

# When the Local Level Steps In

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Local municipalities and local governments in Poland have a relatively high autonomy in creating policies and laws. This is important, since Poland's national governments have never been active in creating migration and integration policies. Migration policies have been adopted by the previous government in 2012, but have simply not been executed in a way that would make integration processes implementable by local governments, nor by cities, where migrants live and integration is supposed to take place in practice.

## **Inclusion First**

When you consider yourself a part of your city and when you feel responsible for what is going on in your local community, you try to operate through a micro-level perspective in terms of processes of inclusion/ exclusion. Through this perspective, it is not hard to say what is going wrong. As an association of both Poles and immigrants, we, the Centre for Immigrants Support, take perspectives of both the majority and the minorities into account. Our clients, i.e. immigrants and refugees, share their stories with us every day. We put a theoretical anti-discrimination approach into practice. We are confident in our conviction that it is the majority's duty to 'let in', invite, and include minorities. It is technically impossible for any minority to get into mainstream, to be and feel equal if the majority does not acknowledge and address 'normalized' power relations and inter-group privileges. We do not doubt the bi-directional integration dimension, but an inclusion needs to precede integration: for a dialog/exchange to take place, a space for communication needs to be created. We know of xenophobia and discrimination that takes place in our labour market, in schools, health units, cultural institutions. We know people do not feel safe because of their skin colour and many other reasons. As such, we have been dialoguing with City Hall representatives about the need for inclusion, as well as activities to make immigrants' life easier in Gdansk. Also on the agenda: equal chances, integration, a larger number of Polish language courses, which we have been organizing in our Centre – the demand has always been huge.

## **Putting Integration into Action**

Then in April 2015 Gdansk Mayor, Adamowicz, said: “OK, I got your message.” He signed an act on creating a team for an Immigrants Integration Model and invited a large amount of institutions, NGOs, businesses etc. to join the work on integration. Over 70 institutions and 150 people entered the process of developing the policy. The work – which is still going on (and which will be never-ending, in fact: how can integration become a ‘done’ thing?) is coordinated cross-sectoral by both City Hall Social Affairs Department and our NGO. We highlighted eight areas critical to immigrants’ integration: education, employment, health, housing, culture, discrimination & violence, social welfare and local communities’ integration<sup>1</sup>.

We started our work with a diagnosis of the particular situation in these areas (gathering experiences of institutions and of migrant). From the diagnosis we went to developing a vision and asked ourselves how things should work. Finally, we created action plans, which<sup>2</sup> have become our city integration policy, voted by the City Council in June 2016. Since then we have been implementing (or trying to implement) what we have imagined would be necessary. We were ambitious and not always realistic. Some plans had to be changed, some took too much time, some were just too grand. It is an ongoing process to which we continuously invite new people, new institutions, new initiatives. We learn, we discuss, we fail, we get disappointed, we become happy. Sometimes we do one step forward and then two backwards in order to yet again do one move forward. One case in point is our action plan with the police, in which we aim at developing more trust between police and immigrant communities. We trained the police, discussed discrimination with them, and just when we were about to meet with migrant communities to build a cooperation scheme with them, the process suddenly stopped: internal police laws seemed to block our action plan. In order to move forward nevertheless, the safety team leaders were required to re-adapt, adjust the action plan, and find another way to make things happen. It is all very dynamic. And dependent on individual people, which is obviously both a strength and weakness.

## **Challenges and Chances**

When something is not a sufficiently funded national policy, this will be most likely one of the results: structures, institutions, money will be lacking. Immigrants integration is not a local governments’ primary duty – there is no act that determines this. Therefore, integration is executed with limited city resources. Given the national narrative on refugees – through which all immigrants, including refugees, are painted with the same brush as terrorists – our prospects look quite bleak. We need to operate where we can, using those means we have access to and control over. Despite our limitations, we nevertheless have

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<sup>1</sup> After a year of work we added three more areas: higher education, sports and communication.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gdansk.pl/migracje/Immigrant-Integration-Model,a,67017>

space to act – many institutions are municipal, we have our means of communication, there are NGOs and local communities...

Also, cities may have an impact on other cities, villages may affect other villages, regions can impact other regions. We don't live in a void: all actions do matter. We can see how this develops step by step. For instance, on June 30, this year, at a conference we organized ("INTEGRATION = SAFETY"), two declarations were signed. One is on the integration of immigrants signed by Poland's biggest eleven cities. A working group from all these cities started working on October 6<sup>th</sup>. Secondly, a regional declaration for integration was signed, which is about managing integration in smaller towns and villages. Parallel to those actions, employers have become very active to build standards of 'fair employment' and adequate living conditions for immigrants. While doing so, local NGOs now want to start info points for immigrants, build connections with them. In Słupsk, for example, we are training a Women Association<sup>3</sup> to manage this task.

To some extent, in smaller communities, challenges are more visible and people feel more responsible for solving them. Contexts are simpler than in big cities and local leaders are willing 'to take things into their own hands' and make things more just and beneficial to all. With unemployment rate of less than 5% in the region, it is impossible to keep the economy growing without immigrants' labour.

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<sup>3</sup> Amazonian Association – gathering women who experienced breast cancer