vital role cities can play in shaping diversity policies and discuss why they must be central to policy planning for inclusivity. This panel highlighted strategies and initiatives that showcase the central role of local leadership for the future of diversity policy.

**André Sobczak, Secretary General of Eurocities**, kicked off the first auditorium session with a setting-the-scene statement on the work of Eurocities. Eurocities **represents and supports its members in the network, which spans over 200 cities and represents more than 135 million people, in matters of integration and inclusion**. Recognising the challenges presented by recent crises, which in turn feed a rise in inequalities and populism furthering hostilities and neglect towards vulnerable groups in societies, Eurocities continues to advocate for collaboration between EU member states and cities to foster diversity and inclusion. **A week after the New Pact on Migration and Asylum was adopted by the European Parliament**, Eurocities called for monitoring the outcomes and for continuing the call for adjusted EU funding towards local governments. Local governments are crucial actors in upholding EU values for *everyone* in their cities, and implementing and sustaining successful integration and inclusion programmes. While such efforts take place on the local level, partnership across the EU can harness resources, expertise, and networks. Such collaborative efforts are crucial in supporting the development of vibrant communities in which everyone thrives, regardless of their background.

In the run-up to the European elections, the network of over 200 member cities called for EU action in the **new statement on 'A better inclusion of migrants in cities and bridging divides to make integration work for all'**. The statement calls for: monitoring the outcomes of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum; upholding the universal right to asylum and ensuring equal access to protection for all refugees; providing clarity on the future of temporary protection for Ukrainians in Europe; and mainstreaming migration and integration across different EU policy fields. Furthermore, Eurocities calls for adjustments in EU funding towards cities: cities must have more access to EU funding through national authorities, to directly address local needs; EU funding should be available to sustain and enhance existing programmes that have demonstrated their effectiveness *and* to newly developed innovative solutions to emerging challenges; funding programmes should focus on medium to long term integration measures, as integration requires sustained and gradual support.

The first panel was joined by **Gwendolyn Rutten, Deputy-Minister-President of the Government of Flanders and Minister of Home Affairs, Integration, Civic Integration, and Equal Opportunities**, and likewise **Mayor of Aarschot** (Belgium). From her experience, not only as Mayor but also as the Minister responsible for local governance, she shared how the Government of Flanders has supported its municipalities over recent years. It became increasingly apparent that Flemish municipalities experienced difficulties in developing integration and diversity policies. As the local level was being faced with new societal challenges, like unequal opportunities, discrimination, segregation, etc., the hardships of bureaucracy in policy planning were revealed, as well as the time and efforts local actors were (repeatedly) required to make to apply for regional grants. Furthermore, there was no coherent policy framework or streamlining across the region of Flanders in matters of social

cohesion and inclusion. To adequately address this, the Government of Flanders developed a horizontal plan for equal opportunity and integration which aims to: offer a coherent policy framework; streamline fragmented subsidies; combat new societal issues; and offer capacity building to the local level. The **'Plan Samenleven'** *(Plan Living Together)* is a project that runs for three years. It supports local authorities to promote living together in diversity. The Plan contains 7 objectives with 24 actions, which cities and municipalities can implement themselves. Local, for everyone, with a minimum of planning burden, with **the local actors in the driver's seat**. This plans extends the focus on newcomers, and incorporates matters of diversity and living together across different groups and intersections of diversity, to cover all parts of society. A central component of this plan is **social mixing (contact hypothesis)**, arguing that challenges in living together and social cohesion can be best addressed and overcome through intergroup contact.

A more recent initiative is the reform of the Flemish Civic Integration Programme. Formerly, the programme already consisted of three pillars, i.e. social orientation (courses about housing and work in Belgium), Dutch language course, and pathways to employment. More recently, **a fourth pillar was added: social participation** (engaging in voluntary work, work placement or buddy projects). Additionally, **Plan Turbo is envisioning a deepened focus on the pillar of pathways to employment**. The Plan proposes ten action points to support labour market integration, including for instance: strengthening language learning opportunities in the workplace; higher level Dutch for medium and highly educated people; or actions to fight discrimination in the workplace.

In terms of labour market integration, Minister Rutten called for **particular attention to labour market integration of newcomer women**. Numbers reveal that this group have a lesser knowledge of Dutch, have less social contacts, and are hard to reach. An additional challenge is that this group is less inclined to call for heightened support in pathways to employment. Consequently, policymakers both at the regional and local level, should develop a specific groups for this group.



**Jens-Kristian Lütken, Mayor of Employment and Integration of Copenhagen** (Denmark) shared some of the challenges with which the city is being faced. One of the problems he highlighted is situated on a cultural level, as communities are segregated, which creates parallel societies in the cities. An important strategy includes social mixing and working towards mixed neighbourhoods. The city argues that the central government should take a clearer stance on migration and integration policies; expectations must be precise and coherent, but leave room for **direct action towards addressing particularities and differences in background**. National governments should state their views on living together, on norms and values. Within such frameworks, local government actors can take more effective and sustainable action. A factor that supports the city of Copenhagen as well, is its city-to-city mentoring and **collaboration with municipalities both within *and* outside national borders**, with reference to, for instance, its cooperation with the city of Malmö.

Similarly, **Erik Pelling, Mayor of Uppsala** (Sweden), discussed the value of social mixing in his city. As Uppsala is faced with issues of unemployment, criminality, and segregation, it is of utmost importance to avoid parallel living, and to bring people together on a daily basis. Social mixing offers a strategy to desegregate the population, and to **create and foster mixed neighbourhoods.** Education, he argued, plays a great role in heightening social cohesion and involvement of all citizens: the current school system partly strengthens segregation, as it offers not enough attention to the different backgrounds and particular contexts people live in. Mayor Pelling addresses, for instance, the social isolation of women who take care of young children at home. As in many other cities in Europe, there are less women with a foreign background than men with a foreign background in the labour market. **Reforming the school system, including the childcare system**, is a central part of addressing such problems, and to foster social cohesion.

Whereas combatting segregation and fostering cohesion can be dealt with through local strategies, the city of Uppsala underlined the **call for more EU attention to efforts made by cities and municipalities**. For some of Uppsala's projects, e.g. initiatives on housing or projects supporting single mothers through labour market integration, EU support has been crucial. The possibility to experiment on the local level with EU funds, or to collaborate through EU projects, has opened doors of policymaking and planning for the city.

Much like Copenhagen and Uppsala, **Thanassis Chimonas, Deputy Mayor of Integration of Migrants and Refugees of Athens** (Greece), explained the city's strategy to deal with adequate and affordable housing, for which cities do not, as of yet, receive EU support. On a more general level, cities and municipalities in Greece are struggling with the lack of local competencies and leverage in matters of migration, integration, and social inclusion. It is of utmost importance that a robust strategy is developed on the national level, in which **more attention should be granted to the role, expertise and influence of cities and municipalities vis-à-vis their citizens**. They should be involved and consulted, and should receive room and tools for developing and sustaining local, even bottom-up, integration strategy. One way in which the city is trying to bypass the difficulties posed by the lack of local agency, is through cooperative networks. For instance, they **work closely together with UNHCR and IOM**, who have been supporting the operation of the Athens Coordination Centre for Migrants and Refugees (ACCMR) and the Cities Network for Integration (CNI).



Anita Vella, Head of Unit of 'Legal Pathways and Integration' in DG HOME of the European Commission presented the EU perspective on the matters discussed in this panel. She addressed the challenge of multiplying legal pathways to the EU. Guiding people to employment in cities and municipalities is, as addressed by the represented cities in this panel, a big challenge. Though they represent big cities in Europe, the panel noted that challenges are increasingly taking place in medium- and small-sized municipalities as well. DG HOME is granting particular attention to the merits of pre-departure training, but noted that language preparation as equally important. The EU has particular interest in funding approaches that address pre-departure preparation.

Furthermore, the European Commission's **Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027)** was discussed. The Action Plan delineates some key parameters across the European Union and demonstrates the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach at the core. As integration is not a binding EU competency, the Action Plan is a crucial tool in advocating for the rollout of integration and inclusion policies with continued EU support and funding.

Having experienced the arrival of newcomers only fairly recently, mostly with Ukrainians refugees, **Simona Bieliūnė, Deputy Mayor of Vilnius** (Lithuania), shared how the city addressed changing circumstances and new societal challenges. She explained that it had been difficult to identify, understand, and address the particular needs of specific groups. For instance, failure to recognise some differences in norms and values has proven to increase societal tensions and exclusion from society. Because of this, Vilnius has sought ways to **raise awareness in society, remove insecurities and ignorance, and ensure that everyone feels involved in city life**. As many of the strategies and projects in the city were developed and implemented in recent years, Vilnius has had to balance between a need for ad-hoc solutions to emerging crises, as well as envisioning a long-term perspective. The city has launched a number of initiatives, which are currently monitored and assessed, in order for them to become part of a broader strategy which sets the course for the city's future of living together in diversity.

