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7 Inspiring Practices to Share

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7. Inspiring Practices to Share

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This chapter is different in concept from the previous chapters. Having introduced each country and summarised their shared and country-specific challenges and some possible solutions to those, we now present promising practices for each country described. These practices may be (at least partially) transferable and thus can offer inspiration to those looking for workable tools and approaches in the field of local integration of migrants.

Inspiring practices are often limited to particular situations and contexts (Henderson, Pavlickova, and Lewis 2016), and they also result from conditions and systems that are unique to a particular country. Therefore, it is essential to understand how these practices are embedded in their national and local contexts (Virkkala and Niemi 2006). We have attempted to facilitate this by providing detailed descriptions of each country's context and migration integration policy setting in the previous chapters. Hopefully, this will enable those seeking inspiration here to have a better understanding of the context in which these practices arose.

First, we introduce a practical methodological guide for regions and cities, entitled the *Manual on Local Integration of Migrants in the Czech Republic*. Second, Slovaks share their experience of working with municipalities that have little to no experience in migrant integration. The third example comes from Germany and presents migration and integration councils, which are political bodies in Bavaria (and across the country), anchored within local administrative bodies, that represent and vocalise migrants' needs and opinions and advocate for their rights. Finally, we zoom in on the transition that the city of Mechelen in Belgium has gone through in becoming a city for all "Mechelaars" thanks to its integral and inclusive approach.

7.1 Manual on Local Integration of Migrants in the Czech Republic (the Czech Republic)

In the Czech Republic, as in other Central European countries, the topic of migrant integration is gradually developing, particularly in the largest cities. However, even there, this agenda is often not developed comprehensively, but mainly through particular areas associated with important aspects of migrant integration (most often social or educational policy). The actors involved then gradually try to cooperate with other actors and approach the issue from multiple angles. This is not easy, and it often takes a long time to make any progress.

Local government officials therefore began to ask for basic information concerning the integration of migrants at the local level, as well as ideas and suggestions on what they could do in their practice and what they could recommend to cooperating departments. Based on this demand from local authorities, a comprehensive publication entitled *Manual on Local Integration of Migrants in the Czech Republic*¹ was produced to provide detailed guidance to local officials and those interested in the issue of migrant integration.

This Manual introduces migrant integration at the local level through individual topics (e.g. services to migrants, education, access to health care), so that regions and municipalities can familiarise themselves with a particular topic and begin to introduce activities in particular areas where they have the opportunity or perceive the need. It consists of twelve chapters and is intended for staff at the regional and municipal authorities, local politicians and anyone else who comes into contact with the topic of migration.² Each chapter presents a particular aspect of integration in terms of the relevant legislation, possible projects, successes and challenges that local authorities or migrants may face. Furthermore, the Manual contains practical tips and specific instructions for readers who have no previous experience with migrant integration. The publication consists of removable, numbered infosheets of various lengths, which can be studied individually or in chapter groupings and

1 Selected chapters of the Manual are available in English at: https://www.migrace.com/en/regulation/mesta-a-inkluzivni-strategie/integracni_manual.

2 The framework of and actors in the integration of migrants in the Czech Republic; Self-government as a provider and recipient of grants; Strategic management of integration in local authorities; Integration at the municipal level; Communication with the majority society; Communication with migrants; Education of students with a different mother tongue; Employment; Social; Healthcare; „Refugees“ – a specific system of international protection; Safety.

can be used as separate background material for meetings, negotiations or presentations. Thanks to its structure and design, the Manual makes it possible to quickly move between topics based on interest or need and thus connect various aspects of migrant integration as best suits the given situation.

The Manual is designed to be a comprehensive yet clear and concise set of instructions on how to approach migrant integration in terms of legal requirements, with respect for local specifics, and for the benefit of all inhabitants of the Czech Republic.

7.2 How to engage municipalities with no experience in migrant integration (Slovakia)

In Slovakia, most cities and regions have very little experience in migrant integration. The most common situation is that migrants are largely invisible to the municipal authorities, as they do not come to the municipality with their issues. Consequently, municipalities devote almost no attention to the topic of migrant integration.

Therefore, the first step taken by Slovak partner organization Human Rights League and its local partners to encourage migrant integration at the local level in Slovakia³ consisted of engaging with municipalities willing to work on the issue of migration. HRL identified three cities, one region and the Union of Towns and Cities of Slovakia (an umbrella organization for cities and towns in Slovakia) that were willing to collaborate with them on this issue. HRL began by introducing them to the issue and to the migrants residing within their territory, providing them with comprehensive information about the migrant population and training them to enable them to collect and analyse relevant data and information on their own. HRL produced a report for each municipality involved in the project with detailed statistics and a description of the migrant population living in the municipality (e.g. Kadlečíková 2018). This information was mostly new and eye-opening for the municipalities concerned.

