

UrbanA Podcast – Episode 16 Transcript

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Episode Information

Topic: Food Sharing

Hosts: Ian M. Cook, Kate McGinn

Guests: Tom Meeuws, Vice Mayor for Social Affairs and Environmental Affairs, in the city of Antwerp.

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Transcript

[Music]

Episode Introduction (0:17 – 1:14)

Ian: Kate, it's happened again.

Kate: What now?

Ian: You remember back in episode four, when I woke up in a shipping container after a heavy night,

Kate: I do, and Ian, it was very unprofessional.

Ian: Yeah, um, well it happened again.

Kate: Ty-pi-cal. Okay. Where are you now?

Ian: I think I'm in Antwerp.

Kate: Well, Ian we have a deadline. You were meant to interview someone for the Urban Arena Podcast, a podcast about just and sustainable cities.

Ian: Yeah, I know, I know. Listen, could you do me a favour, and do a bit of research online and tell me if there's anyone worth speaking to in Antwerp?

Kate: Got it! [Sound of keyboard clicking]. You could try Tom Meeuws, the vice mayor of social affairs and environmental affairs of Antwerp, it looks like he's responsible for both social and environmental issues.

Ian: With a title like that, I would expect he is. Anyway. My luck is in. City Hall. Here I come.

[Music]

Background of Tom Meeuws (1:15 – 6:12)

Tom: I'm Tom Meeuws. I'm the vice mayor for environmental affairs and social affairs in the city of Antwerp, Flanders, Belgium, Europe.

Ian: So as I mentioned, this is a podcast about exploring social and environmental justice in cities. And so let's take it as a given, to begin with that, we both think that there can be no environmental justice without social justice. And we both think like that now, I'm guessing, but I guess we both didn't, we had to come to that sort of realisation. So I want you to think a little bit about how you came to link these two things together. Basically, what's the personal, political, and maybe even institutional history that led you as the deputy mayor of Antwerp to become responsible for both social and environmental issues?

Tom: Yeah, thank you for that very interesting and starting question or opening question. I started my career 25 years ago in a very small, not-for-profit organisation called *Arbeid en milieu* in Dutch, in English it's labour and environment. And that's a very small organisation that combined trade union organisations at the one hand and environmental organisations at the other hand. And the only aim the only purpose was getting to know each other and avoiding that we keep on protesting in streets or in firms one against each other.

So it's not, the question is not- it's a paradox, but not the opposite between employment at the one hand and environment at the other hand or environmental protection at the other hand. But how can we get to know each other much better? And how can we define projects, programmes actions in which the double dividend becomes clear? So 25 years ago, I started my career in that very little organisation and then in the, at the end of 2018, I started negotiations in order to become a vice mayor in the city of Antwerp, 530,000 inhabitants, a world famous port city.

And then I got the opportunity the chance to catch those both competence, and that's environmental affairs at one hand and social affairs at the other. To be very clear, I hate, I hate in the public debates, a kind of established artificial opposition talk between labour and environment. And so local climate measures, local energy measures, local environmental protection measures are definitely in a port city, social by definition. Social by definition. So that was my, my lifelong motivation to get those two portfolios in one hand.

Ian: Okay, so it was your initiative that said, okay, I want to take on these two things together.

Tom: Yeah.

Ian: And when you did that, what, what did your fellow politicians or civil servants in the in Antwerp city say? They said, okay, or they were a few raised eyebrows?

Tom: Well, to speak very clear [laugh], it's kind of a public confession. They wanted to give me environmental affairs and then I asked, I'd like to have social affairs beside that. So they were a bit surprised. But in fact, for the whole board of the City Council here, it's quite clear, it is really a double dividend.

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We're, in the whole of our energy and climate policies, we believe we are entering a new stage. You had the stage of the individual with a lot of money on a household level, including myself, I have photovoltaic panels on my rooftops. It's all quite a range and we got some subsidies for that on an individual basis. But as a socialist, but also as the vice mayor for environmental and social affairs, it's my conviction and the City Council shares that, we're entering a new phase.

