

Ghent

Comprehensive policies and extraordinary collaborations.

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1. Abstract & Takeaways

Key Takeaways:

1

The particularly high level of collaboration between the city and civil society organisations makes Ghent's local migration and integration policies unique in Belgium.

2

Individual and long-term support of migrants early on takes a broad focus on wellbeing in general.

What is unique about the city?

Civic engagement supported by the city: Ghent has both an active civil society and recognises its invaluable initiatives. This allows the city to support civil society projects to a high degree, including through official cooperation in certain cases. This cooperation allows for a more holistic, tailored, and socially-oriented (instead of merely results-oriented) approach to supporting and including newcomers in Ghent. For its cooperative approach, Ghent has received various titles of solidarity.

What is the focus of local migration policies?

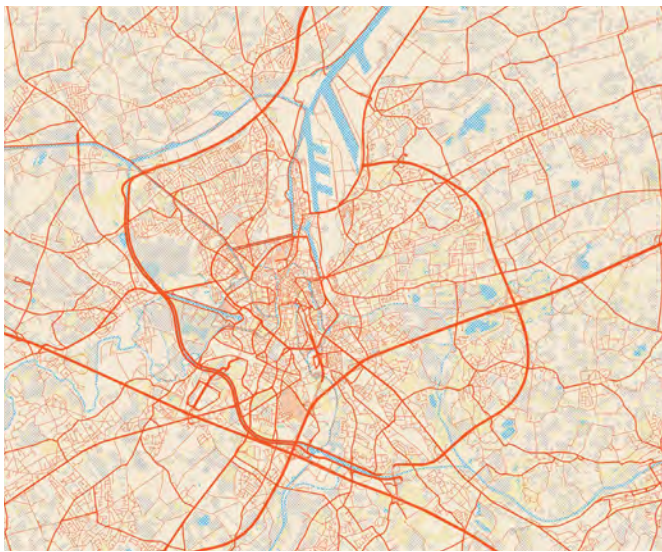
Bringing proactive inclusion and solidarity together: Ghent's Migration Forum, which brings together migration actors, promotes cooperation and a holistic approach between the multiple initiatives taking place. The idea is to proactively integrate asylum seekers while involving civil society to simultaneously foster solidarity among current city residents. The city's most prominent initiatives concern reception, (volunteering) work, and social inclusion.

“Various initiatives and organisations arise through bottom up approaches. The city of Ghent recognises and supports these initiatives and organisations, without taking them over”.

(Rudy Coddens, Alderman of Social Policy and Finance)

Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

Believing in the power of these local approaches, both local politicians and citizens have campaigned for a more open approach to migration at the national level. After the Moria fire, the city of Ghent pledged to receive more refugees than the federal government set out to do, only to see the federal government block it. In this respect, Ghent Mayor Mathias De Clercq proclaimed that “cooperation and solidarity across borders is more relevant than ever, especially for the most vulnerable in our global society. The coronavirus doesn’t know any borders. European solidarity and cooperation are necessary more than ever.”



Population

263,608

Location/ region

East Flanders (province)

Mayor (party)

Mathias De Clercq (Open Vld)

2. Local background and context

2.1 Priority areas for Ghent migration and inclusion policy

Focus on social rights

Ghent’s migration and integration policy mainly focuses on social rights (over political rights). Ghent is committed to providing help and assistance to refugees and migrants in all aspects of life, such as housing, education, language and integration, healthcare, employment, leisure and social networks. Exemplary of this is Ghent’s collaboration with civil society organizations to start the integration process as soon as an asylum seeker arrives in the city, instead of waiting until after the recognition of their status as refugee, the granting of subsidiary protection or the obtaining of another residence right.

Ghent puts forward a double-pronged approach that simultaneously allows organizations and citizens to get to know newcomers, while

speeding up the integration process for these newcomers. Building on the ideas of contact theory (which argues intergroup contact reduces prejudice), the aim is to help combat negative stereotypes and prejudices against newcomers. Until now, no research has been conducted to measure the impact of this approach. Another way to reduce negative stereotypes can be through empathizing with the stories of refugees. This is the objective of the board game 'This is not a Game', offered in the schools of Ghent. Based on stories from refugees, students playfully get an insight into what it means to be a refugee. Furthermore, this objective is also pursued by an open-air exhibition, initiated by Ghent and IN-Gent vzw, where citizens of Ghent with a migrant background tell a story about their favorite place in Ghent. This photo exhibition was launched to celebrate World Refugee Day 2020, which is, as the mayor of Ghent, Mathias De Clercq put it, "a good time to think about those who are fleeing. What better way to do so than to give them a face, to literally show them in our city, to let them hear their stories".

