



Montreuil

Co-developing solutions with local communities

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1. Abstract & Takeaways

Wichtigste Erkenntnisse

1

The municipality of Montreuil has developed an “International Exchange and Decentralised Cooperation Service” (“Service Échanges Internationaux et Coopération Décentralisée (EICD)”) centre to foster international solidarity policies through local cooperation, together with migrant communities.

2

Over the years, the city has structured a network of services offered to foreign residents and newcomers (asylum seekers). These include literacy and writing courses, legal and administrative support, and social residences. All are done in collaboration with migrant support associations in the area.

3

During political tensions between national and local authorities in September 2018, the municipality requisitioned a disused state building (AFPA, Adult Vocational Training Agency) to adapt it into an emergency reception area.

What is unique about the city?

A laboratory for innovative approaches: Located in the eastern suburbs of Paris, Montreuil is historically characterised by a high migration rate. This made it a place where not only migration-related challenges became particularly visible, but also where, at the same time, many successful local policy solutions were tested. Montreuil has a rich history of migrant self-organisation and in the last years, the municipality has supported political activism by undocumented migrants (“sans papiers”). It also went into conflicts with the national government regarding the housing situation of migrants.

What is the focus of local migration policies?

Unconditional access to rights and services: The development of local services for resident foreigners (either with regular status or undocumented) and refugees is strictly connected to the evolution of local

policies. Under mayor Patrice Bessac's new left-wing coalition, Montreuil is gradually moving from a reactive "ad hoc" approach to services intended for specific categories, to an "unconditional access" model for all residents. The city has developed several programmes fostering economic, cultural, and legal inclusion.

Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

In Montreuil, migrant reception and welcoming policies have represented a point of debate for many years (e.g. regarding the reception of the Roma population in 2009). The city claims to have an international solidarity history, in particular since in 1985, a partnership with Mali was signed, representing the precursor of what would later be called decentralised cooperation. Many more international partnerships, including those with cities in Latin America, Asia, and Turkey, followed. In 2015, Montreuil became a founding member of the french ANVITA network ('Association Nationale des Villes et Territoires Accueillants' - the National Association of Welcoming Cities and Territories). In September 2020, with a resolution adopted by the city council, Montreuil declared its support for the National March of Undocumented Workers ('Marche nationale des Sans Papiers'). Representatives of the National March described Montreuil as a "welcoming, solidarity city, linked to a universal citizenship."

“As a full citizen, each Montreuil resident must be able to participate fully in democratic life; this is an essential condition for us to all live together and be equal.”

Mayor Patrice Bessac, 27.06.2018



Population

109,897

Location

Located in the Seine-Saint-Denis department in the Île de France region, Montreuil is part of Paris' urban area, bordering the French capital on its east side.

Mayor

Patrice Bessac (Front de Gauche)

2. Local background and context

The city of Montreuil, nicknamed Bamako-sous-bois, is called “the second Malian city in the world” with its 8-10,000 Malian inhabitants. In total, the foreign population makes up about one fourth of the inhabitants.¹ Located in the eastern suburb of Paris, Montreuil is historically characterised by a high migration rate, with a population increase of 265% in the first forty years of the 1900s. Industrial development first attracted European (mostly Italian) migrants, followed by people from Maghreb and West Africa (francophone). In 2015, one out of four inhabitants of Montreuil was born abroad.²

A history of migrant self-organisation

The development of migrant workers' foyers started during the 1950s and 60s. The subsequent evolution of stricter migration policies has produced an increase in the population of undocumented people (sans papiers). As in other banlieu cities and in Paris, the organisation of migrant collectives have claimed their right to regularisation and developed forms of self-management.³ To date, the management of foreign worker (sans papiers or “regular”) foyers represents one of the main problems in cohabitation, access to rights (housing), and integration. These come with political tensions between the competencies and responsibilities of local authorities and national institutions. The emblematic case of “Bara foyer”⁴ (see chapter 3.2) illustrates this tension, which affects the living conditions of several hundred irregular migrants who are excluded from the reception system.