One of Vilnius' focus points includes **language policy**. Especially in the context of the war in Ukraine, many refugees have fled to the city. Recent numbers have shown a large interest in learning Lithuanian, especially as perspectives of return to Ukraine are changing, and as people are consequently valuing more highly the importance of integrating, both for societal as for professional purposes. The city has offered free language courses, as they have been proven to be highly successful. **Not only language acquisition, but also language coordination in the city's social services** is crucial. For this, Vilnius has strengthened collaborations with NGOs and other local and international partners. The city now wants to further expand the services and make them more flexible.

As the second largest city in the country, **Espoo** (Finland) hopes to learn from comparable cities or cities in comparable situations (such as Copenhagen or Uppsala, see above), **Mayor Jukka Mäkelä** explained. About 25 per cent of the city's population are newcomers. Because of this, the city has sought to develop, inspired by other large cities across Europe, a strategy on 'living together in peace'. For this, the city directly consulted the insights and needs of its citizens, offering the possibility to actively hear and incorporate values and expectations. This strategy is created with a long-term perspective and grounded in sustainability on the local level, *but* leaves room for ad-hoc adjustments and answers to emerging crises. Furthermore, the city strategy recognises the importance of working together with partners: other cities, but also specific collaboration with universities and private companies. Mayor Mäkelä expressed his hopes to see city-to-city mentoring and cooperation expanded in the coming years.

One of the main challenges in Finland is labour market integration according to the mayor. Traditionally, **well-being has been the focus and priority of Finnish integration policy**. But **the role of international experts and talents in securing the vitality** of the innovation community and the business life is receiving more and more attention. Espoo is a forerunner in this shift. This also allows for a more positive framing of questions of immigration and integration. The city aims to increase international talents' participation **from *light* to *intensive* participation in its broad and diverse service portfolio**. (For more information on Espoo's approach in international talent development and labour market integration, see the summary of 'Mentoring for labour market integration, lifelong learning, and stronger connections - Inspiration from practitioners' in this report).

The **Mayor of Fuenlabrada** (Spain), **Francisco Javier Ayala Ortega,** presented the strong commitment of its city to pioneer innovative social policies to strengthen social cohesion. He emphasised the importance of European support in exploring and implementing strategies. Fuenlabrada is very active in several networks and European initiatives, such as Must-a-Lab (funded by AMIF) focusing on the development of inclusive methodologies for local inclusion strategies, the Anti-Rumors network, and the SHARE project, focusing on housing needs.

Slightly contrary to the experiences with social mixing in the cities noted above, **Faouzi Achbar, Deputy Mayor of Rotterdam** (the Netherlands) explained how this strategy has not been as successful in the city. You cannot "create' social cohesion from nothing, he argued, so directly bringing in mixed neighbourhoods might not be the answer. The city instead opts for a living together plan, which departs from addressing discrimination first, and which backs grass-root initiatives. The city addressed each theme one by one – e.g. which groups are being discriminated on the basis of a disability -, often via roundtable discussions. By **listening to the citizens and taking a bottom-up approach**, people can be directly involved in the creation of the city's diversity and inclusion strategies. The Deputy Mayor noted that, when facilitating such discussions and listening to the people themselves, we should be attentive to the **integration paradox**.



In a local look towards the future, the city of Rotterdam hoped to see two developments. Firstly, in the context of the arrival and protection of Ukrainian refugees, cities and municipalities have shown their humanity and solidarity in the reception and consequent (seemingly smooth and successful) integration of Ukrainians into society. For instance, providing housing happened quickly and was stimulated on the European and national level. The Deputy Mayor wished to see these **initiatives and solidarity not only continued, but also expanded to and shared with all minorities, regardless of their background**. Secondly, there should be **more diversity within city organisations**. City boards, councils, administration etc. should be an example for and representation of society.

## *Addressing polarisation in diverse cities*

Experts, Mayors and local government leaders joined this panel to discuss how to address polarisation in diverse societies. They shared collaborative approaches and interventions actionable by cities and municipalities to bridge divides and foster unity, and present insights into the opportunities and complexities of social cohesion strategies in polarisation.



**Dr Roger Berkowitz, founder and academic director of the Hannah Arendt Center** at Bard College in New York opened the second auditorium session with a setting-the-scene speech by. The first panel brought together representation from municipalities in Europe: **Richard Arnold, Mayor of Schwäbisch Gmünd** (Germany); **Mayor Angel Dzhorgov and Deputy Mayor Lyuba Klenova of the municipality of Samokov** (Bulgaria); **Amani Loubani, Deputy Mayor of Malmö** (Sweden); and **Ieva Silina, city councillor of Riga** (Latvia) and vice-chairwoman of the Education, Culture and Sports Committee. The second panel included Dr Roger Berowitz, **Marise Habib, Chief of Mission for Belgium and Luxembourg at IOM**, and **Menno Ettema, Head of the Speech, Hate Crime, and Artificial Intelligence Unit within the Inclusion and Anti-Discrimination Programmes Division, of the Directorate of Equal Rights and Dignity at the Council of Europe**. Below are the key takeaways of these discussions.

Polarisation is not something to be feared. Instead it is part of the human plurality and should not simply be eradicated. If **polarisation is not the problem, whereas the political engagement and distrust** is, then we should work on that issue instead. Politics should try to look for a shared basis that is supported by society, achieved with a bottom-up approach. This way we can work on restoring trust in the government, institutions, law etc.

There is a **difference between factual beliefs and symbolic beliefs**. People with symbolic beliefs usually can revert back to factual beliefs when they are expected to. Unless people with symbolic beliefs refuse to go back to factual beliefs when needed, these symbolic beliefs are not to be considered problematic. According to certain studies there are a number of negative consequences that are linked to a more diverse society. **They say that the more diverse a society is, the less trust there is in the government; the less trust there is in each other or in social institutions; the less engagement there is in society**. It is important to not deny these findings but to work on these issues of distrust and keep them in mind while working on approaches to diversity. **Local governments play a critical role in combatting negative and harmful polarisation**. After all, the local level is where the social melting pot is being formed and where people from all different social groups interact with each other. It is important to create and provide a safe public space where these social interactions are made possible.

The panel discussed this link between increased diversity and lessened trust and societal engagement. Mayor Arnold of Schwäbisch Gmünd, for instance, argued that he does not believe this has to be the case. Instead, the increased diversity in the municipality has heightened societal engagement, through **active involvement and dialogue between the municipality and newcomers**. For example, the newcomers were actively involvement in local projects, and along with them, local government actors drafted a charter.

Deputy Mayor Loubani of Malmö shared how the city has sought ways to avoid this distrust in the government or lack of engagement. Indeed, the increased diversity has urged the city and its people to envision new ways of interaction. For instance, Deputy Mayor Loubani believes in **the power of cultural heritage to combat polarisation**. If used in the wrong ways, i.e. by creating ideas of multiple – distinct and parallel – cultural heritages, policymakers risk focusing too heavily on the identity of people, and specifically the differences between them. Instead, cultural heritage, and its shared elements among all citizens, can combat polarisation and foster social cohesion and a sense of belonging, in turn contributing to (the recovery of) political trust and engagement.

## *Building diverse and inclusive cities: the role of architecture*

Mayors and local government leaders delve into the pivotal role of architecture and the built environment in strengthening inclusion and diversity policies within cities and municipalities. They joined the panel discussion to explore innovative strategies to create inclusive spaces through urban planning and architectural design, to foster a sense of belonging for all residents.

The panel included **Jens-Kristian Lütken, Mayor of Employment and Integration of Copenhagen** (Denmark), **Silke Beirens, Deputy Mayor of Oostende** (Belgium); **Jean-Marie Jans, Deputy Mayor of Bettembourg** (Luxembourg); and **Anne McTaggart, Councillor and City Convener for Communities and Equalities of Glasgow** (United Kingdom). Below are the key takeaways of these discussions.



Traditionally, architectural priorities leaned heavily towards industry-centric living conditions. However, recognising the evolving needs of communities, there's a crucial shift towards community-centred architecture. Central to this transition is the cultivation of robust communities, which must be integral to urban planning efforts. Therefore, **community building intertwines with urban development, steering away from industry-centric models**. Instead of pigeonholing architects into their traditional roles, consider integrating them into multidisciplinary teams. This means both incorporating non-architects into traditionally focused teams as incorporating architects into traditionally non-architects teams. City development must go hand in hand with community building, therefore experts on both aspects must be in the same team. Architects sometimes overlook the fact that people will *inhabit* these areas. **To make living spaces truly liveable, they must incorporate social amenities** such as schools, bars, and kindergartens. People do not only sleep and work.Furthermore, geographical features, like railways dividing a city, can create social divides. A comprehensive masterplan involving multiple projects can address these divisions and promote inclusivity.