The project concentrated on early engagement with local political leaders and local municipal representatives to build trust, find “ambas-

3 For more, see the Project *KapaCITY* – *Supporting the integration of newcomers at a local level* (2018–2020) webpage, available at: <https://www.hrl.sk/en/our-work/projects/old-projects/kapacity>.

sadors”⁴ for the project and prevent disinformation about the project activities. The report and project activities were presented to municipal councils and parliaments in each involved city/region. This has helped to build trust among the actors involved. Also, a memorandum on cooperation was signed with each municipality, describing each party’s roles and responsibilities. HRL also provided an opportunity for municipalities to fund the work of their employees tasked with integration activities, since municipalities frequently lack funding for integration of migrants.

The next steps were to provide training and tools on how to engage with the migrants in each municipality. Meetings between migrants and municipalities were organized to enable them to learn about each other, and intercultural workers were recruited in every municipality to act as *liaison officers* between migrants and the municipality. The focus was on the empowerment and activation of migrants at the municipal level; this included providing information on the role and responsibilities of municipalities and establishing lasting frameworks for regular meetings between municipalities and migrants. However, without any permanent advisory bodies established and funded by the municipalities, these meetings and other forms of contact between migrants and municipalities turned out to be unsustainable in the long term.

Much attention was also paid to communication. In most cases, municipalities did not know how to communicate about integration issues and therefore chose not to. HRL provided the municipalities with the skills to communicate with the local population about migration and integration. Initially, municipalities were scared to do so, since they tended to view migration as a topic leading to conflict and disinformation, and so HRL focused on narratives, framing and facts that could be used. It hired an agency to assist in developing the municipalities’ communication skills and strategies.⁵ Also, migrants were engaged and trained in how best to communicate their individual stories as well as their expectations and aspirations to the public. The cooperation with the agency proved very beneficial.

Nevertheless, several challenges remain, such as communicating multilingually with migrants or engaging migrants in local level interaction. More effort must be invested in these issues in the future.

4 By „ambassadors“ we mean people who were interested in the issue and working on the issue within the municipality as “municipal coordinators”, they also acted as liaison officers between the project and the municipal authorities.

5 A comprehensive communication strategy was created and municipalities received communication training (Neuropea & HRL 2020).

HRL's recommendations from its work with municipalities/regions with very little experience in migrant integration are as follows:

- Doing “political work” is crucial when it comes to such a heated issue as migration. This includes investment into engagement with local parliaments, mayors and others from the municipality to explain issues and ensure support.
- Identifying “ambassadors” for particular issues/activities helps.
- It is necessary to frame the issue of migrant integration clearly and carefully. Employees and local MPs are influenced as much as others are by pictures in mass media and migration hysteria. Therefore, it is important to explain the issues at stake, the aims and goals, and to clear all possible misunderstandings (e.g. migration “crisis” vs. labour market needs). Finding common ground helps (e.g. accommodation for migrant workers).
- Becoming familiar with the working culture/cycle of the municipality and planning activities to match the municipality’s cycle is highly useful.
- Municipalities are frequently faced with understaffing, shortage of money and fluctuation of employees. If possible, it helps to offer funding for some of their activities.
- It is worth focusing on how to communicate with the local population about migrants. It is a good idea to invest resources into finding the right common framings and narratives that are inclusive and provide connections between migrants and the local population. It is also important to find ways of motivating municipalities to start communicating about migration.
- It is vital to identify a communication plan for each municipality separately, ideally in the early stages of the project, as this allows room for piloting joint communication campaigns. While national narratives may work, it is important to be aware of the local context, which can play an important role in communication.
- Providing tools for municipalities is crucial (such as information materials, training, tips for involving and engaging with resident migrants, a website with the important information in one place, contact details for intercultural workers and migrant communities).

7.3 Integration and migration councils in Bavaria (Germany)

The integration of people with migration histories can only succeed if they are taken seriously as actors and are involved in decision-making processes. The most tried and tested instrument for this in Germany is a well-functioning integration and migration council.

These councils contribute to participatory democracy in several ways: first, migrants are directly involved in local political work through their work in the councils. Second, the councils represent heterogeneous social groups that otherwise have little or no representation in the municipalities. Third, the councils open the way to immigrant associations, networks and communities to which local authorities and political bodies previously hardly had any access.

For the councils to work successfully, their work and networking must be coordinated and supported and their interests represented at the state and federal level, and know-how and best practices need to be transferred. In this case, an umbrella organisation is essential. The work of AGABY in Bavaria (and other umbrella organisations in Germany⁶) is based on representation, participation and empowerment principles.