Decentralised policies

Due to the “multicultural” composition of the local population, the municipality of Montreuil has developed over the years decentralised co-operation policies relying on migrant associations in the area. Despite structural issues, linked to housing access,⁵ the city of Montreuil, which has been governed over the years by progressive and left-wing coalitions, has established itself as a solidarity and multicultural municipality, “attentive” to integration and inclusion policies.⁶ Starting from 2010, along with the “Grand Paris”⁷ development process, Montreuil has become the reference municipality of the “Est Ensemble” (Together in the East) coalition of territorial communities.⁸ In 2018, Montreuil hosted the States General of Migration (‘États Généraux des Migrations’),⁹ during which the representatives of 106 local assemblies adopted an original declaration, to propose a “common basis for a migration policy that respects fundamental rights and the dignity of people.”¹⁰ Montreuil is a particularly interesting case study in terms of how solidarity and welcoming policies can be developed at a local level. It is one of the most vocal French welcoming cities, and it didn't shy away from conflict with the national authorities regarding the management and reception of sans papiers.

¹ Villes-Mondes: Bamako-sur-Seine

² <https://www.montreuil.fr/la-ville/population>

³ <https://www.leparisien.fr/seine-saint-denis-93/saint-denis-93200/saint-denis-la-coordination-des-sans-papiers-a-20-ans-03-11-2016-6285618.php>

⁴ <https://www.la-croix.com/leur-squat-indigne-Baras-Montreuil-preparent-expulsion-2021-02-25-1301142714>

⁵ https://www.montreuil.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/05_Grands_Projets/09_Le_Plan_local_d_urbanisme/_PLU_/03_Archives_de_l_evolution_du_PLU/Le_PLU_modifie_du_1er_decembre_2015/1-1_Diagnostic_EIE-V2.pdf

⁶ <https://www.montreuil.fr/fil-infos/detail/communique-un-etat-de-droit-ne-peut-bafouer-les-droits-des-resident-e-s-etranger-e-s-non-aux-guichets-fermes-des-services-de-la-prefecture-de-seine-saint-denis>

⁷ <https://www.societedugrand-paris.fr/>

⁸ <https://www.est-ensemble.fr/les-instances>

⁹ <https://www.leparisien.fr/seine-saint-denis-93/montreuil-l-appel-des-100-pour-une-autre-politique-migratoire-27-05-2018-7738803.php>

¹⁰ <http://www.gisti.org/spip.php?article5916>

3. Selected local approaches

3.1 Local services

The development of local services for resident foreigners (with regular status or sans papiers) and asylum seekers / refugees is strictly connected to the evolution of local policies. In particular, with the mandate of mayor Patrice Bessac (head of a left-wing coalition), Montreuil is gradually moving from an “ad hoc” approach to services intended for specific categories targeting a specific need, to a perspective of “unconditional access” to rights and services for all residents. The following chapter records the main services covered so far.

Inclusion through culture

The city offers numerous cultural options for the migrant population as pathways to encourage inclusion.

- ◆ Over the years the city, through its ‘Service Lutte contre les discriminations et intégration’ (Fight against discrimination and integration service), has structured a network of services offered to foreign residents and newcomers (asylum seekers). These include literacy and writing courses, legal and administrative support, foyers and social residences, in collaboration with migrant support associations (Gisti and Cimade), and with migrant associations in the area.¹¹ In addition, the city’s service also carries out transversal work to develop projects aimed at improving the social, cultural and civic integration of migrant populations, including support for projects with elderly migrant audiences (fostering social ties, decompartmentalization); preventive actions in the fight against discrimination; organisation of “diversity cafes;” sociocultural projects with the audiences of French learning workshops; and actions within the framework of the “Anti-Racism Education Week.”
- ◆ Literacy work is part of a long-term collaboration with social centres in the area, which participate in the municipal linguistic device (school accompaniment, literacy for adults) but also provide complementary services in collaboration with migrant communities in the area.¹² The literacy work is also part of a literacy policy adopted at regional level, which is more specifically directed to inclusion in the job market.¹³ Furthermore, since 2012, the city of Montreuil has animated a network of public writers (professionals or volunteers) in support of the resident population, who offer their services to about 3,000 people a year (2018).¹⁴