Shortcomings: No inclusion without participation

With respect to other rights, such as political participation, Ghent is silent. The city depicts itself as a promoter of the inclusion of newcomers from the first day of arrival. To accomplish this, granting social rights is indispensable. However, as the coordinator of Jobteam Ghent has recognised, no person can ever be fully part of society without participation in decision-making or policy. The need for refugees to politically participate in society cannot be understated. This shortcoming was confirmed by civil society organizations.

2.2 Actors in Ghent's migration and inclusion policies and collaboration

Ghent's local migration and integration practice is characterized by a multi-actor approach, ranging from the city itself and its different agencies to civil society organisations and citizen initiatives.

A first actor is the city itself. In addition to the Refugee Taskforce and Migratieforum, the city of Ghent has set up projects concerning migration and integration, on its own or in collaboration with municipal agencies or civil society organizations. A clear example is the cooperation agreement of December 2020 between Ghent and vzw Thope concerning the housing of resettled refugees through the requirement of homes to rent and the development of a social network of social services and "buddies" (see 3.4.)

An active civil society

Secondly, many civil society organizations are active in Ghent, which constitute a major asset for its migration and integration policies. Many of these organizations work closely with other organizations and/or the city of Ghent. For example, a collaboration between youth organisations (JES vzw and Tumult vzw), a youth movement (KAJ De Mug), a university college (Odisee) and refugee organisations (SINGA and MENA)

arranged a four-day cycling tour in 2018 for newcomers from Ghent to other cities in Belgium, called 'Circle of Cycle & Eetfestijn'. During the cycling tour, different parts of Belgium were discovered and social networks were built. This collaboration was granted a welcoming award by Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen.

Thirdly, solidarity from the citizens of Ghent has resulted in citizen movements or individual citizen initiatives. A well-known citizen movement is Gent Zonder Grenzen (Ghent Without Borders). This movement, consisting of committed citizens and launched in early 2020, stands for the humane treatment of people with and without documents. They first gained public attention through social media platforms (especially Facebook) and were forced to continue working online due to the COVID pandemic. This allowed them to reach a broad audience, and use their support to put pressure on the local and federal migration policies. Exemplary of this are their meetings with the city and federal government in relation to the reception of refugees after the fire in Moria (see 4).

An example of an individual citizen initiative is Hart voor Vluchtelingen (Heart for Refugees). This initiative was founded in 2015 by a citizen of Ghent to collect material aid for asylum seekers and refugees arriving in Ghent. Today, Hart voor Vluchtelingen is a community that offers material assistance as well as friendship work and various activities and workshops.

Close collaboration between the city and civil society

What makes the local migration and integration policies of Ghent unique is the high level of collaboration between the city and civil society organizations. Alderman Coddens describes this as follows: "various initiatives and organizations arise from bottom-up initiatives and the city of Ghent recognizes and supports these initiatives and organizations, without taking them over". Ghent considers its citizens and civil society organizations as partners in achieving solidarity. According to Ghent and civil society, working together, instead of side by side, allows for joining forces to realize a solidaristic and humane policy towards newcomers. This openness to collaboration is equally recognised by the civil society organisations, who appreciate the trust-based relationships and recognition that arise; they are in favour of an even closer cooperation.

A point of criticism voiced by civil society organizations is that the partnerships between Ghent and civil society organisations tend to be established for relatively short periods of time. More longevity is needed in order to achieve sustainable results. For example, the duration of the project Jobteam Gent was originally set at two years, but the pressure to increase the employment rate of newcomers will not have ceased after this period. However, there is a possibility of extension of projects. This was already granted to Jobteam Gent once, with a current extension of one year, and the hope for a further extension.

3. Selected local approaches

3.1 Ghent's Refugee Taskforce

Ghent's Refugee Taskforce was set up to help newcomers begin to integrate into society as soon as they arrive in the city. Central to this was the establishment of an additional reception initiative, in the shape of a boat that docked at the port of Ghent. The Reno-boat provided the starting point to create a closer cooperation between the city and other relevant organisations, both on the ground through the support of the boat's new residents, and behind the scenes through the establishment of thematic working groups to realize an integrated approach.

In 2015 Ghent, like many European cities, was facing an increasing number of refugees and asylum seekers. In response, Ghent expanded its reception capacities by providing more reception places in its Stedelijk Opvanginitiatief (Urban Reception Initiative) and by establishing a temporary reception initiative called the Reno-boat.

