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CITIES



Antwerp - Inside Out

Boosting products, boosting people - creating jobs for refugees

Antwerp has turned the challenge of integrating refugees into the labour market into an opportunity to transition to a circular economy. Its innovative Inside Out scheme combines social care with work experience and education to give newcomers with textile and clothing experience the support they need to gain self-esteem, secure jobs and contribute to a more sustainable fashion industry.

Antwerp is the beating heart of the Belgian fashion industry, home to a renowned fashion academy and major fashion designers such as Marc Jacobs and Dries van Noten. Yet refugees arriving from Afghanistan, Iran and Syria with experience in the industry found it impossible to get work. Their lack of formal qualifications wasn't the only thing standing in their way. Poverty and personal presentation and confidence were also playing a part in preventing them accessing the jobs they had the skills and talent to do. The city's social welfare organisation, OCMW Antwerp, saw an opportunity to open doors to the labour market for refugees while also renewing its fashion industry by bringing production back from abroad and promoting circular principles. From the start, the OCMW team was clear that the initiative must pay attention to participants' inner selves, their self-confidence and wellbeing, as well as their outer selves, their appearance and clothes. Through debates with the target audience, the team then defined the mix of practical, psychological and professional support needed.



With some pride I note that Inside Out has grown into a place to invest sustainably in people and create opportunities to make their future better while also helping to reduce the city's ecological footprint - and we will keep on dreaming and evolving.



Marijke Cassiers - Inside Out coordinator

Better life chances

The resulting Inside Out social project has a total yearly budget of €674,000, which funds five full-time staff and nine temporary work experience roles. As an OCMW service, the project also has access to its 200 social workers. These social workers are in touch daily with the city's vulnerable groups and ideally placed to identify refugees with relevant backgrounds. Following assessment and acceptance, individualised support packages are created and

cities in action

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where: Antwerp, Belgium
what: Participation
when: 2007 - ongoing

those for whom work experience is appropriate are offered temporary labour agreements for up to a maximum of two years.

The project helps vulnerable adolescents and children, single mothers and the poor by combining three areas of activity: a clothing store, a tailoring and alterations studio and social care. The latter aims to emancipate and empower people to improve their chances of securing work, through training, guidance and one-to-one coaching. Activities focus on everything from hair and make-up to housing, personal hygiene to styling, and body language to managing stress. Group workshops are also offered to enhance people's social skills, expand their personal networks and help them integrate into society.

“ We see it as our social responsibility to take care of the environment in which we are active. This 360° concern has evolved into a structured collaboration with various social partners, including Inside Out, to which we give free shoes twice a year.”

Isabel van Goethem - Torfs

Multi-purpose spaces

The social clothing store and studio are where the project's vision comes alive. The shop provides much more than new clothes and styling advice – offered for free to job-seekers and at low cost to families referred by their social worker. It's where refugees can work as sales assistants to develop communication and sales skills that will help them realise their career ambitions. And it's how unwanted or damaged stock donated by the project's clothing industry partners is saved from landfill and incineration.

Vocational and skills training and hands-on experience in clothing modification, tailoring and product innovation are offered in the studio to put participants on a more even footing with others in the labour market. And what they learn about textiles and clothing waste, recycling and upcycling, gives them additional knowledge of value to employers. The upcycling activities that began organically to deal with shop overstock have led to the launch of a range of bags made from old jeans and folders made from old banners and flags - sales of which now fund sewing machine maintenance and repairs.



Self-reliant professionals

Inside Out may have become an established OCMW service but there was initial resistance to what some perceived as a lightweight project about giving people makeovers. It has gone on to prove how much more than this it is by reaching around 2,600 adults and children annually, getting unemployed refugees into career roles - including at a leading couture house - and enabling many to set up a small business of their own.

The OCMW team believes this success owes much to four factors: involving the target group from the beginning; making use of social media to tell the project's human stories; raising its profile among employers and suppliers; and providing psychosocial guidance to those gaining labour experience. It is also thanks to renowned fashion stylist Gerdi Esch who helped secure the commitment of companies such as Torfs and Carrefour. Even with the support of big names like these, finding new partners to contribute clothes to the store has been an ongoing challenge, as has the search for potential employers willing to give participants a chance. Through relentless effort in these areas and continuous innovation and improvement, Inside Out has evolved from a small project into the comprehensive service it is today. The OCMW team's immediate ambitions are to move more Inside Out professionals into local production and to bring their world ever closer to that of local fashion designers through collaborations.