¹¹ <https://www.montreuil.fr/solidarites/integration-aide-aux-populations-migrantes>

¹² <https://www.montreuil.fr/solidarites/integration/alphabetisation>

¹³ https://www.gouvernement.fr/sites/default/files/contenu/piece-jointe/2017/10/le_reseau_des_cri.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.montreuil.fr/actualites/detail/appel-a-benevoles-rejoindre-le-reseau-des-ecrivains-publics-benevoles-1>

Inclusion through working opportunities

Alongside “classic” professional training and employment support courses, in the territory of Montreuil, in partnership with the city administration, professional training and support activities for foreigners are being developed.

- ◆ The “Migrants’ Socio-Professional Promotion Program” offers three cycles of training aimed at associative actors and / or individual project leaders on the themes of employment, income-generating activities, and discrimination in the labour market¹⁵.
- ◆ Since June 2019, the “La Ruche” incubator of Montreuil helps the entrepreneurs réfugiés dans leurs projets d’entreprises.¹⁶ Within ANVITA and together with the La Ruch association and The Human Safety Net Foundation, Montreuil has developed a good practise in aiding its refugee population in the creation of enterprise and association projects. The “incubator” offers a collaborative workspace, laboratories and collective workshops, individual follow-ups and mentoring, and networking with a group of experts.¹⁷

Inclusion through access to rights and legal support

- ◆ In collaboration with associations for the defense of the rights of foreign people, the city of Montreuil hosts two PADs (points of access to rights), which offer diversified services including “aid to victims” , generic support of a “rights defender,” specialists in “foreigners’ rights,” support for asylum seekers, foreign women, and victims of violence.¹⁸ Since 2019, this activity has been strengthened by a stable presence of these services.¹⁹

Inclusion through health care

The city offers three municipal health centres (CMS). The CMS were created to facilitate access to care. They bring together various medical or dental specialties in one place and offer patients a quality service. They offer anonymous and free reception by appointment²⁰.

3.2 Housing

Initially meant to cover temporary housing solutions for migrant workers mostly from former French colonies, the so-called ‘Foyers de Travailleurs Migrants (FTM)’²¹ have become a stable housing solution.²² FTM are buildings offering collective spaces and one-room apartments. On municipal territory, there are 12 migrant workers’ foyers, managed by different organisations,²³ while former FTM have been refurbished and converted into social housing.

The mobilisation of “sans papiers”

The FTM, through the development of solidarity and mutual aid networks, welcome numerous foreign workers of irregular status. This category of foreigners results from the evolution of migration management

¹⁵ <https://grdr.org/Cycle-de-formation-sur-l-insertion>

¹⁶ <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/28216/video-a-montreuil-un-incubateur-pour-les-entrepreneurs-refugiés>

¹⁷ <https://start.lesechos.fr/societe/engagement-societal/a-montreuil-lincubateur-qui-aide-les-refugiés-a-sinsérer-grâce-a-l'entrepreneuriat-1257501>;

http://www.espacedatapresse.com/fil_datapresse/consultation_cp.jsp?idcp=2856563

¹⁸ <https://www.est-ensemble.fr/agir-au-quotidien/la-maison-de-justice-et-du-droit-et-les-points-d'accès-au-droit>;

<http://www.infomie.net/spip.php?auteur508>

¹⁹ https://actu.fr/ile-de-france/montreuil_93048/seine-saint-denis-montreuil-avocats-mobilisés-sans-papiers_27169248.html

²⁰ <https://www.montreuil.fr/sante/loffre-de-soins/centres-municipaux-de-sante-cms>

²¹ <https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F17912>

²² The situation in France of the FTM is a long and complex history of housing several generations of migrant workers and cannot be addressed in detail in this text.