Going beyond the national requirements

For the Reno-boat Ghent decided to go beyond what was required at the national level. In addition to the basic "bed, bath, bread" services, Ghent invested in guidance and support for refugees and asylum seekers. Ghent aimed to provide guidance to integration as soon as newcomers arrive in Ghent, regardless of their legal status. To coordinate this innovative and unique approach, Ghent set up a Refugee Taskforce with full support of the city council.

Ghent's Refugee Taskforce has been widely praised for its quality and success. UNHCR declared Ghent a "solidarity city" with refugees. A collaboration between Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, Amnesty International, 11.11.11, Caritas and many other organizations also granted Ghent solidarity status. Lastly, Ghent has been awarded an URBACT Good Practice for its policy toward refugees, called "Refugee Solidarity".

According to alderman Coddens, together with the mayor competent for the refugee policy of Ghent, "the real strength and power of the Refugee Taskforce has always been in the daily efforts of professional staff, the numerous civil society organisations and their volunteers, citizens' initiatives and committed citizens. And we will continue to stimulate these networks, because cooperation works".

The four key success factors

The success story of the Refugee Taskforce can be attributed to four dimensions.

- (1) Firstly, Ghent utilizes an integrated and pro-active approach. Key services and contact with relevant organizations are provided to newcomers from the first day of arrival in Ghent, with a dual objective. The integration process of newcomers is accelerated, while simultaneously organizations and citizens have the chance to get to know the newcomers, which may contribute to decreased prejudices against newcomers.
- (2) A second dimension of the success story, referred to as the participatory approach, is the partnership between city services, NGOs, civil society organizations and individual citizens. In light of this, three working groups were created, respectively concerning reception, integration and sensibilisation.
- (3) Thirdly, the Refugee Taskforce grants a comprehensive and complete package of solutions to help asylum seekers and refugees with different issues. This result-oriented approach starts from their concrete needs and evolves into the creation of various networks to support different aspects of life, such as housing, education, language, health and work.
- (4) Lastly, according to URBACT, the Refugee Taskforce serves as a replicable and transferrable solution for other European cities.

Because a coordinated and cooperative approach to migration and integration is not only relevant for refugees and asylum seekers, Ghent decided to transform the Refugee Taskforce into the Migratieforum (Migration Forum). This Migratieforum concerns all people with a migrant background. This includes the many intra-European migrants residing in Ghent, who mainly come from Bulgaria, Slovakia and Romania. Through this Migratieforum the city hopes to maintain a dialogue between the city and its citizens, between policymakers and field workers, between organizations and individuals, and professionals and volunteers. The objective is to work together on local policy towards newcomers and people with a migrant background. Therefore, Ghent organizes its Migratieforum twice a year to allow all the different actors involved to meet, exchange and debate on themes of migration and integration. Jobteam Gent, a civil society organization, expressed its appreciation for the Migratieforum as follows: “you don’t always agree on everything, but thanks to the Migratieforum everyone is forced to sit at the same table and problems can be discussed from different angles in a much more integrated way”.

The key takeaways are the positive impact of

- 1 the pro-active approach to provide support and guidance to asylum seekers before they have obtained a residence right,
- 2 the co-operation between city and civil society initiatives in concrete projects, to allow the establishment of longer lasting collaborations and
- 3 the continuous maintenance of these networks through the establishment of a twice-yearly forum bringing all the relevant actors together to discuss the themes and target groups they are all concerned with.

3.2 Jobteam Gent

The main aim of Jobteam Gent is to help vulnerable people in Ghent find a durable job. Strengths of the project are its holistic approach and the expertise of its team. The project provides long-term support, ranging from outreach approaches to tailored support, specialized training and ongoing monitoring. This is all realised by an inter-organisational team, comprised of staff members from 10 municipal and civil society organisations, each with their own expertise (e.g. youthwork, substance abuse, social services, education, reception).

Jobteam Gent is an extensive project that aims to help people with a migrant background and other vulnerable groups to find a job. The two-year project started in the beginning of 2020, initiated by the department of Work of Ghent. It brought together multiple previous projects focussing on supporting one specific target group in finding a durable job. During the project, Jobteam Gent wants to reach 1.500 persons and have 920 participants in an intensive coaching program towards. After one year, they have already reached 798 people, of which 532 people have entered in intensive coaching programs. Staff members are ambitious and hope for a further extension of the project. The project is sponsored by the city of Ghent and the European Social Fund (ESF). According to ESF, “the project scores the maximum on expertise and experience because of a very strong relationship with its partner organisations, strong local embedding and a very experienced team with diverse expertise”. The team is composed of 35 staff members, originating from ten different partner organisations, including the city of Ghent and several civil society organizations.

