

## CASE STUDY

# Leuven: creating support and skills for handling conflicts in a restorative way

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### 1. Origins of the project

Restorative justice research and practices have been flourishing in Leuven since the late 1980s, thanks to a long-standing relationship between the KU Leuven Institute of Criminology (LINC) and the field of practice and policymaking. Moreover, in Belgium the scope of application of restorative justice practices is broad: victim-offender mediation (and conferencing) is offered at all stages of the criminal justice process for all types of crime and all degrees of seriousness. Nevertheless there is a strong belief that the potential of restorative justice and restorative practices in society is much larger than what has been reached until now (Dünkel, Grzywa-Holten & Horsfield, 2015; Lhuillier, 2007). To realise this potential we first need to build support, awareness, appropriate attitudes and specific skills amongst professional stakeholders including judicial authorities, but also amongst citizens and civil society organisations at large (Pali & Pelikan, 2010).

With the financial support of a private foundation a preparatory study 'Field glasses' was carried out in a partnership between the NGO Moderator<sup>1</sup> and LINC in 2016 (Deboeck, Lauwaert, Vanfraechem, Aertsen & Marchal, 2017). A policy scan was presented of school teaching, individual social work, community development, socio-cultural education and of the field of criminal justice. The scan explored possible links to developing a community-oriented approach of restorative justice. Furthermore theoretical foundations were discussed, including frameworks related to prevention (prevention pyramid), 'social vulnerability' and 'emancipatory youth work', 'new authority', 'non-violent communication', 'presence theory', 'deep democracy' and 'democratic professionalism'.

After this preparatory phase, the next step was to effectively go to 'the field' by bringing together a number of organisations in a project called 'Leuven Restorative City', to explore their expertise and needs (first year, 2018), and to set up and try out innovative practices (second year, 2019).

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1 Moderator v.z.w. (previously named 'Suggnomè v.z.w.') is the Flemish umbrella and support organisation officially accredited by the government to implement restorative justice in Flanders and Brussels.

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## 2. Theoretical and conceptual basis

Originally the general aim of the project was formulated as follows:

‘Leuven Restorative City’ aims to develop methodologies that allow for dealing with polarising tendencies, ‘otherness’, conflict and tensions in society. ... The focus is not only on responding to conflict or crime, but also on strengthening social cohesion, in short: the art of living together.

During the first months of the project, a steering group (infra) discussed the demarcation of the project. After some time, a consensus grew that the project should focus on ‘dealing with conflict’ and not on promoting ‘social cohesion’ at large. However, there was also an understanding that restorative practices do also have a proactive side. Dealing with conflicts in a restorative way can also induce another way of looking at and dealing with future conflicts. In this regard, conflicts have to be seen as opportunities for people and society to grow.

Another important addition was that the project wouldn’t focus only on developing new methodologies but would start from picturing restorative practices that do already exist in diverse fields as education, counselling, criminal justice, social work, youth services, workplace, city government and faith communities. In all of these sectors, models and methodologies have been developed but initiators are often unaware of the commonality of each other’s efforts. Bringing all the initiatives together to learn from each other was detected as a strong need.

## 3. Operationalisation

### 3.1 Methodological approach

The project is conceived as an action research. All actors are actively involved in a partnership (researchers, practitioners and policy makers). Action research is characterised by a cyclical course comprising phases of ‘look, think and act’ consecutively. This allows for applying, testing and adapting new types of intervention (Vanfraechem & Aertsen, 2018).

The main research questions were formulated as follows:

- 1 In which way active support can be provided to citizens, organisations, enterprises, schools and public authorities in order to deal with tension and conflict in a restorative way?
- 2 Does the concept of ‘Restorative City’ contribute to strengthening societal support to restorative justice in a systemic way?

A next step related to the question which organisations or social fields should be involved in the project. This exercise brought us to include a broad range of social settings in order to explore their (innovative) ways of dealing with conflict: from schools and social assistance programmes, over neighbourhood schemes and sport clubs, to private companies and local government. A next phase (2019)

focuses on the improvement and dissemination of restorative ways of dealing with conflict by:

- spreading restorative stories to inspire citizens and social actors;
- making mediation services more accessible;
- introducing new ways of dealing with conflict in specific social settings.

### **3.2 Organisation**

The project builds on the active participation by the Leuven city council (city administration), the university and a number of organisations.