²³ <https://www.montreuil.fr/foyers-et-residences-sociales>

²⁴ https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/2018/02/13/y-a-t-il-entre-400-000-et-500-000-etrangers-en-situation-irreguliere-en-france-comme-le-dit-eric-cio_1653166/

policies in France in the 1980s and 90s. Growing difficulties in renewing residence permits, the rejection of asylum applications, and expulsion measures have created a population living in precarious conditions. There are estimated to be between 300,000 and 600,000 such individuals in France.²⁴ They cannot be regularised, nor expelled. This national situation led to a well-known mobilisation of the “sans papiers” from Montreuil in 1996, culminating in the occupation of the church of Saint Bernard in the 18th arrondissement in Paris.²⁵ The situation of the foyers, between state responsibilities, management policies, and the ability/willingness to intervene in the municipalities, today represents one of the main problems in the metropolitan area of Paris, and beyond. This is a situation particularly sensitive in the territory of Montreuil. The city of Montreuil is still in the midst of political tensions, especially in relation to housing, because its territory suffers from a lack of adequate and affordable housing for its residents. This is due on one hand to local housing policies being largely influenced by the tense housing market in Paris, which affect the surrounding municipalities in the Ile de France, and on the other hand on decisions made at the national level which lack adequate public investment in affordable housing.

²⁵ <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/affaires-sensibles/affaires-sensibles-19-octobre-2015>

²⁶ <https://www.la-croix.com/leur-squat-indigne-Baras-Montreuil-preparent-expulsion-2021-02-25-1301142714>

²⁷ <https://www.afpa.fr>

²⁸ “Today, we are particularly worried about the police operations regularly carried out in the immediate vicinity of the former AFPA building. Indeed, every morning as these men leave to work or return from work, they and other residents undergo targeted identity checks. Some people were arrested, others released, some people received OQTF, (Obligation to leave French territory) others are still held in an administrative detention centre, for which we have hired a collection of lawyers who are members of GISTI and ADDE (Lawyers for the Defense of Foreigners’ Rights)”. <https://www.montreuil.fr/actualites/detail/declaration-de-la-majorite-municipale-les-elu-es-de-la-majorite-de-montreuil-denoncent-les-arrestations-et-les-controles-d-identite-des-residents-du-foyer-bara-reloges-dans-les-locaux-requisitionnes-de-l-ex-afpa>
https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/montreuil-le-maire-requisitionne-pour-loger-des-migrants-26-09-2018-2254524_23.php

How proactive municipalities are disputing state regulations

The emblematic case of the “Bara foyer”²⁶ illustrates this tension well, affecting the living conditions of several hundred irregular migrants who are excluded from the reception system. After the opening of two social residences in 2015 and 2016, in 2018 the city of Montreuil proposed using the empty premises of the AFPA²⁷, in order to temporarily accommodate its last residents in decent conditions. Despite repeated alerts and proposals made by the city, the national government has remained silent. Facing the need to allocate migrant workers, the mayor of Montreuil then bypassed the national government and asserted his power of requisition. In September 2018, Patrice Bessac, mayor of Montreuil, declared the Bara home unhealthy and uninhabitable. As a result, he led an operation to requisition the former empty AFPA premises, owned by the national government, to shelter residents, driven by the conviction that the safety and dignity of the people should prevail over all other considerations. This requisition action also made it possible to initiate the “demolition / reconstruction” of the historic foyer on the Bara street, the project of which was initiated in 2013. The action, for which the municipality received support from ANVITA, opened a dispute with the national government.²⁸

3.3 Associations and civil society involvement

The city of Montreuil relies on vocal and active local associations of citizens, cultural centres and third sector actors, which engage in shaping Montreuil's inclusion and welcome policy towards refugees and asylum seekers.