A cornerstone of city planning includes ensuring **accessibility for all**. Public spaces, including beaches, should be readily accessible to everyone. **If certain isolated residential areas exist, societal divisions inevitably arise.** Intervening in private projects becomes imperative to foster inclusivity, such as by opening rooftop parks to the public. This fosters social interaction and, consequently, cohesion within communities. When embracing accessibility for all, this also should include a feminist perspective. Many constructions have been historically designed by men, for men. Adopting a feminist viewpoint allows us to create cities that are friendly and inclusive for everyone.

In developing new urban areas, mere space allocation falls short. Instead, **embrace a systematic, socially representative approach by individually engaging stakeholders**. This ensures diverse representation and enhances decision-making quality. Relying solely on structural committees for advice risks excluding certain voices. While these committees hold significance, diversifying input methodologies, like incorporating children's perspectives through drawings, ensures broader representation.

Clean, safe cities serve as the bedrock for progress. Establishing such fundamentals sets the stage for promoting respect, both towards one another and the environment. Through this ethos of respect, positive societal transformations naturally ensue.

The issue of housing is one that concerns municipalities all over Europe. **Rather than viewing social housing as an obligation, we should recognise it as an opportunity**. Many existing social housing units require renovation, which presents a chance to incorporate climate-friendly features, enhance social cohesion, and create green spaces. This can be seen as pioneer projects for bigger future urban projects. One effective approach to promote affordable housing is by **mandating project developers that a certain percentage of housing units are affordable**. It is essential to consider housing preferences of people—



whether they want to buy or rent—and create a robust market for affordable options based on their preferences. Also important to note is that, while living in a big city is desirable for many, it is not a right. The challenge lies in ensuring that not everyone is concentrated in urban centres, especially in smaller regions. Instead of solely focusing on big cities, we should **invest in regional cohesion and efficient transportation across the entire area.**

**Higher support makes a difference**: both the accessibility of funds and other types of support from a higher level (European, national and/or regional) is crucial. Here it is important that these higher levels of government do not take the lead; they need to support the local government who has the director role.

## *The future of local diversity and inclusion governance*

Local government leaders delve into the evolving landscape of diversity and inclusion within cities and municipalities. Emphasising the crucial role of the local level, this panel not only explores current strategies and initiatives but also envisions the trajectory of local leadership in shaping the future of diversity policy.

In this last auditorium session of the day, **Bart Somers, Mayor of Mechelen** (Belgium), **Andriy Sadovyi, Mayor of Lviv** (Ukraine), **Rutger Groot Wassink, Deputy Mayor of Amsterdam** (the Netherlands), and **Ayşe Özbabacan, Deputy Director of the Integration Department of Stuttgart** (Germany) joined the panel. Below are the key takeaways of these discussions.

Our challenge lies in **overcoming segregation and fostering a sense of community**. To achieve this, we must aspire to be one cohesive whole in municipalities all over Europe. The panel discussed some elements that would be crucial to achieve this.

Europe is facing **demographic changes** with a rapidly aging population and low birth rates. This will have significant social and economic consequences: think of health care, social services, labour market demands, social housing, high public expenditures. Europe needs migrant workers. Local governments should be at the forefront of addressing these changes, and preparing sustainable policies as we enter the second half of this decade. History teaches us that **a robust middle class stabilises society**. To combat poverty, we must invest in social programmes and believe in social mobility. Integrating newcomers offers potential in terms of combatting labour shortages. **Failing to utilise this potential and solving the labour shortage frustrates both migrants and society as a whole**. Let newcomers actively participate in integration trajectories. Involve them in shaping policies for labour market activation: they want to integrate and know the best what obstacles they face to do so. In this, local governments should at all times be prepared for sudden changes or even **crisis situations**, much like has happened throughout the past few years (e.g. Covid-19 pandemic leading to loss of work and housing). Considering the tremendous impact such contexts could bring in terms of social vulnerability and social cohesion, local governments should prepare for adaptability, flexibility, and sustainability.



Another challenge to counter in the coming years is **the threat of far-right ideologies.** Far-right ideologies threaten social cohesion on the basis of fantasies. Finding solutions is crucial to prevent societal fractures. Our perspective shapes acceptance or resistance. **Freedom and adaptability are the bedrock of our society.** Embracing change is needed to preserve our traditions. In doing so, we should always avoid two extremes: neither criminalising migrants nor victimising them is the solution. **Key is to approach them as individuals and to see their talents, strengths, challenges, weaknesses and opportunities.**

# 2. Parallel sessions

## *City-to-city mentoring*

This session shared experiences and lessons learned from European, regional and a combination of European and regional initiatives of city-to-city mentoring. Questions included: How can cities take on a mentoring role? What support is needed? Which actors can play a (supporting) role? How can we secure and unlock the knowledge and experience? What are the preconditions? How to deal with the great diversity of cities and municipalities in terms of capacity and resources? This session was coordinated by **Vereniging van Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten** (VVSG, *the Association of Flemish cities and municipalities).*From the various experiences of city-to-city mentoring, the coordinators gathered and formulated some recommendations for the EU and the central governments.

Sharing insights into the guidelines of their mentor guide, VVSG provided a brief discussion of city-to-city mentoring. Based on the **peer mentoring relationship**, city-to-city mentoring is a powerful method for tailored and informal support from mentors for mentees. It creates a protected space to talk about professional challenges; enables development; and allows partners to work on a goal-oriented basis, towards clear objectives and change. Usually, it lends itself well to partners with a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship. **Mentors should listen and understand, share their own experiences (successes and failures), and help determine next steps.** It should *not* be interpreted as a form of professional or legal advice; training or formation; counselling or therapy; or trying to solve mentee problems. The guidelines for mentors include the following suggestions: defining a common ground and thematic benchmark; preparing the process (analysis, matching, training, engaging stakeholders); and the mentoring process itself (work visits, regular contact, action plans). All aspects of this process are subject to expectations from both mentors and mentees – the process is not a 'one size fits all'. Furthermore, it **highly depends on the context in which it is situated (e.g. transnational, regional, national mentoring)**, and on commonalities and differences in institutional frameworks and (migratory) backgrounds that these contexts bring forth. Here, note was taken of the fact that smaller municipalities often do not participate in networks, or they do to a lesser extent, because of budget and capacity considerations. VVSG advices associations to actively take steps to represent such municipalities in networks and (European) projects.

Providing an example of **transnational city-to-city mentoring initiatives,** the session presented the **IncluCities** project. IncluCities aims to strengthen small and medium-sized cities in terms of integration of third-country nationals through cooperation between European cities. The project is led by CEMR (Council of European Municipalities and Regions) and supported by the AMIF. **Eight cities (four mentors and four mentees) and their umbrella organisations of cities and municipalities, with different experience, knowledge and expertise in the field of local integration policy, participate and enter into a mentoring process with each other**. This includes the city of **Mechelen** in partnership with the **VVSG**. They are mentoring **Capaci** (Sicily) and the **Italian Association of Cities and Municipalities** (AICCRE). Their mentoring relationship has resulted in an action plan, which includes a 'long-term action plan' to start building a vision of a city-for-all by involving stakeholders, and an action plan project, which aims to reach and engage various communities in Capaci through a pilot project on buddying. Mechelen presented some challenges that were revealed throughout this mentoring experience, such as the language barrier, differences in organisational structures; availability of resources (e.g. staff, funds); dependency on

political support and national discourse on migration. Also, they found that **in mentoring at the transnational level, it may be challenging to identify a common ground** (e.g. a common history, budget, legal provisions, similarity of approaches), whereas national or regional mentoring projects are confronted with such obstacles to a lesser extent. Other noteworthy European examples are, for instance, the Urban Agenda Partnership on Inclusion; the European Coalition of Cities against Racism; and the Global Forum on Migration and Development (Mayors Mechanism).

Highlighting examples of **regional mentoring initiatives**, the session discussed how city-to-city mentoring takes place in Flanders' **Plan Samenleven** *(Plan Living Together).* Plan Samenleven is a project that runs for three years and through which the Government of Flanders wants to support local authorities to promote living together in diversity. The Plan contains 7 objectives with 24 actions, which cities and municipalities can implement themselves. VVSG revealed that for some of the 24 action points, **a number of Flemish cities and municipalities have put themselves forth as a mentors for other municipalities**. For instance, the city of Oostende is a mentor for the action points on entrepreneurship

 guidance, and on guidance to employment by mentors. For another action, the action point on improving social cohesion in social housing estates, Oostende was actually the mentee, guided by mentor city Mechelen. In order to qualify as a mentor in the Plan, cities are expected to organise a minimum of two learning networks; to bring local governments together; to propose and share methodologies and tools; and to make this mentoring accessible for every other municipality (even those not currently participating in the actions of the Plan). For 9 of the 24 action points, there is currently no mentor city. However, VVSG has taken on the role to provide mentoring to ensure that expertise and experiences are shared with mentees.