We're now entering the phase of robust, just, social climate policies, energy policies, and that means you have to look at the whole system. It's not about people who will lose their jobs in one factory or another. It's about leading a sort of creative destruction. Also in firms, we will lose jobs; yes, we will lose jobs, but that will not lead definitely to high unemployment figures. We get some opportunities at the long end. And so, it's the strong belief in combining those two goals, not blurring those goals.

You can have some ecological measures which harm, which harm socially deprived areas or socially deprived people. But it's the art of combining them, but not blurring the goals which you need, the blurring- not blurring the goals which you need separately in the social domain and in the energy or environmental domain.

Transition Politics (6:13 – 9:09)

Ian: Mm hmm. Do you think maybe there's an issue with the, I guess, sort of the short term or reactionary nature of politics and party politics and so on, and the need to have then this more honest conversation and say there is going to be winners and losers in any sort of transition, and what questions of justice some of those losers might be quite high-placed people, and maybe in the short term, some of those losers might be relatively poorer people, but we need to have that conversation in politics nowadays doesn't always allow for that.

Tom: No, no, no, no. You have to invent a new logic, a new discourse and new words, new language. So, people, there are some people that are going to lose and those people we call them, not the poor, but, the polluters. The polluters are going to lose, those guys in economics, but also on a household level that are polluting too much that are not reducing their greenhouse gases, they will lose. But of course, as vice mayor for social affairs, the losers can never be, can never be – let me be very clear about that – can never be the vulnerable; the vulnerable residents that are not private owners of their, of their house or their apartment or their building block.

And so in the transition to more climate friendly way of living, we have to invent a new set, a new toolbox of measures in which people that are renting their house, they're renting their apartment also can profit from climate measures, from subsidies. They have the right, that is really a right to energy efficient house also for people that rent, so the losers will be those who pollute, but not the vulnerable, the vulnerable we have to protect them more than ever, more than ever.

And what I call a new kind of welfare state, we had the social welfare states after the World War II, and now we have to invent the climate welfare state. The climate welfare state in which, first of all, an ever, ever, any kind of measure we take, we take into account the vulnerable, and we have to protect them. If I just can give one brief example talking about carbon taxes, I'm profoundly a fan, I support carbon tax schemes. But if you do that at, let's say, 2:00 p.m. in the afternoon, a quarter past 2:00 p.m. in the afternoon, you have

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to refund the vulnerable in your classical Social Security system. You have to refund them with the gains of the carbon tax scheme. So that's the that's the kind of the bridge we have to build amongst the environmental and labour or amongst the environment and social affairs.

Examples of Projects (9:10 – 16:03)

Ian: Okay, great. So we talked a little bit, I guess slightly on the abstract sense. Now let's, let's dig down a little bit into Antwerp. So maybe you can tell me then, you know, since you've, since you've taken on the position, what have you been particularly proud of? What would you like to highlight in terms of what you've done in the city and bringing together just- questions of environmental and social issues?

Tom: Yeah. The One-Stop Energy Shop, the one stop energy shop. I'm very proud of that. That's a shop for the most vulnerable – for all Antwerp people, but as I'm concerned, for the most vulnerable – the jungle, the jungle of subsidy schemes, the jungle of measures which have been taken for years for a high- and middle-income class, so we have to take them off for the low-income class.

And so, we created an, a one-stop shop, energy shop where people physically, *physically* – it's very important – physically can meet each other, can come to the shop and there we help them if they ask for a new energy distribution firm or a new energy provider. And we only ask one question: Can we visit your home? Can we visit your apartment? Can we envisage your one-room space in most of the cases? So we like to visit your home and then we like to screen your home and help you in enabling energy efficiency measures. And we will help you to get in fund that. But so, the One-Stop Energy Shop for all Antwerp people, but mostly for the vulnerable, is one of the measures we immediately installed, and I'm very proud of that, yeah.

And now we go in further, a second example is setting up a new kind of household electronics as a service. So fridge, refrigerator, a stove, can we provide that as a service? The most vulnerable, they buy low efficient household electronics. And so we, we like to stop that. And we are now tendering a large project in which we like to provide, as a service not to have it as an owner, but as a service to, to establish the most energy saving electronics to the most vulnerable. And so, they just pay kind of a monthly rent, but it's lower than what they pay to their monthly energy provider. And so they will have the most efficient, utmost efficient fridge in their apartment without being the owner. And so that's kind of changing- transition changing their, the logic also in their in their heads.