The Collectif des Sorins is a collective of migrant workers from Montreuil, almost all of which are “sans papiers” and residing in France for around ten years already. In 2020, they wrote to the prefect to ask him for the regularisation of their group. Without a response from him, they decided to write an open letter to inform the public about the life of undocumented migrants and to highlight that “[...] the law contradicts itself: [they] do not have the right to work and yet today [they] are asked for evidence that [they] are working to regularise [themselves].”²⁹

Libraries without Borders

Montreuil is also the headquarters of the Bibliothèques sans Frontières (Libraries without Borders), an NGO that strengthens the power of vulnerable populations to act by facilitating their access to education, culture, and information. The NGO is present in more than fifty countries, creating innovative cultural and educational spaces that allow people affected by crises and precariousness to learn, have fun, and create bonds.³⁰ In the city, various associations and NGOs with different political stances are able to work together. In December 2015, parallel to the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris, Montreuil hosted the Village Mondial des alternatives,³¹ hosting a large number of migrant associations. During the two-day conference, many topics were debated, such as what local civic welcome alternatives could influence migration policies. Participants highlighted the need of a local level solidarity network, not only for migrants, but for all.³²

²⁹ French original: “Mais la loi se contredit : nous n'avons pas le droit de travailler et pourtant on nous demande aujourd'hui des preuves que nous travaillons pour nous régulariser.” <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/collectif-des-sorins/blog/050820/lettre-ouverte-de-notre-collectif-de-sans-papiers-montreuil>

³⁰ <https://www.bibliosansfrontieres.org/bsf-org/>

³¹ <https://uneseuleplanete.org/A-Montreuil-un-reseau-d-entraide-avec-les-migrants>

³² French original: “Cela fonctionnerait un peu à la manière du troc, plutôt que d'échanger des valeurs marchandes, chacun proposerait un savoir-faire, afin de faire vivre ce territoire. Et, sans-papiers ou non, chacun serait bienvenue pour intégrer ce réseau!”, *ibid.*

³³ <https://journals.openedition.org/geocarrefour/8261>

³⁴ <https://www.lacimade.org/la-marche-des-sans-papiers/>

4. Advocacy and network activities

In Montreuil, migrant reception and welcoming policies have represented a point of debate for many years (e.g. regarding the reception of the Roma population already in 2009).³³ The city claims an international solidarity history, in particular since in 1985, a partnership with Mali was signed, representing the precursor of what would later be called decentralised cooperation. Many more international cooperations with cities in Latin America, Asia, and Turkey followed. In 2015, Montreuil became a founding member of the ANVITA network. In September 2020, with a resolution adopted by the city council, Montreuil declared its support for the National March of Sans Papier Workers ('Marche nationale des Sans Papiers').³⁴ Representatives of the National March described Montreuil as a “welcoming, solidarity city, linked to a universal citizenship.”

Starting from 2.000, Montreuil has also put in place ambitious international partnership projects towards the Mediterranean (Beit Sira in Palestine, Modi'in in Israel, Agadir in Morocco), Latin America (Diadema in Brazil), Asia (Changchun in China, Haiduong in Vietnam), and in Turkey (Bismil in the Kurdish southeast). Today, the city follows and reinforces its networks with Mali, Palestine, Germany, Turkey, and Vietnam, through many projects concerning local development issues. It also affirms its international solidarity values through the promotion of education and support to local associations that promote dialogue and inequality reduction.³⁵

This historical premise explains the genealogy of the mobilisation of the city of Montreuil as a solidarity city, and as a founding member of the ANVITA network since 2015. In 2018, Montreuil hosted the 'États Généraux des Migrations' (States General of Migration). This meeting was the culmination of a citizen consultation process that brought together around 10.000 people, including French citizens and exiles.³⁶ During the États Généraux, the representatives of 106 local assemblies adopted a declaration affirming a "common basis for a migration policy that respects fundamental rights and the dignity of people."³⁷