Lastly, the session presented a **European (and regional) level mentoring initiative**, with the **EMMA project: Evaluation and Mentoring of Multi-Agency approaches to violent radicalisation**. EMMA is a European ISF-P project coordinated by VVSG with the goal of strengthening multi-agency structures within the approach to violent radicalisation in three participating countries, i.e. Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. VVSG does this in cooperation with Ghent University, RadarAdvies (NL) and the Violence Prevention Network. The project involves a **comprehensive process evaluation based on two central pillars: an academic evaluation and a practical based mentoring** trajectory to combine scientific evidence and practical knowhow. VVSG's experience with European (and regional) level initiatives have produced some lessons learned. For instance, different needs and paces require different formats of mentoring, e.g. networking, exchange, in-depth advice, topical input, peer-to-peer meetings, bilaterals, international platforms, etc.

## Inclusive communication in diversity

In this session hosted by the **Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering** *(AgII, Agency for Integration and Civic Integration)* of Flanders, participants identified key elements of inclusive communication by analyzing case studies. In smaller groups, participants exchanged thoughts and experiences, and linked them to the cases. By pinpointing the crucial elements or areas needing more attention in our communication skills, we hope to find solutions more easily. The session pointed out that in our superdiverse society, we must be mindful of the variety of perspectives. **Our communication will only achieve its goal if we pay attention to the people we want to reach**. Do we know who we want to address? Are we aware of our own stereotypes and assumptions about others? Is our communication necessary only to provide information, or are we aiming to build a sustainable connection between our citizens?

One of the key takeaways is the **importance of language**. Terminology and communication choices matter in influencing public perception. Identifying appropriate language seems to be a struggle. This is partly due to the mismatch in legal terminology vis-à-vis everyday language and the use of words in various municipalities. Furthermore, the language does not always correspond with the preferred terms in project applications.

**Flanders** opted for the term *newcomer* because of its positive connotation and prefers it over terms such as *refugees* or *asylum seekers. Newcomers*, or simply the connection to something being 'new', is more easily perceived as a positive contribution to society. Identity is multi-layered, and the term leaves room for that. **Austria** made the decision to refrain from talking about *migration background*. Instead, they now use *migration biography*. The decision was made due to the negative connotation linked to *background*, and the idea that *background* can provide a more defining, perhaps even geographical, value to the term. In **Finland**, they use term *international talent*, with the departments being referred to as *international talent services*. They actively take out references to *immigrants* or *immigration* or *third-country nationals*. They do note, however, that this often poses a challenge when applying for EU-funded projects, where the legal terminology is required.

This discussion was concluded through an exercise by sharing thoughts and linking them to AgII's own communication toolbox, **OpenBlik**. AgII works on five pillars, one of which is 'living together and language', through which they provide advice and support for local authorities and organisations. **OpenBlik** is a platform where you can find various exercises and tools that can be used to develop inclusive communication strategies, developed for local authorities. They focus on language, socio-cultural connection, and participation. In the context of this session, their main concern is **how to reach a diverse group of participants when we communicate to our local residents**. According to the toolbox, three elements should be present for an inclusive communication: **awareness** (Who is your audience or target group?); **communication** (How does your audience or target group think and reason? Through which channels will this communication be shared? Which words and images will you use?); and lastly, **opportunity to encounter** (How to actually get to know each other, with the aim of increasing the feeling of collective belonging but also your awareness and understanding of 'the other'?).

Good practices were presented by the cities of **Diest (Belgium)** and **Stuttgart (Germany)**.

Growing diversity in the city of **Diest (Belgium)** necessitates inclusive communication strategies. They underline the need to understand both concepts: **diversity** (recognising

various cultural, gender, age, religious, and other differences) and **inclusion** (addressing, involving and representing diverse groups, also in communication). The **four principles of inclusivity** according to Diest are: determine your target audience effectively; avoid narrow perspectives (broaden inclusivity); accessibility, recognition, and understanding; and working toward the ultimate goal of **positive, stereotype-free, authentic communication.** A number of elements that should be taken into account in such communication, is attention to intersectionality, digitisation (and careful management of traditional and non-traditional media), visual communication (images can unite and divide), and the importance of listening to your target audience's feedback. Furthermore, they discussed particularities which should receive attention in regards to **ethnic-cultural diversity**, **gender diversity**, **inclusion of people with a disability, sexual identity, aging and diversity.**

The city of **Stuttgart (Germany)** shared best practices on how to give people the empowerment to act and to co-create communication. They delved into **communication in times of crisis** and shared strategies employed during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. a series of short videos from and for asylum centres, as 9.000 refugees were living there at that time and social work was working from home); earthquake in Turkey (e.g. creating a homepage in simple language, as 50.000 persons from the city were affected); the war in Ukraine (e.g. setting up a website together with the community, for instance to share initiatives of offering private housing). Beyond this, they share their decision-making process in relation to **which channel of communication is best-suited** for various situations: oral communication, social media, website, banners, visiting locations (e.g. a mosque), organising an event, formal or non-formal language, etc. Generally, **empowerment to act and to co-create communication** is an important principle in the city's strategy.

## *Bystander training*

Addressing unacceptable behaviour and clearly defining boundaries will increase the pressure on individuals displaying unacceptable behaviour to reconsider their actions. However, for bystanders, this is often not so straightforward. Bystanders may feel fear or reluctance to intervene effectively. This workshop gave **insights and practical tools to be an active bystander**, in order to respond effectively as a bystander to racism or discrimination. The session was conducted by **Paul Storme**, an experienced bystander trainer at **Amal, the integration agency in Ghent** (Belgium).

The active bystander workshop is rolled out in the city of Ghent since 2021 as part of the city's **Action Plan on Antiracism and Antidiscrimination (2020-2025)** led by Astrid Debruycker, councillor for Equal Opportunities, Welfare, Participation, Community Work, and Public Green. Since October 2022, bystander training was boosted and rolled out more broadly in Flanders as part of the 'Plan Living Together' from the Flemish government. The city of Ghent is a mentor for other local governments.



Paul proceeded by delving into four intervention strategies: "**Feel responsible and use the 4 DDDDs!**". **Direct action**: do something now. Acknowledge the situation and explain why it is *not* okay. You set your own boundary – e.g. through non-verbal communication, by involving another bystander, by stimulating dialogue and asking open questions. **Distraction**: shift the focus. Intervene indirectly to de-escalate the situation – e.g. by removing the target from the situation of by shifting the topic of conversation. This is especially useful when direct action could cause harm to the target or the bystander. **Delay**: do something later. Talk about it with the target, perpetrator or another bystander in a calm and safe environment. It is never too late to do something. **Delegation**: tell it to someone else. Find support with others, do not be left alone with your story. Talk about it to someone with (social) influence or a person from your social circle – e.g. person of trust, manager, employee hotline. You could also reach out to interest groups, authorities, or the police in case of unsafe emergency situations.

For all four strategies, you should think of the following: Is it safe to intervene? What strategy suits you in the given circumstance and context? Is it possible to combine strategies? Also, always use non-violent communication and support the target.

## Sport and prevention of radicalisation

This session, hosted by the **Hannah Arendt Institute**, explored the potential of sports in preventing radicalisation and promoting positive social change. **Younis Kamil Abdulsalam**, sports scientist with 15+ years of experience in sports-oriented youth work and doctoral researcher at the University of Brussels, has developed a programme theory for a football-based radicalisation prevention programme. The central mechanism of this programme theory is **Dr. Daniel Koehler**'s theory of re-pluralisation, and the psychology of radicalisation.

Radicalisation is multi-determined, steered by multiple drivers. There is no single cause for it, as multiple pathways exist into violent extremism and terrorism. This demonstrates the complexity of violent extremism emergence, escalation and persistence. We should be aware of **equifinality** (different pathways can lead to radicalisation) and **multifinality** (different persons on a shared pathways may have different outcomes). Extremism is a response to a complex a multidimensional interaction between a host of push-and-pull factors. This applies to both trajectories *in* and *out* of violent extremism. In terms of radicalisation research, this has produces the identification of six central themes: **relative deprivation**; **belonging and identity**; **purpose, adventure, honor; active recruitment; indoctrination; and small group/peer dynamics.** There is no single vision, nor one solution for radicalisation. It is not automatically an intellectual or theoretical process – it can contain emotional or social factors.