Ian: Okay, and so this is for people who are in, or that's what we call them in the UK context, council housing, so state-owned housing?

Tom: No, in Belgium, there's a large amount of private housing. So we have, to give you an example, we have 12% of the housing market in Antwerp is social housing, but 60% is a private renting and that's our biggest problem. So Belgians have a brick in their stomach, but not the Belgian- not the Antwerp people, the Belgians that live in the city. They depend largely on the private hiring markets.

And so that's, that's a big problem. So there's a kind of split incentive. Those, the most vulnerable, they, they haven't any incentive to invest in energy saving. They have, they, they're not the owner. And so we're setting up this scheme for the vulnerable. And the

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definition is quite simple. As a vice mayor of social affairs, I'm responsible for the social benefit department. You have 8000 of social beneficiaries, talking about the amounts in the household, we're talking about 30,000 people. So it's for them that we're doing it. But most of them, they are hiring an apartment on the, the private housing market.

Ian: Mm-Hmm. Mm-Hmm. So I guess a cri- a critical angle somebody might take is that, okay, this is great, and with any sorts of state welfare scheme, you know, the state provides something, but the state takes- what it takes back is to be a little bit intrusive into people's lives, you know? And so in this sense, you're asking people, okay, I want to go in. And this doesn't happen if I'm if I'm a richer resident of town, like, you know, the state doesn't come in to look at my fridge, you know, and see what sort of- [Tom laughs]. So like, how do you, how would you then respond to this that basically then the more vulnerable members of Antwerp, residents of Antwerp are being asked to reveal more about their life than what, what would most people would happily, happily offer up?

Tom: Yeah, a smooth or rather saying, a soft kind of paternalism...

Ian: Mm-Hmm.

Tom: ...Is kind of the cements in the bridge between the social and the economic- and ecological affairs. That's my political, philosophical conviction. So you need one way or another, a soft kind of paternalism; we know what's good for you, but the trouble is you can't fund it by yourself and what we used to do when I entered the- my job here, when I, I saw then we're spending millions of euros in skipping or taking jubilee measures in skipping the energy costs of the vulnerable. But if you just take a jubilee measure, okay, they don't have to pay their invoice at their local energy provider. But you don't do anything about the monthly energy invoice and the consumption, the energy consumption in that household.

And so soft paternalism is- you, you're right about that, good question. You enter the private space of people in a soft, paternalistic way in order to, to get things done and to do something about the social vulnerable situation, but also about the climate and energy issues in the city. There is no one, of course, you always ask permission, you always ask permission, you ask them to sign documents in order to be complied with you and the European privacy policies. But there's no one, but really, no one that refuses a government that is trustful, that tries to build trustful links. No one refuses that kind of help. But it's not a hard paternalism. It's not authoritarian. It's, it's, it's, it's a kind of, your neighbour, local government as a friend enters the doorstep, or knocks on the, on the door.

City Role within a Complex Governance Landscape (16:04 – 25:36)

Ian: Glad you mentioned the local government, because that brings me to the last sort of theme that I want to discuss. And that's maybe the, the urban scale, because obviously, you know you're, you're deputy mayor of a city and it's a city within a country, and it's a very- as a country on a whole region, which is very densely urbanised, and of course, you've got the layer of the EU and they all have different layers of government, different priorities, different challenges, different priorities, et cetera, et cetera, and so on. So I'm wondering then, that's extremely complex, right? So when you're sitting, you know, with your advisers or when you're discussing with your colleagues how to act and where to

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act, like, I'm just wondering, how do you think through your role as a city within these sort of multiple layers of complexity?

Tom: Yeah. Of course, our city and no city in the world is an island. So we are a densely populated region and situated at the heart of the European road network. Antwerp is really a transit city. Also, we're talking about the roads that are laying amongst us. So that poses a few challenges, but in my view, it's- we're living in the urban area, it's cities that are going to make it. If you can make it in Antwerp, you can make it everywhere, we say, like, like New York, like all big cities.