Long-term tailored support

One of the unique strengths of Jobteam Gent is that they offer more long-term and tailored support than provided by the regular interim offices. The project’s strategy is an outreaching approach, moving away from the traditional model where job seekers are required to visit an

office. Instead, staff members step into the living environment of job seekers, visiting social services, youth movements, specific neighbourhoods, individual homes, job sites and so on. This allows the staff to remove some barriers to reaching and supporting the most vulnerable people. Another distinctive feature of Jobteam Gent is that they work on an individual basis. The coaching program is not fixed in advance, but is determined by the job seeker and their job coach. In this way, the project can guarantee an accessible, intensive and sustained service for the job seeker concerned.

In addition to individual guidance, the project provides language coaching and support, education and training mediation, labour market orientation and competence screening. To illustrate this multidimensional approach, Renaud Teukam, a participant in the coaching program, states: “My first job here in Belgium was very irregular. I rarely knew in advance whether I would be able to work. Together with Julie from the Jobteam, I continued my search. I have now been working for Ivago for almost one and a half years. The Jobteam also follows up on my residence status and when I was almost homeless, they helped me look for accommodation”.

A broader focus on wellbeing

In the search for a suitable job, Jobteam Gent addresses other aspects of life too, such as housing needs, drug problems, financial problems and psychological problems. The focus is thus not only on work, but on wellbeing in general. The design of the project allows to work on these urgent needs as well as barriers to finding a durable job. While this means the short-term results in terms of ‘finding a durable job’ are at times limited, the project recognises the long-term relevance of taking these preliminary steps. This might offer challenges to staff members who have not previously worked in these other domains, but they can always count on the expertise of their colleagues.

Some key takeaways are the benefits of

- 1** the open-endedness of the project's aim to not only help people find a job but to reach these vulnerable populations in the first place, and to support them in bridging the barriers on the road to a durable job,
- 2** the creation of a long-term support process, combining individual support, monitoring and training to strengthen the client's job-seeking and working skills,
- 3** the continuous maintenance of these networks through the establishment of a twice-the combination of expertise and organisations involved in carrying out this project, which further extends the reach and support of the project.

3.3 Refu Interim

Refu Interim builds bridges between local social and cultural organisations and refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Ghent through volunteering. The personal interests of the volunteers are recognised as a ground to create a mutually beneficial learning experience, where volunteers can practice their Dutch language speaking skills, execute a specific task and get in contact with other employees, and organisations learn to appreciate and work with diverse people.

Refu Interim is a project addressing the social and labour integration of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. Despite its name, Refu Interim is not a real interim agency: their main focus is social contact. The project originated from an initiative of vzw Cirq, who wanted to make an artistic production about newcomers to perform at the Gentse Feesten (a yearly ten-day festival in Ghent) in 2016. Vzw Cirq wanted to involve newcomers themselves in their production, Batahlan, and eventually more than 70 newcomers participated as volunteers. The production aimed to counter stereotypes about asylum seekers and refugees, and at the same time bring visitors and asylum seekers into contact with each other. Due to the success and enthusiasm for Batahlan, Refu Interim was created in 2017.

Fostering social and professional self-reliance

Refu Interim is subsidised by the city of Ghent and the Ministry of Culture. They want to promote the social and professional self-reliance of newcomers. Refu Interim supports them in their path to work and gives them a helping hand in building a social network. Specifically, the project brings newcomers and organisations in touch with each other through voluntary work in the cultural and social sector. Matching between newcomer the organisation takes place on an individual basis, with special attention to the interests, skills and characteristics of the newcomer concerned, and to the social engagement of the organisation. By carrying out voluntary work in local organisations in Ghent, three different objectives are pursued. Firstly, the first step into the labour market is facilitated for newcomers. By involving them as volunteers during the period of their residence procedure, Refu Interim wants to give newcomers the opportunity to work voluntarily, as the latter have to wait during their residence procedure before they are allowed to work. Secondly, the social integration of newcomers is accelerated. Cultural and financial barriers sometimes make it difficult for arrivals to move outside of their own community. Refu interim opens possibilities to build a network, as newcomers get in touch with organisations in Ghent and the Dutch language in an informal context. Thirdly, diversity is increased, since the project encourages cultural and social organisations to take in newcomers as volunteers. In this way, organisations better reflect the diverse composition of the society in Ghent.

An example of a success story is Rose, who had extensive work experience in Rwanda but struggled to find a job in Belgium, until she came in contact with Refu Interim, where she eventually started to work professionally: “They [Refu Interim] were looking for someone to run the operation in Lokeren. Linking volunteers to organisations, looking for new

opportunities for voluntary work, organising activities and workshops... Bringing people together, giving volunteers a helping hand and creating a connection. I did not have to think for long [to take the job]”

In 2019, 210 asylum seekers, refugees and migrants volunteered in organisations in Ghent, 65 of whom had newly registered that year. These numbers show that most newcomers do voluntary work not for one, but for several years.