An ideology contains three components to be functionally complete. Firstly, there is a **problem** which the individual struggles with. The second and third components are that the ideology should offer a **solution** to this problem and a future **vision** on society. Dr. Koehler elaborated on the various aspects at play in the psychology of radicalisation: **relationship motives** (recognition and feelings of importance, reliability, solidarity, autonomy, and territoriality); **problem identification** (diagnostic framing); **threatening the motive** (amygdala activation, creation of moral outrage, often induced through ingroup/outgroup effect); **provocation of conflicts with parallel activation** (dysfunctional solutions); **creation of additional frustration** (prognostic framing); **interpretation aligned with the threat** (complete formation of collective identity/opposition culture/contrast society); **overfulfillment of deficit motives** through ideology and group; **increase of group attachment and commitment** (binding to external group *plus* isolation from old social environment, establishment of alternative social norms and moral concepts); **habituation; reinforcement management** (habituation to violence, dissonance reduction); and **binding reinforcement** (hard commitment and guilt defence, dealing with one's own crimes upon return is unbearable).

The process is characterised by a combination of a negative pole (e.g. toxic stress, traumatic experiences, diagnostic framing, propaganda) and a positive (quasi-therapeutical) pole (e.g. group context, loyalty, collective identity, understanding, norms and values legitimising actions, social network rewards, respect). **Disorganised attachment is a two-sided concept which occurs during the radicalisation process.** It means that the source of your security is also a source of threat or trauma to yourself. It can be visualised by a pendulum which swings from one side to another. Through this process the individual experiences a rising degree of radicalisation. Furthermore, the process of radicalisation is not linear, but rather is **characterised by energy bursts and periods of low energy**. During the radicalisation process the ideological urgency to act rises over time while the alternative of other solutions decreases over time. When the urgency to act overcomes the alternative

solutions (de-pluralisation) the feasibility of the use violence becomes present. This process can be reversed (re-pluralisation) by acknowledging the urgency of the individuals ideology. By doing this violence can become once again unnecessary.

The **Belgian Red Courts** programme has put this theory into practice. **Football** cannot solve complex problems like radicalisation by itself. It does, however, have potential to be **powerful** *if* **the context is right and** *if* **it is accompanied by the rights coaching and** *if* **content to support it**. It could have the potential to teach young people relevant skills to prevent them from drifting into radical scenes if it is done **target-oriented, systematically, and theory-based.** During the programme, the term of radicalisation is not used. Instead, they approach it in a positive way by focusing on the development of youngsters. They create a heterogeneous, multicultural and ideally also mixed-gender group of young people to participate in the programme. During the first four sessions of the program they **create a sense of safety, a positive social climate and feelings of trust.** During the last eight sessions they **focus on relevant personal and interpersonal skills**: communication, teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving and empowerment. After completion of the programme, there is an award ceremony for all participants and families to **highlight their sense of belonging** to the Belgian Red Courts team, and therefore a responsibility to uphold its values. Furthermore, there is a continuation through regular tournaments. The long-term outcome is **improved resilience against radical ideologies and movements**. The impact is **peaceful and active citizenship as a member of a democratic society**.

### *"Plan Living Together": supporting local efforts towards inclusion and diversity*

National and regional governments can set up structures to support local authorities' approaches. This session, hosted by the **Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur** *(ABB, Agency for Home Affairs),* presents the Plan Samenleven *(Plan Living Together),* the Flemish approach to support cities and municipalities financially and with capacity building in developing and implementing social cohesion projects and policies.

Over recent years, it became increasingly apparent that Flemish municipalities experienced difficulties in developing local integration and diversity policies. As the local level was being faced with new societal challenges, such as unequal opportunities, discrimination, segregation, etc., the **hardships of bureaucracy in policy planning** were revealed, as well



as the time and efforts local actors were (repeatedly) required to make to apply for regional grants. Furthermore, there was no coherent policy framework or streamlining across the region of Flanders in matters of local social cohesion and inclusion efforts. To adequately address this, the Government of Flanders developed a horizontal plan for equal opportunity and integration which aims to: offer a coherent policy framework; streamline fragmented subsidies; combat new societal issues; and offer capacity building to the local level. The **Plan Samenleven** *(Plan Living Together)* is a project that runs for three years and which wants to support local authorities to promote living together in diversity. The Plan contains 7 objectives with 24 actions, which cities and municipalities can implement themselves. Local, for everyone, with a minimum of planning burden, with **the local actors in the driver's seat**. The plan extends the focus on newcomers, and incorporates matters of diversity and living together across groups and intersections of diversity, to cover all parts of society.

The 7 objectives are the following. **First, increasing security and liveability**. It is the core task of a government: to guarantee its citizens are safe. Freedom cannot be experienced without security. This safety requires an integral approach. From prevention to sanction and care for the public space. We increase security and liveability with a strengthened Lokale Integrale Veiligheidscel *(Local Integrated Security Cell),* a local polarisation action plan and neighbourhood improvement contracts. **Second, strengthening the Dutch language.** Knowledge of Dutch is the gateway to education, employment and participation in social life. We therefore pursue a strong and coherent language policy that stimulates learning, practising and using Dutch. To this end, we motivate local governments to invest in initiatives that strengthen the knowledge of Dutch: organising summer schools and practice opportunities for adult non-native speakers. **Third, strengthening competencies**. We take action to guide vulnerable children in secondary education towards higher studies. It is important to properly identify and develop talents at an early age in education. We deploy actions to guide unqualified dropouts to a qualifying pathway. Additionally, there are of course the talents that are already developed, but which we cannot use due to circumstances. Think of diplomas from abroad or competences acquired elsewhere that are not fully recognised. **Fourth, labour market pathways**. The most important access to social mobility, next to education, is the labour market. Work is a key area for participation

in society. Work provides an income, but also a social network. Special attention should be paid to newcomers, people with disabilities, 55+ and women. To eliminate their under-representation in the labour market, an outreach, targeted and integrated approach is needed. Also, mentors guide young people of foreign origin to work. **Fifth, strengthening citizens' networks**. As you go along, you can make yourself familiar with the values and norms of social life. But this is only possible if you know someone who is willing to share with you their social capital and their knowledge of society's information that is not contained in laws or decrees. Buddies can support newcomers to function in our society. With such networks, we give opportunities and at the same time strengthen our shared values. **Sixth, fighting discrimination and exclusion**. Not only your background but also the socio-economic situation you grow up in can limit your opportunities. Conversely, fellow citizens may also exclude you. Discrimination, racism, and sexism erect walls that many fellow citizens come up against every day. A just society never accepts that its citizens are treated unequally. Every talent lost means sacrificing social cohesion and prosperity. To achieve an inclusive society, we reject and consistently act against any form of discrimination. **Seventh, making one community**. Safety creates trust, but the reverse is also true. Trust in fellow human beings makes for a safer society. Meeting each other is the prerequisite for keeping trust intact between fellow citizens. We need to break down the segregation that leads to us-them thinking and fully engage in connections. Therefore, we ensure that citizens, young and old, meet each other at school, in the neighbourhood, at work, or in leisure time. This is how we make work of one community, where we do not live side by side. This is how shared citizenship is created.



On plansamenleven.be, municipalities can find content partners who (whether free or paid) can support the local governments in carrying out the actions. These partners include support on the ground by the **Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering** *(AgII, Agency for Integration and Civic Integration)*, support by **Inter** *(Agency for accessibility)*, the **Vereniging van Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten** *(Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities),* **civil society**, and **learning networks hosted by mentors.**

The **Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering**, a government agency responsible for implementing the Flemish social and civic integration policies, then explained how they support local governments in implementing the actions proposed in the Plan Samenleven. Out of the 24 actions, the Agentschap support 10, for instance through **one-on-one guidance, advice, information, training, monitoring, and evaluation**. Some of its main themes are **language** (e.g. using clear Dutch language, creating language learning opportunities); **connection** (e.g. bystander training, depolarised communication on social media); and **participation** (culturally sensitive action). In the session, they shared successful ways in which they could support and collaborate with municipalities. They did note, however, some remaining challenges. For instance, it can be **hard to balance between being demand-orientated and being sufficiently concrete** in communicating unique selling points. Also, they are still navigating the best way to match their integration consultants to municipalities, with their own specific needs, requirements, and pace.

The Flemish municipalities of **Lier** and **Turnhout** shared ways in which Plan Samenleven has impacted and ameliorated proceedings of local efforts towards integration and living together. They shared which of the 24 actions of the Plan they applied for and how they adapted their city administrations. For instance, Lier partnered up with several services like the local museum, cultural centre, youth centre, (art) schools, library, as well as supporting services like the municipality's communications office and IT-services. As a result, they could **reach more than 5000 vulnerable citizens** (equivalent of one in seven and a half persons in Lier). It also strengthened their **imaging of diversity**, for instance through positive media attention. Similarly, Turnhout shared which actions they applied for, based on the municipality's priorities: increasing the acceptance of diversity (e.g. local action plan against polarisation); stimulating meeting moments (e.g. getting in touch with culture); tackling societal problems (e.g. local action plan against street harassment); emancipation (e.g. mentoring to work); and accessibility (e. bridging figures).