And so, for example, we are the second largest ports of, of Europe, that's in our backyard here. Thanks to the port, we're able to construct our city heat network. So there's a lot of waste heat in our ports area. So, thanks to the ports we can construct in our city a heat networks, so you need, of course, regional, sub-national, national levels to subsidise or to, to make the business case possible.

But I'm really convinced that they're, in the, in the next hundred years, we will discover that by pain, but also by joy, that there is the urban areas and there's a European level, but the nation state, the regional state hasn't the real future, I think that's quite a heavy political statement, I know, but it's borne out of a really conviction and an urban city love and urban passion that we really in all urban cities, urban and regional cities, urban cities that are open for the region too, but open cities have no enemies. They only have supporters to talk in in football terms. It's the level, on a political way, it's the level that will reach out and that will succeed in reaching the, the climate goals.

Ian: Mm hmm. So if we take what you say, it's true and then like, but then the cities are a place where you know, they're going to be able to be at the forefront of coming up with solutions or ideas and processes to challenge. But we know cities are sort of in competition. I'm sure you feel that Antwerp is the second largest, you know, and you have a big port somewhere else. And so you know how competition sometimes work. It can be a race to the bottom because, you know, if you want to attract, you know, investment, sometimes environmental or ecological issues are a bit of a red flag. So I'm wondering, how do, how then you balance questions of being a competitive, smaller city, you know, with, with the need to be environmentally sound?

Tom: Yeah, the competition between cities is also bothering me. The art of city politics is don't lose – in, of course, a world competition amongst world economic players – don't lose your identity. Therefore, I was giving the example of we have a waste heat opportunity. Dublin has that too, not with the port. Dublin has no port, but Dublin has the heat of the servers of Google, for example. But the, the, the art of city politics is invest a lot in, not try to attract the same global investments all over the world, but invest first of all in getting to know yourself and your urban regions. What are your strengths, what are your weaknesses and build on that opportunity?

And luckily, I think ten years ago we were really at the bottom, I think, of the cities that were in a worldwide competition. Saskia Sassen, Richard Sennet, they wrote terrific books about that, but also terrifying books. You have H&M, you have all the same businesses in the same shopping street. If you took the plane 10 years ago, you take the plane, you go to a shopping street in a European city, and you close your eyes while you

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go into the to the aeroplane you, but when you enter then a shopping street, you won't know in which city I am now.

And so it's the art of identifying your, your, your own identity, a profound, profound strategic discussion or profound strategic exercise. But then morphological every city has its own opportunities, and you have to invest in that. We have here River Scheldt with these opportunities, we have the port city has its opportunities, we're in the midst of a Flanders, but also of Europe as a transit city. You have to identify yourself and then you won't become one of the hundred European cities. But having saying that, at the political level, cities administrations are lean and mean, and of course, you have to build trustful relationships with regional and national levels, but really lean and mean. And so it's here we can have the demos, projects, experimentation. These are really climate labs in order to, of course then, of course then, lobby for legislation that helps us to become really in a just way, just climate cities.

Ian: Mm-Hmm. Mm-Hmm. And just maybe just quickly follow up on that if I may, I know we're running out of time. But it's just then, that is still there seem to be maybe a little bit of a contradiction in how this is going to be worked out, moving, moving forward because, okay, you might be able to as Antwerp, then, you know, be able to position yourself in this sort of global position of cities as being both, you know, unique- well, you're a famous city, not every city can say it's a famous city, because it doesn't have a famous history, but it could be as big as Antwerp but we never heard of it right?

And, and yet, and yet and at the same time, you know, so you can only control what's happening locally. And I'm just wondering, like, you know, when we talk about questions of, you know, bringing in investment in this and that there's always going to be these trade-offs, which is natural, you know, the world is, we can't live out through our utopias. But I just wonder then like if we are talking on a European scale thinking about, you know, creating just and sustainable futures, there's going to be certain places which are not going to want to join in. You know, and because they missed out on this big green investment opportunity, or et cetera, and so on, so, is there a question of confliction between different scales or?