In May 2019, Montreuil and the Musée National d'Histoire de l'immigration (MNHI) (National Museum of Migration History) signed a three-year partnership agreement to deepen awareness-raising actions on issues of migration history. In 2018, the city started a first collaboration with the MNHI to launch two exhibitions at the town hall on migration and borders. Later on, museum staff, together with the municipality, held cultural mediation sessions and workshops. The partnership agreement between Montreuil and the MNHI represents a willingness to amplify and renew a common desire of more in-depth work on medium-term projects for raising public awareness on migration.³⁸

³⁵ <https://www.lacimade.org/la-marche-des-sans-papiers/>

³⁶ <http://www.gisti.org/spip.php?article5916>

³⁷ <https://www.leparisien.fr/seine-saint-denis-93/montreuil-l-appel-des-100-pour-une-autre-politique-migratoire-27-05-2018-7738803.php>

³⁸ <https://www.montreuil.fr/actualites/detail/communique-montreuil-et-le-musee-national-dhistoire-de-limmigration-sunissent-contre-ligno-rance-pour-leducation-et-la-connaissance-1>

³⁹ <https://www.montreuil.fr/actualites/detail/communique-mardi-21-mars-2023-journee-internationale-pour-lelimination-de-la-discrimination-raciale>

⁴⁰ <https://www.anvita.fr/fr/actualites/notre-reseau/view/atelier-de-travail-sur-laccueil-inconditionnel-des-collectivites-de-seine-saint-denis>

5. Update: What is new in 2023?

- ◆ Montreuil is intensifying its efforts to fight racism and discrimination. To this end, the city - together with **MRAP 93** (Mouvement contre le Racisme et pour l'Amitié entre les Peuples) - opened a legal contact point for people who have been victims of racism and anti-Semitism in March 2023.³⁹
- ◆ The city of Montreuil, together with the department of Seine-Saint-Denis, continues to advocate for the unconditional reception of refugees and migrants. In order to develop a common dynamic and action plans, the cities of the department network with each other and organise workshops for a regional exchange of experiences on reception practices.⁴⁰

- ◆ Montreuil made a strong statement of solidarity in June 2022 when the city, in cooperation with the '**Collectif Sans-Papiers Montreuil**', organised a symbolic sponsorship ceremony for five African migrants without regular residence permits at the city hall.⁴¹ The activists were first arrested in October 2021 on the sidelines of the French-African summit in Montpellier and then sentenced to deportation without permission to return to France.⁴² Once again, Montreuil thus openly criticised the migration policy of the national government.
- ◆ To address the precarious living conditions of many single, under-age migrants in the country, the Montreuil city council has been supporting the 'habitatmobile' project since January 2022 for the next five years. It offers a temporary solution for the accommodation of young people in difficult living situations in the form of 'tiny houses', which can continue to be used in alternative ways afterwards.⁴³ In 2020, Montreuil already participated in a similar community project called '**In My Back Yard**', where modular houses for vulnerable migrants were built in private gardens.⁴⁴

⁴¹ <https://www.anvita.fr/fr/nos-membres/les-pratiques/view/montreuil-parrainage-republicain-pour-les-cinq-de-montpellier>

⁴² <https://www.ldh-france.org/7-de-montpellier-donnez-leur-une-chance-de-vivre-en-france/>

⁴³ <https://www.anvita.fr/fr/nos-membres/les-pratiques/view/montreuil-ecologiques-et-solidaires-micro-maisons-pour-jeunes>

⁴⁴ <https://www.anvita.fr/fr/nos-membres/les-pratiques/view/montreuil-in-my-back-yard-projet-partenarial-dhebergement-solidaire>

The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of progressive cities in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful approaches to migration policies. Find more city reports at www.moving-cities.eu/en.

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