## Language acquisition outside the classroom – good practices of non-formal adult learning

Participants gathered to delve into the dynamic realm of non-formal second language learning experiences for adults beyond the traditional classroom settings. Exploring success stories and innovative approaches from a number of European municipalities, this session highlighted the pivotal role local authorities can play in supporting a varied learning landscape. This session was hosted by the **Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering** *(AgII, Agency for Integration and Civic Integration)* of Flanders, along with the municipalities of **Halle** (Belgium), **Hasselt** (Belgium) and **Torres Vedras** (Portugal).

In Belgium, the communities and regions are responsible for integration policies. Consequently, their legal aspects, practices, policies and budgets differ. Since 2001, Flanders has developed an integration programme which offers language courses, social orientation courses, individual counselling, pathway to employment, and a participation programme. Since 2015, AgII has functioned as a Flemish government agency responsible for implementing the Flemish integration programme. **The target groups are local authorities, organisations, and citizens**. In terms of language acquisition, AgII does not offer language trainings themselves. However, together with the client, they set out to find the right training course or school best suited, or help answering any questions they might have regarding learning Dutch.

Dutch is an important lever for non-native newcomers to participate in society: at work, at the school gate, in the shop, on the street. By speaking Dutch in many different situations, they learn the language better. But why does one person learn Dutch faster than another? Why does someone often make the same mistake? There are many different factors that determine this: personal background, learning ability, social interactions. When learning a new language, there are three key elements that should be activated: hearing the language, speaking the language, and receiving feedback. **Language can and should be a tool to participate in society** and everyone can contribute to this process: teachers in a formal school setting should teach relevant skills for *outside* the classroom (e.g. using important and relevant vocabulary); volunteers in conversation tables should hold conversation on recognisable situations; and the people around (e.g. buddies, neighbours, colleagues, service providers) should show patience and use correct and open communication. This is how language acquisition outside the classroom can become a success. This shows how non-formal practice opportunities are just as important. Some key criteria for such initiatives include: providing a safe space for practice; a linguistically rich environment; speaking opportunities and interaction; and positive feedback.

In the remainder of the session, some best practices from European municipalities had the chance to present their initiatives.

**Ana Umbelino**, Deputy Mayor of **Torres Vedras** (Portugal) shared how the municipality promotes non-formal language acquisition through cultural activities. Tracing back some contextual information and milestones in the development of its local approach to inclusion and participation of migrants, Portugal saw the development of the Local Support Centres for the Integration of Migrants (CLAIM). **CLAIM** are offices/spaces for reception, information and support whose mission is to provide support throughout the reception and integration process of migrants, **articulating with the various local structures, and promoting interculturality at the local level**. CLAIM now represent a network of around 150+ offices

around Portugal partnered with the High Commission for Migration (ACM), the government agency for migration. The local articulation of migrant integration is secured through a contextualised, local-based knowledge; through strategic planning in a holistic vision; and through integrated and collaborative governance. Here, Umbelino stressed the proximity paradox: local governments are closest to their newcomers, can best manage and



articulate the local context, *but* cannot be expected to solve all problems or manage by themselves all aspects of integration processes. Through local strategies and plans, including intermunicipal coordination with the Lourinhã and Óbidos municipalities, Torres Vedras has sought to develop the reception and integration process of migrants through cultural and artistic activities and intercultural dialogue. Some of its initiatives worked towards cultural citizenship, such as '**Ensemble Intercultural**', a project promoting rapprochement between cultures and traditions of different migrant communities, existing in the municipality, through music, dance and poetry. Another example is the project '**The Family Next Door**'. In this project, a family agrees to welcome and host a family they do not know in their home, becoming pairs of families for holding a typical Sunday lunch of their culture. Torres Vedras sees high value in stressing the need for language integration and cultural integration, and develops a number of initiatives to strengthen initiatives working towards the goals of **strengthening integration and language acquisition**, and **promoting cultural diversity and its visibility**. The municipality has, for instance, developed its offer of cultural and artistic activities in a way that creates more moments of intercultural exchange, such as making mural paintings that reflect the local diversity, or offering 'cultural passports' to ensure people can participate and get to know activities and public cultural spaces in Torres Vedras. Torres Vedras has reaffirmed its commitment to strengthen the reception and inclusion of migrants by joining the **Rede Integrar Valoriza** *(Integrating Adds Value Network),* an agreement with the UN High Commission for Migration. Additionally, the municipality has set up an integrated and multidimensional response to recent crises, through its creation of **SOS Afghanistan and Ukraine**

The role of local governments in supporting non-formal language practices opportunities were furthermore highlighted with contributions by **Gonda Sanders** and **Emma Vandyck**, experts equal opportunities for the city of **Halle** (Belgium) and **Hasselt** (Belgium) respectively.

The city of **Halle** saw large increases in population with a different home language. On average 2/3 of new residents do not speak Dutch at home. Numbers are particularly high for children and students, as the amount of students with a different home language in primary or secondary school has doubled over the past ten years. Halle presented its initiative **Hallo Nederlands.** Throughout the year, various city services and associations organise activities for foreign-speaking children, young people, adults and families. During these activities, they can practise their Dutch, while getting to know Halle better. The project offers regular activities, organised all year on a fixed moment and location, and extra one-off activities which vary every month. Activities include walking, swimming, cycling, game nights, cooking, artistic activities, etc. A good example offered by Halle in cooperation

with its cultural centre, is an initiative to support people in finding their way to the city's cultural offers. For instance, they teach them how to choose a show or concert, where to find practical information on the event, and how to order tickets.

The city of **Hasselt** likewise shared some initiatives developed for newcomers who want to practise their Dutch. Like many other Flemish cities, their initiatives are published on **ikdoemee.be**. The website gathers activities for newcomers who want to learn Dutch and expand their social network. Ikdoemee.be is created with attention to accessibility for non-native speakers (e.g. filters on location or knowledge of Dutch; translation into multiple languages). Local governments are in the lead to develop and strengthen the offer of such activities, and are supported in this by the agencies for integration and civic integration. Some initiatives presented included **VriendENtaal**, weekly conversation groups in various locations around the city; city orientation and leisure activities with a language buddy; or volunteering groups for women to come together, hold conversations, and do crafty activities at the same time.



Gonda Sanders and Emma Vandyck shared some of their successes, challenges, and future priorities in terms of developing a local offer of non-formal language activities in their respective cities. Some of their key conclusions in organising successful non-formal language practice initiatives are the following: maintaining a clear overview in the activities in order to detect gaps; determining what impact you want to make; building and nurturing partnerships; providing ample support to organisations or volunteers; being a consistent point of contact; and tailoring activities to the needs and interests of participants.

## *Mentoring for labour market integration, lifelong learning, and stronger connections - Inspiration from practitioners*

This session, hosted by **DUO for a JOB**, explored the potential of mentoring as a valuable tool to serve cities and its communities to embrace diversity and tap into its richness. From local practices, it observes how this grassroots methodology is currently converging and developing at the European level. Why mentoring? It is an impactful and cost effective tool to respond to actual **demographical, socioeconomic and educational challenges** across the EU. The methodology illustrates the added value of collaboration between the public sector and non-profit organisations. This session featured successful collaborations between municipalities and mentor programmes, with cases from **Mechelen (Belgium)** with **DUO for a JOB**, **Poitiers (France)** with **AFEV**, and **Espoo (Finland).** The session proceeded with an intervention from **Mentoring Europe**, exploring some EU developments.

Social service-systems and mentoring programmes are often intrinsically intertwined, and therefore need a local-level organisation and coherent strategy. The **Sociaal Huis** *(Social House)* of **Mechelen**, responsible for social services in the city, therefore works together with **DUO for a JOB.** The maze of social services can be daunting and challenging for both citizen and professional. *Professionality* is often equated with *specialisation*, and social services are as a result congested by bureaucracy: technicity, complexity, function segregation, control, and regulation. In practice, this resulted in situations where one client had a lot of social workers; one social worker had a lot of clients. *But*, the most crucial aspect should be the *personal* relation between client and social worker. The Sociaal Huis therefore adapted their approach in 2015: *one* **client became** *one* **responsibility for** *one* **social worker**. This required, *inter alia*, moving the specialisation to the back office, destructing micromanagement, and simplifying the process and organisation structure. Specifically, this has resulted in more fruitful manners of helping people find a job, e.g. combining learning Dutch with actual work; focus on the regular economic circuit; fast-track programmes like Jobroad; experiments like 'open hiring'. Throughout such approaches, collaboration with mentoring programmes like DUO for a JOB was crucial. DUO for a JOB puts job-seeking young people with a migration background in touch with over-50s, who volunteer to **transmit professional experience and guide them in their vocational project and job search**. DUO for a JOB offers the following aspects of the mentoring trajectory: **discover** (infosession and intakes); **train** (training mentors); **match** (matching duo and assisting first encounter); **guide** (signing agreement and supervising duos); and **evaluate** (evaluation at the end of mentoring). Mentees are 18-33 y/o, have a nationality or origin from outside the EU, and have a residency permit that allows them to work in Belgium. Mentors are over 50 y/o, have professional experience, and are available for two hours/week for six months. **About one in two of the young people find a stable job (min. three-month contract); seven in ten find a positive solution (e.g. job, internship, training).** Since 2013, 7500 duos have been matched; with over 2000 active mentors; working with 100 employees, in 17 branches in Belgium, France and the Netherlands.