Tom: I don't think so. You have to be self-conscious without being arrogant, and you, one mistake you, you, you may never make, that's, it, it's kind of a strange thing I'm going to tell now, but politicians may not think they will change the world on their own. My experience now in the three years I'm in office now is that, for example, big chiefs of local firms in the port area, but big, big firms in the chemistry, Big Oil even, if you talk to them, and that's not only the lean and mean question, the lean and mean opportunity, but also the opportunity to, to have personal relationship with people.

If you talk to those corporate guys on the local level, they say, we hate gold plating, for example, we, we want to be the best in class. And so but on a national level, you get that, well, we have to be modest. There's still that tension between energy investments, economic investments, economic returns, energy returns. So, but if you talk on the local level, people are very ambitious. Even Big Oil in the Antwerp port, even our chemistry sector, they're really convinced we can, we can reach our goals. It's all about relationships, networks and cities itself are very good at it. Will there be losers anyway? Losers talking about cities, yes, that's right. But as long as you are, are you capable of, of organising it on a regional level or a sub-regional level, we will, we will get a lot of cities involved, but

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maybe they have to- we will be merging, merging areas with merging cities. But I really think the end of the nation state, we will, we will experience it in the in the next 50 years, let's say. Not 100, 50.

Ian: It's good to good to end on a message of hope. Thank you so much for taking the time to come on the podcast!

Tom: Yeah, a pleasure. A real pleasure in this early summer afternoon. Thank you very much.

[Music]

Post-Interview Discussion (25:35 – 28:42)

Ian: All right, Kate. So what did you think of my interview with Tom?

Kate: Yeah, super, super interesting to hear kind of a government point of view. I feel like on this podcast, we discussed these, these topics about how to create sustainable and just cities with various stakeholders. And I think this is a really good opportunity for us to see the public view. You know what, what is someone who is actually elected by the people do to make cities a better place for everyone to live in?

At the beginning of the episode, you guys were talking about kind of, you know what the losers and winners of this climate crisis might be. And to quote Tom, he said losers or “the losers will be polluters”. And, and I kind of wanted to push back on that with you or just hear your thoughts because and maybe this is a bit of a jaded, [laugh], jaded point of view, but I think ultimately the like the rich will always be able to protect themselves, you know, whether it's, it's, it's holding on to their money, whether it's finding alternative ways to, you know, still living the same lifestyle and still not be like, you know, necessarily the reprimanded for it, whether it is, you know, investing in like highly, highly efficient energy sources that only the rich can afford. I mean, I think unfortunately, I just don't see necessarily a future where, you know, sustainability can work in a very egalitarian way, but maybe again, maybe that's just jaded me.

Ian: It's usually me who's the pessimist one, Kate, and you're- you who's the optimist, what's happened to us over the last two and a half years? living in London made you cynical. Who would have thought? No, um, yeah, I mean, that's, that's the point, right? I mean, he was sort of, I guess he, he was saying, this is what we want it to be, this is what we aim for it to be. But yeah, like who, who's to say that the losers, or the people who will- who should be the losers, in a sense, of the of the transition because, you know, they are the polluters, who's to say they won't just keep finding ways around it, right?

There's a certain cunning to capital when it always manages to find new ways of reinventing itself as something else. You know, like, as rein- the polluters will reinvent, reinvent themselves as the environmentalists, you know, and they'll spend a lot of money greenwashing themselves and finding ways to get around stuff. And yeah, politics isn't always, electoral politics isn't always the best at going after such players, especially when there's so much money involved. Something to something to think about a little bit more.

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But we're going to come to the end of this podcast, and I'd like to thank everyone for listening yet again. Kate, I usually ask you if people want to find out more, what can they do?

Kate: Yes, they can go onto our website at Urban-Arena.EU. They can also email us. Our Instagram is @arena_urban, and we do really want to hear from you. So if you have any thoughts on kind of what we discussed or want to get in touch to ask another big pressing question that we want to answer on our next episode, please do reach out.

Ian: Bye!

Kate: Bye!

[Music]

Disclaimer

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