#### *3.2.1 Steering group*

From the start of the project, a steering group was established, initially consisting of seven core organisations. Other organisations gradually joined, mainly from the field of community development and the local business community. Also the police and justice were represented. The steering committee now consists of twenty members. Together these actors became the driving force of the project.

#### *3.2.2 Action researcher*

The action researcher (staff member of LINC, on a half time basis) has a central role in initiating and building cooperation between organisations, practically organising and supporting the steering group and its monthly meetings, and continuously reporting and reflecting about the project development.

#### *3.2.3 Working groups*

Several working groups were started (infra), coordinated by the steering group. They focused respectively on schools, work places and, to a lesser extent, to neighbourhoods. One working group was thematic in a cross-sectional way: racism and discrimination.

On the occasion of particular meetings or events, other representatives from various types of organisations were involved as well. In this way, a collaborative network was gradually formed with the following characteristics:

- a flexible partnership, without heavy structure;
- with representatives from multiple sectors;
- need oriented and action based;
- working towards a common goal;
- held together in a framework;
- utilising existing and emerging flows of energies.

### **3.3 Implementation**

The project runs over a period of two years (2018-2019), divided into two phases of each one year approximately. During the first year the activities started from gathering the partners, exploring and analysing common themes, and sensibilisation of and information to the public. Main realisations were:

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- a Mapping of existing initiatives in the field of mediation and other relevant organisations in the region of Leuven.
- b Collecting case studies of people and/or organisations who have been dealing with conflict in a restorative way. Cases from different societal sectors were selected: neighbourhood mediation, (primary and secondary) schools, business community, sport clubs and social organisations (socio-cultural organisations, including youth organisations). These cases were discussed and analysed in steering group meetings. This allowed for a common learning process in order to identify supportive and impeding factors towards connecting people and working in a restorative way.
- c Some of these cases were prepared as 'show cases' for a broad public event. The event finally took the form of a TEDx talk, accompanied by a series of other public actions.
- d An 'Inspiration Day' in November 2018. This day was attended by 75 persons from very different fields and formed somewhat the conclusion of the first project year. On the programme were plenary lectures, a 'market place' where organisations presented their programmes on conflict resolution, and five 'round tables' where topics were discussed more in-depth.

For the second year (2019): see Section 5 'perspectives and plans'.

## 4. Ongoing processes

### 4.1 *Central place of the steering group*

The steering group became the central and most dynamic part of the project. In its monthly meetings, cases (real events) from different societal sectors were presented and discussed. This made clear how in different settings conflicts were being dealt with in surprisingly innovative ways and how the participants in the meetings representing different sectors compared their practices and learned from each other. A remarkable dynamics emerged in the group resulting in new ideas and proposals to invite other people and organisations as well.

### 4.2 *Working groups*

Working groups were established in the following way:

- Schools: various schools are already using restorative and participatory models of dealing with conflict, but are in need of more support and coaching in order to implement restorative practices in a more systemic way and to develop cooperation with external partners.
- Work places:
  - A 'learning group' was established with representatives of (mainly) human resources departments of several companies, an employer umbrella organisation, the city council and the university. In several meetings both practical experiences in dealing with conflict and conceptual frameworks were discussed.

- Two work places have been chosen to develop, implement and evaluate restorative ways of looking at and handling conflicts.
- Racism and discrimination: the project joined the ECCAR participation of the city of Leuven (European Coalition Against Racism). A working programme for 2019 was adopted to inform and activate citizens and social organisations to better deal with hate crime, racism and discrimination in society.

## 5. Findings, challenges and further perspectives

There is effective support for the idea of a restorative city aimed at a more inclusive and connecting society. The idea is broadly supported by actors of different fields: local government, companies, social organisations, education, police and justice. Amongst the project partners, the commitment and motivation to work on a common goal appeared to be stronger than what was expected initially.

Some of the challenges are:

- securing continuation and coordination of the project, and permanent funding;
- creating more visibility and support in society for the existing mediation services and, more generally, for restorative practices by informing and creating possibilities to experiencing them.

To summarise the envisaged activities for 2019:

- further developing a common frame and language related to 'Leuven as a restorative city' in a participatory trajectory with relevant partners;
- creating a logo and website in collaboration with the steering committee of Leuven Restorative City;
- gathering stories of ongoing restorative practices to share, inspire and support their improvement;
- creating places for citizens to meet and exchange about restorative ways of handling conflicts in daily life;
- apply for an EU funded project and at the same time develop cooperation with projects in other regions of the world.

## References

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