

Good Practice Summary

In 2015 the city of Ghent, like other European cities, was facing a growing number of refugees. In Belgium, the number of asylum applications doubled within one year. Over half of them (60%) are recognized as refugees. In September 2015 the city of Ghent established a Task Force on Refugees. Within this structure we believe it is very important to involve everyone who can take a role in dealing with the growing number of new arrivals. This is a cooperation, not only between administration (city services and the Public Service for Social Welfare) and policy; also citizens, NGO's and civil society are involved in this structure. Through this structure you can set clear roles and responsibilities.

Within this Task Force three working groups have been created:

1. Shelter
2. Volunteers and Public Awareness
3. Integration.

This triple-pronged approach allows us to tackle the challenge of welcoming refugees holistically. Municipalities are responsible to provide accommodation for refugees. Due to the growing number of refugees a new refugee shelter was set up in Ghent. When a new reception centre is being set up, it's important to have a good information exchange with the neighborhood and other citizens. For this reason neighborhood information sessions were hosted to address residents' concerns about the new arrivals (December 2015). Residents were also given the opportunity to visit the reception centre (February 2016). By giving accurate information and involving society from the beginning you can demystify stereotypes and raise awareness. A brainstorm session was organized: one session with people from the neighborhood on how to give the refugees a warm welcome in Ghent. Another session with civil society organizations. A dedicated website was set up providing accurate information on the local approach on refugees, an article was published in the city magazine, received by all Ghent citizens (March 2016).

A coordinated local approach makes sure that fundamental rights such as housing, education, work, health care, leisure activities can be accessed quickly and effectively. For every domain, the local actors responsible for that domain came together to analyze the situation: what are the needs, are specific measurements needed. For example in the domain of housing 'transithouses' for refugees were started up. Once people get recognized as refugees they only have 2 months to leave the reception centre. Transithouses gives them more time to find appropriate accommodation and they get the necessary guidance. To help recognized refugees in their search for a house, a 'Housing Guide for refugees' was published in several languages https://stad.gent/sites/default/files/page/documents/20160905_PU_00924_A4_folder_Wonen_vluchtelingen_engels_LR.pdf.

For example the local actors responsible for education checked if there were enough places available for the children. As a result a new reception class was set up. Within this school the students also developed a 'refugees welcome kit'. In the domain of healthcare, mind spring sessions and mind spring sessions junior were being organized which overall aim is to provide psychosocial support to asylum seekers. In the field of leisure activities: refugees were brought into contact with all sorts of sports- and cultural activities and organisations.

For example a football match was organized (<http://www.rudy-coddens.be/06062016.htm>), asylum seekers could take bicycle classes...

The moment asylum seekers arrive in Ghent we start up the integration process immediately. Since 60% of them are getting recognized as refugee, there is no need to wait till the decision in their asylum application is taken. They are brought into contact with relevant organizations to start their language training, do volunteer work, do leisure activities, get a buddy assigned... Refugees love to contribute to the host society with their skills and talents. During the yearly 10 day popular 'Ghent Festival' refugees worked as volunteers in acts, bar tending,.... This initiative was such a success that it resulted in a new organisation 'Refu Interim'. By doing volunteer work in the cultural sector, they can broaden their network, practice their language skills and get the necessary skills for the job market. Engagement of civil society is crucial within our approach. NGO's, volunteers, citizens are willing to offer assistance to asylum seekers and refugees (offer help, donating materials...). As a local authority you can align these initiatives and offer professional guidance. For example by setting up a dedicated website <https://solidair.stad.gent> , by opening up a give-away-shop, by hosting a volunteer event, by organizing workshops and trainings based on the needs of volunteers. As a local authority you can give your support to the numerous initiatives that are being undertaken by citizens and organizations for example by bringing them into contact with the right service or organizations, by helping them to look for financial support or by facilitating the initiatives. By coordinating these initiatives you can fill up the gaps and give a warm welcome to asylum seekers and refugees and foster solidarity with other vulnerable groups within the city.

This proactive holistic approach fast-tracks the integration process and makes sure that refugees are included within the host society. Cities are facing the same challenges as a result of the large and rapid inflow of migrants. A locally coordinated proactive approach can be set up in other cities as well. This approach leads to sustainable change. The cooperation installed between city administrations, NGO's and civil society leads to new alliances that can also prove efficient and interesting in other contexts. It's actually a mindset you install, not only applicable to refugees. Therefore, it can inspire other cities to adapt this practice to their own context.

Successfactors:

- Set up a structure that involves everybody (administration, citizens, NGO's, volunteers,...).
- Set clear roles and responsibilities
- Involve volunteers from the very beginning and support them
- Involve refugees (win – win)
- Connect people, organizations and services
- Communicate open and transparently