**Afev** is a nonprofit organisation (active in France, Belgium and Spain) with over 30 years of commitment, that fights against educational inequalities and creates social links and

solidarity bonds between schools/campuses and disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Their objective is to **help young people gain self-confidence, inspire a desire to learn and offer more than just homework help – an opening into culture and the city.** Their mentoring programme for youth of 5-18 y/o consists of mobilisation, training and monitoring for 2 hours/week throughout the school year. 94 per cent of mentees say they have established trust with their mentor; 90 per cent feels as if they have made progress in school performance. Support is provided **throughout the educational path** with attention to pivotal moments – e.g. reading sessions for children of **5-7 y/o**; preparation for the transition from **elementary to middle school**; support **between middle and high school** in choice of career/higher/education/vocational training; host mentoring by linking students with another student from their **college**. Afev zoomed in on their local educational projects in **Poitiers (France),** where they have set up the project 22 years ago. Figures for the 2022-2023 school year in Poitiers included: 690 committed students; 596 mentors; 10 intervention districts; 37 volunteers in the civil service; and 146 students whose commitment was recognised by UP. Poitiers regards the promotion of youth as a resource for the community in the municipality. This initiative **promotes a rich student experience and citizenship by helping to catalyse student involvement and foster a community of committed youth.**

The city of **Espoo** (Finland) shared how they strengthen international talents. The city is the second largest in the country, with 314.000 citizens and 155 nationalities. About 24 per cent of the residents are not native speakers of Finnish or Swedish. According to Finnish legislation, cities should advance 'the well-being of their residents' and the 'vitality of their



respective areas'. Traditionally, **well-being has been the focus and priority of Finnish integration policy**. But **the role of international experts and talents in securing the vitality** of the innovation community and the business life is receiving more and more attention. Espoo is a forerunner in this shift. Some numbers: 11.000 immigrants employed as directors, senior experts and experts in 2021 (a growth of 60 per cent since 2017); the share of international talents in city personnel has grown by 11 per cent, and in Aalto University teaching staff by 49 per cent; income-tax revenue from international talents has grown by 152 per cent between 2010 and 2021. The city aims to increase the talents' participation **from** *light* **to** *intensive* **participation in its service portfolio.** It includes the **talent match** (networking and matching event); proceeds with a **career bootcamp** (one day event on job application strategies); **entry-point mentoring** (facilitated mentoring programme in cooperation with immigrant communities); via the **career club** (facilitated peer-to-peer career development); and the **competence centre** (personalised career counselling programme, guiding clients to industry-specific continuous learning services of higher education institutions). Service portfolio diversity is a crucial factor in this approach.

Lastly, the session looked at how mentoring is advocated for at the EU level and how this has recently developed. The **Advocacy Committee** is a group of experts in mentoring from the Netherlands, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Italy, Germany, Ireland, and Spain. Their goal is to initiate actions to increase recognition and development of mentoring throughout Europe, by developing a European mentoring strategy. In October 2022, the Committee presented a position paper in the European Parliament during the first ever event. After this, MEP Cicurel invited them to develop a pilot project to foster mentoring in Europe. In May 2023, the Roadmap for the Development of a European Mentoring Strategy came to be. Since September 2023, there have been ongoing meetings with MEPs, the Commission, and other EU representatives. The opinion on mentoring was furthermore unanimously approved by the European Committee of the Regions in October. In November, the second event in the European Parliament took place under the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU. This was followed by a European mentoring summit in Paris in April. The next steps will further the efforts to feed the European Parliament and Commission to **define a potential policy and financial framework**. Furthermore, the **Advocacy Committee continues the deployment of mentoring through the implementation of projects.**

## *Beyond paper: the "Fellow Citizen" Project on diversity in city organisations*

Why does it go so slow? Why do we feel we do so much, but little seems to change? Do we know if, and why, we find diversity and inclusion important? What actions and interventions did we do? What worked? What didn't, and why? Why do we often speak about diversity in a rather uncomfortable and vague way? Also, ever noticed the amount of burn-out and employee turnover in this field?

In the **Stadsgenoten** *(Fellow Citizen)* project (2018-2023), the **Kenniscentrum Vlaamse Steden** *(Knowledge Centre Flemish Cities)*, explored how diversity manifests itself in the city organisations itself. The Kenniscentrum Vlaamse Steden wants to support urban development in Flanders. As an interlocal association of the 13 major Flemish cities and the Commission for the Flemish Community in Brussels, it stimulates learning processes in and between cities and is committed to strengthening the network of cities. In this way it wants to contribute to an improvement of the urban organisation, services and policies. In this session, the Kenniscentrum presented some of their findings, insights, common traps, but also cases and wisdom from experts regarding diversity in city organisations. Focus was put on where the most difference can be made: at the top level of the organisation. Leadership style, as well as organisational culture and the incorporation of diversity on a strategic level, are crucial for effective interventions. Lotte De Bruyne, programme leader of the project took participants on this field trip through diversity plans, history, intentions (many!), roadblocks, experiments, myths, dreams and realities and research reports.

**One in three Belgians has a migration background.** In almost all Flemish central cities, more than half of the children have a migration background, and in majority-minority cities (cities where the majority of inhabitants have a migration background, such as Brussels, Antwerp, Genk, and Vilvoorde) this is more than two out of three. Diversification is also continuing in the other central cities and cities with an industrial past, such as Ghent, Mechelen, Turnhout or Sint-Niklaas, where more than one in three inhabitants has a migration background. A lot of expertise, information, and research existed on diversity (and super-diversity), but not on diversity *in* cities. This is why the project was launched. This initiative involves continuous conversations (28 roundtable discussions and in-depth interviews) and research with cities to identify their needs and develop strategies for addressing the challenges and opportunities brought about by rapid demographic changes. This effort is particularly crucial for smaller cities that have experienced sudden increases in diversity and are often overwhelmed by the accompanying challenges. These challenges include handling friction and discrimination, addressing issues in schools, and managing community tensions. **The project seeks to leverage the experiences and strategies of larger cities, which have had more time to develop effective methods for dealing with these issues.**

One observation from the project is that the perception of diversity tends to be more positive at higher organisational levels. However, a common misconception is that diversity will naturally improve over time without active intervention. The reality is that **without deliberate efforts, progress in managing diversity can be slow and insufficient**. City organisations often face significant challenges in bringing about lasting change due to frequent changes in leadership. Advocates for structural change find themselves having to repeatedly convince new leaders of the importance of diversity initiatives. This necessitates continuous efforts to raise awareness and sensitise those in power, highlighting the need for consistent advocacy. Furthermore, the current approach to diversity in Flanders is heavily project-based, with many initiatives lacking a long-term strategic planning

necessary for sustainable impact. There is **a need for more results-oriented and structurally integrated approaches** to diversity, moving beyond small-scale, fast-paced temporary projects. **For diversity initiatives to be truly effective, they must be embedded within the entire organisational structure**. This integration is particularly crucial during challenging times when organisations are tested. **A written vision that explicitly emphasises inclusivity is essential**. If the vision and culture of an organisation do not support diversity, efforts by diversity managers can be seen as contentious rather than constructive. To achieve meaningful change, the commitment to diversity must come from the top and permeate all departments, not just a dedicated diversity management unit. Improving workforce representation within city organisations is another area of focus. Examples from Finland and the Netherlands demonstrate effective strategies, such as positive action measures, referred to as "corrective measures" in the Netherlands. The role of selection officers and leaders is pivotal in these efforts. A diverse workforce not only brings new perspectives and networks but also fosters internal discussions and mutual respect. The city of Genk was highlighted as a good practice in promoting diversity within its workforce.