Studies show that the work done by these councils gives migrants and people with migration history better access to resources in their municipalities, provides intercultural exchange and intercultural opening, contributes to peaceful coexistence, and serves as an empowerment platform for migrants in their political engagement (Wilmes 2018). In Germany, integration and migration councils have become an indispensable element that brings the interests of the population with a migration history into the local political decision-making process.

7.4 Mechelen's journey towards becoming an inclusive city (Flanders, Belgium)

In 2005, Mechelen had a very bad reputation in Flanders and was referred to as “the Chicago of the Dijle”: this reputation was driven by impoverished neighbourhoods, public nuisance and a great feeling of insecurity. The Mechelaars were not ‘proud’ of their city, the overall feeling was

6 For further details see the webpage of Der Bundeszuwanderungs- und Integrationsrat (The German Federal Immigration and Integration Council), accessible at: <https://bzi-bundes-integrationsrat.de/mitgliedsverbaende/>.

one of distrust in politics, and faith in the (local) government crumbled. Things had to change, and they did. The City Council and the Mayor radically changed their approach and based the city's policies on three pillars: security, city renewal, and inclusion. Investments were made in favour of prevention and safety: strengthening the police force, installing cameras and streetlamps, pursuing urban renovation and renewal projects, investing in first-line workers, creating more green public spaces, public playgrounds, and so on.

The key strength, however, is the city's inclusive vision. This vision consists of:

- a firm anti-discrimination policy (e.g. the city has a local contact point where citizens can file reports or complaints with regard to racism & discrimination⁷, Mechelen is a member of the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism (ECCAR) network⁸ and has a ten-point action plan against racism⁹);
- a strong focus on accessibility and social mix at different levels (neighbourhood, school, sport club ...);
- a positive (counter) narrative where diversity is regarded as an added value. “Mechelen is an inclusive society in which differences are acknowledged, tolerated and respected, but not without limits. We propose legislation and core values that are non-negotiable. Mechelen sees value in this diversity. We have a diversity mindset, drawing on the wealth of difference to discover what binds people together. The spirit of coexistence is key.”¹⁰

In Mechelen, the saying goes: “We are all from Mechelen”, meaning that the citizens might not share a common past, but they share their city's future. The city works to create a climate in which it is generally accepted that diversity is part of society. Every resident of Mechelen is duty-bound to integrate in the new and super- or hyperdiverse Mechelen of the 21st century. The city takes a critical and open view of traditions, practices and structures and calls them into question. It does not avoid sensitive issues, but encourages dialogue and debate.

Every resident of Mechelen has a complex identity: there is no need for anyone to choose between being Muslim, being Flemish, being from Mechelen, speaking Spanish, or being gay. The city's policy encourages

7 For further details see: <https://www.mechelen.be/tegenracisme/racisme-melden>.

8 For further details see: European Coalition of Cities Against Racism, <https://www.eccar.info/en/mechelen>.

9 For further details see: <https://www.mechelen.be/tegenracisme>.

10 Working on Diversity: The Vision and Mission of the City of Mechelen, 2008

every resident to be proud of who they are, of their complex identity. People have freedom of choice when it comes to expressing certain aspects of that complex identity. The city aims to create a diversity-friendly environment in which the full complexity of those identities can be explored. Mechelen is not made up of 136 different communities. Mechelen has one community containing almost 90,000 individuals, each with a complex identity.

The diversity in Mechelen has gradually changed in character. Until the 1990s, two large groups lived in the city: native Mechelaars and Moroccans. Today, Mechelen is a multicoloured mixture and internal diversity is also increasing within its various sub-communities. The stereotypes are less and less reflective of the reality of “the migrants”. Target group policies (a categorical approach) thus lost touch with reality, and lost their value and legitimacy. The City Council of Mechelen has therefore developed a reverse strategy since 2013. Instead of defining differences and excluding people based on differences, efforts are made to strengthen shared identity. That is the core of urbanity: all of us together in diversity.

The principle is being an inclusive city, which means stressing mainstreaming as much as possible. Diversity in all its forms is given a prominent place in the city’s communication and identity experience. All policy areas, city services and partners must support this inclusive approach. However, the city of Mechelen is also aware that inclusive policy must go hand in hand with more specific policy and acknowledges the need for some carefully chosen exclusive (categorical) measures. One of the principles behind diversity is that everyone plays a part in shaping society and that everyone must be given the opportunity to participate actively in that society. It makes sense to have a partly categorical approach, to counter disadvantage and exclusion and give certain target groups greater opportunities to participate.

Strategic programme management at the city level further supports a coordinated and consistent approach and strategy within a clear, shared vision on integration and diversity. The development of cross-cutting networks and greater insight on crossovers between different policy areas and policy objectives make integration policy more efficient and effective (challenges, opportunities and cooperative partners are detected easily) and as such, the city’s initiatives have more impact.

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