Refu Interim has worked with 69 different organisations in 2019, and, due to their success in Ghent has expanded into other regions in Flanders: Ostend, Kortrijk, Bruges, Leuven, Sint-Niklaas and Lokeren. However, the support of local governments and communities has not been as extensive everywhere as it has been in Ghent.

The key takeaways from Refu Interim are the benefits of

- 1** investing in making qualitative matches, based on the interests of volunteers and screening organisations' accessibility to volunteers,
- 2** valuing volunteering work as a way to create a network, practice a language and learn more about job opportunities and
- 3** investing in a supportive relationship with the local government and its (social and cultural) departments, and in co-operation with them establishing support from the local community and organisations.

3.4 Project Ankerkracht

Project Ankerkracht is carried out by a multidisciplinary team to support young, recently arrived refugees in multiple domains of their lives. The team members first establish informal contacts with the youths to develop a relationship of trust. This allows them to build bridges between both the young refugees and social support services, and between different supportive disciplines.

Ankerkracht (Anchor Power) was set up by the Belgian federal government and was originally funded by the European Union. However, in 2015 European subsidies were ended. The same year, the Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn (Public Centre for Social Welfare, OCMW) of Ghent decided, after an evaluation, which projects that were no longer subsidised would be taken over with regular funds. Ankerkracht was one of the selected projects. Moreover, the OCMW decided to structurally embed the project in its operations.

An anchor for young refugees

As the name of the project suggests, Ankerkracht aims to “anchor” young refugees in Ghent’s society. As young refugees form a particularly vulnerable group, there is a need for appropriate guidance, both in group and individually. Members of the target group of the project are between 16 and 25 years old, have been recognised as a refugee or granted subsidiary protection, receive a living wage and have been living in Ghent for less than one year.

The project applies an outreaching, tailored and holistic approach to focus on all areas of the young person’s life, with particular attention to psycho-education, identity and personality development, integration, participation and social and financial empowerment. The aim is to support the young people in acquiring skills. To achieve these objectives, the OCMW set up a multidisciplinary team of social workers, a psychologist, a housing coach and a job coach. This enables them to support language learning, education, employment, networking, leisure etc. – both individually and in group. The project’s success derives from the holistic integration of various disciplines by a case manager and a personal development plan.

The number of applications increased from 41 in 2014 to 77 in 2015, with the number of active participants every year fluctuating between 50 and 60. Both internal and external services are satisfied with the social value of the Ankerkracht project.

Key takeaways of Ankerkracht include the successes of

- 1** the investment in an outreaching, informal approach to reach young refugees and build a relationship of trust,
- 2** the creation of a multidisciplinary team for supporting both the young refugees and for the team members to support each other (in weekly meetings),
- 3** the recognition of the existing youth culture and the existing support network.

4. Advocacy and network activities: Some conclusive remarks

Ghent is not only working actively in building solidarity at a local level. The city also advocates for more solidarity towards newcomers at the national and European level.

On the national level, the citizen initiative Gent Zonder Grenzen (Ghent Without Borders) wrote an open letter to the city council of Ghent in June 2020 requesting the shelter of 300 asylum seekers following the inhuman living conditions in Moria. With the support of Ghent, they then addressed this request to the federal government. The spokesman of alderman Coddens stated that “we have sent a clear signal that we want to exercise our responsibility for international solidarity”. However, the initiative was rejected by the Belgian federal government.

Ghent is also taking action at the EU level. For example, in 2018 the then mayor of Ghent, Daniël Termont, wrote an open letter to call on the European Council to create a fair and common EU asylum system, declaring that “cities work every day to put the European values of solidarity, humanity and dignity into practice. Now is the time for European member states do the same”. Another illustration is the Public Statement from European Cities on Vulnerable Children on the refugee situation in Greece. Ghent, together with other European cities, addressed the statement in April 2020 to the presidents of the EU institutions, offering to take in unaccompanied children from overcrowded refugee camps on the Greek islands.

Whereas the city of Ghent has successfully created and supported several solidarity projects locally, its appeals to the Belgian and European level to show the same solidarity have been less often heard.

The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of 28 progressive, solidarity-based cities and their strategies in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful local approaches to their migration policies.

Moving Cities is a project from Seebrücke, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and Heinrich Böll Stiftung, funded by Robert Bosch Stiftung and Stiftungsfonds Zivile Seenotrettung and supported by many more initiatives.

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