## Empowering newcomers through social integration and networking initiatives

The power of social integration for newcomers can be elevated through various activities like volunteering, sports, and local buddy networking. Local governments are leading the charge, encouraging community involvement and involving local partners, to break down barriers. This session fuelled a discussion on social integration and networking initiatives to gain inspiration for fostering a more connected and inclusive community in each one's own locality. Extra attention was granted to the power of regional cooperation and the role of the EU as a catalyst. The session was hosted by the **Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering** (*AgII, Agency for Integration and Civic Integration*) along with the **Department of Work and Social Economy of the Government of Flanders.**

In Belgium, the communities and regions are responsible for integration policies. Consequently, their legal aspects, practices, policies and budgets differ. Since 2001, Flanders has developed an integration programme which offers language courses, social orientation courses, individual counselling, pathway to employment, and a participation programme. Since 2015, AgII has functioned as a Flemish government agency responsible for implementing the Flemish integration programme. **The target groups are local authorities, organisations, and citizens**. AgII has about seventy offices spread across municipalities in Flanders and Brussels, but *not* in Ghent or Antwerp as these cities have their own agency. Furthermore, they are not responsible for the language aspect of the programme in Brussels, as the **Huis van het Nederlands Brussel** (*Brussels House of Dutch*) offers this service.

The participation and networking programme is one of four components of the Flemish integration trajectory. This component entails that newcomers should strengthen and broaden their own social network for a minimum of 40 hours. This can take place in a buddy project, an internship with a company, association or local authority, through voluntary work, participation in activities in a community centre, etc. The person integrating can also combine various activities. The activities must take place in a Dutch-speaking context and must promote social participation. This competent is the latest addition to the civic integration programme and was introduced in January 2023, after going through 26 pilot projects. Counsellors from AgII are the main point of contact and provide assistance, testing, and guidance, tailored to the needs and preferences of the persons integrating. AgII also brings together the offer of participation and networking activities and gathers them on the online platform ikdoemee.be. Furthermore, they offer trainings and workshops, also for local governments. The latter are in the driver's seat in terms of developing the activities itself, in cooperation with local partners.

The session proceeded with good practices of those local governments in Flanders, namely the city of Genk and the city of Sint-Niklaas.

The city of **Genk** receives about 500 new residents per year. Over 59.6 per cent of its citizens has a migration background (mostly Turkish, Moroccan, and Italian) and about 13.2 per cent does not have the Belgian nationality. Genk's approach to building an inclusive and diverse city is grounded in its long-term policy plan 2020-2025, of which some objective and actions focus on ensuring everyone feels at home in the city, and on expanding the policy through a focus on activities and opportunities from language learning and self-reliance. Genk was one of the cities where the pilot project, preceding the formal introduction of the participation and networking component in the civic integration programme, was conducted. To then formally introduce this change in legislation, Genk

made use of the AMIF/ESF call for applications for city governments. In this framework, Genk wanted to create a **welcome desk for newcomers**. They gathered plans to offer leisurely activities, such as swimming, football, dance, painting, music; volunteering activities at different local organisations or companies; and buddy initiative providing language coaching and mentoring. To make this a successful endeavour, the city involved many stakeholders, such as AgII, the OCMW (Public Centre for Social Welfare), language schools, the VDAB (Flemish Service for Employment and Professional Training), the public library, and (new and existing) teams from across the local governments domains (diversity and equal opportunities; culture; sports; youth; social well-being; etc.). Furthermore, they **engaged with other local governments**, some of which were part of the pilot project, to brainstorm and exchange good practices. Some preliminary observations show the following results: 75 per cent opted for buddy initiatives; volunteering was less of interest as this often requires higher language skills; and family members of (ex-)integrators often also requested to be involved in the support and coaching. **The city's goal would be to expand this initiative and to have an actual 'welcome house for newcomers'** in order to fully provide the one-stop-shop-approach and foster a cohesive and open integration experience for new city residents.

With over 34.6 per cent of its residents having a migration background, and with 140 countries of origin represented (mostly the Netherlands, Turkey, Morocco, and former Yugoslavia), **Sint-Niklaas** is also a diverse city. The integration trajectory is currently active for 384 newcomers, of which 203 are actively enrolled in the participation and networking programme. Like Genk, Sint-Niklaas developed a city strategy for its diversity and inclusion policy: **Iedereen Mee** *(Everyone Included)* (2020-2025). The strategy's ethos is that policies should be **generally inclusive where possible, but specific where needed**. In order to put the new legislation on the participation and networking programme into practice, the city proactively engages with leisure organisations to encourage them to open their services to newcomers, establishing clear agreements and highlighting the benefits for these organisations. Where gaps exist, the city creates its own programmes, such as buddy systems, finance discussion groups, and bicycle lessons. The current offerings are largely standard, but the goal is to develop a diverse range of services that meet newcomers' needs and preferences through co-creation. Recognising the rapid societal changes, the city acknowledges that **many organisations and internal departments lack the necessary tools for inclusion and accessibility**. These entities seek guidance and examples to improve their services, often unaware of the barriers newcomers face. To address this, Sint-Niklaas prioritises raising awareness about inclusion and accessibility, for instance through a '**learning network**'. This network consists of professional organisations that want to learn more about diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunities, and comes together four times a year. Some of the previous sessions have focuses, for instance, on decolonisation; inclusive volunteering; inclusive communication; and addressing polarisation. Another initiative of the city are the '**city conversations**', yearly networking events for residents and associations in Sint-Niklaas where people can learn more about the themes and the projects that are currently active. Lastly, the city also focusses on **process management**, to guide internal city departments in the themes of diversity and inclusion. Each city service receives four sessions guided by the city's social policy team, and is supported in developing a customised action plan for their department. Some that are already covered include: childcare, youth services, HR, sports services, police, library, etc.

How can the EU support local governments in developing such integration policies and initiatives? Flanders has, with its local governments, organised its **AMIF-strategy for 2021-2027** in regional networks. There are currently **18 regional networks** (in 15 Flemish regions and 3 cities, Antwerp, Ghent, and Brussels). Each region received a budget for two network employees and for the development of an action plan. The network consists of the local authorities in that region, AgII, and local organisations. The aim is to bring them together to exchange knowledge and resources, and to develop a common field of expertise and actions. This strategy is currently still in its preliminary start-up phase, and regional action plans are in preparation and should be submitted by September. The goal for 2027 is to connect local governments and organisations around this theme; to increase their interest in the reception and integration of newcomers in municipalities; to demonstrate the importance of creating a social network; to increase the available initiatives for newcomer participation and networking; and to heighten tolerance in communities.

## *Introduction to the collective impact model*

From the pandemic and the climate crisis to increasing polarisation and disinformation, our current times are characterised by increasingly complex social issues that prove challenging for any single entity to solve on its own. Local governments often try to manage these complex issues with isolated initiatives. However, as long as they are not part of a collective approach, the impact of these initiatives remains limited. During this session, the **Hannah Arendt Institute** introduced participants to the Collective Impact Model. This model aims to **tackle complex social challenges by fostering broad cross-sector cooperation**. How to agree upon a common agenda? How to coordinate various activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action? How to build a centralised infrastructure dedicated to coordinating all shared efforts? **Christophe Busch**, expert in complexity theory, introduced the central principles of the model.

The Collective Impact Model represents a strategy for addressing complex social challenges. This approach is effective for **tackling 'wicked problems'** —intricate issues such as revolutions, financial crises, migration dynamics and societal polarisation, which are characterised by their complexity and resistance to straightforward solutions. Wicked problems are made wicked by their interdependent and multi-causal entanglement in multiple interfering systems and the (unforeseen) chain reactions they provoke. Wicked problems are not linear or simple. Instead, They demand a circular and process-based approach. Traditional monocausal strategies, which attempt to isolate and address single causes, are often ineffective. The Collective Impact Model shifts away from these monocausal approaches to embrace complexity, understanding that social realities are multifaceted, circular, and driven by feedback cycles. The **complexity approach** inherent in the Collective Impact Model is systemic. It acknowledges that social reality operates within a web of interactions at micro, meso, and macro levels. Factors at these levels mobilise individuals, groups, and entire societies into frameworks of thought and action. A process-based approach that takes into account different actors, factors, and their interplay is needed. No single organisation, actor or entity can single-handedly solve the world's most challenging problems. **Collective impact occurs when actors from different sectors connect to a common agenda to solve a specific, often very complex, community problem**.

The foundations for Collective Impact are: recognising the urgency of the problem; involving key figures of influence who can drive the initiative forward; and having sufficient resources to support the effort. Furthermore, a critical aspect is the process of prioritisation, which may then lead to the development of an action plan. This involves identifying key activities, addressing gaps, and aligning partners' resources to realise the shared agenda. Shared measurement, while sometimes challenging, involves determining what information can be shared and working towards common outcomes using both qualitative and quantitative data. **Many local authorities are beginning to adopt this model, recognising its potential to bring about significant societal change.**