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# VAUDREUIL-DORION



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# VAUDREUIL DORION

I AM... / The adventure of one community in the middle of a transformation

## CONTEXT

The small Canadian community of Vaudreuil-Dorion, located in the Quebec province, is only 30 minutes away from Montreal and is renowned for its quality of life and strong cultural history and pride. However, over the course of 20 years it has been radically transformed due to the fast increase of its population, mostly a consequence of new arrivals. New citizens have arrived from all over the world, bringing with them their languages and cultures. Between 1994 and 2014 the number of inhabitants increased from 17,000 to 37,000, 48% of the current population coming from another country. In addition and as a consequence of this, fast social transformations have taken place.

The number of citizens that speak French has decreased from 80% in 1994 to 60% nowadays. English, Hindi and Urdu represent now half of the languages spoken. Vaudreuil-Dorion is today a diverse and young town where both low-income households and the unemployment rate have seen significant reductions.

Coming from a cultural context with a strong sense of pride for the contemporary francophone culture, the social transformations that the town has gone through have created some level of inter-cultural conflict, tension and strain between

the different communities and a diminished sense of belonging among its citizens. This has forced the local authorities to proactively work towards strengthening the feeling of pride and belonging to the local community in order to improve social cohesion.

A starting point to achieve this has been the establishment of a common ground between the different cultures and communities embodied in the program I AM... initiated in 2010. Since then, it has taken advantage of cultural mediation as a way to create a feeling of belonging and provide a friendly context to the emergence of a united community; one that is proud to be part of an area unique in its richness. The ongoing program has made remarkable progresses, in particular, since 2014 when culture was put at the center of local development.

The conditions that have enabled the creation of this program can be analyzed in relation to the local cultural policy. It was in 2009-2010, that the town decided to create a strategy for rebuilding social ties which also led to the creation of the I AM... program. The strategy led to the establishment of an advisory committee for the cultural sector that included the participation of other sectors such as health and education. The

strategy supported the positioning of culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development in order to bring the community together and establish a harmonious way of living together.

The I AM... program was adopted as the first building block for this process. Its transversal approach has allowed the program to deal openly with the issues and benefits of cultural diversity. It has recognized the wealth of cultural diversity and supported the active participation of citizens of all ages and cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Central to it has been a model of participatory governance that uses citizens as key actors for municipal cultural action while simultaneously providing a new role for cultural actors working in social development.

### **GOALS, CHALLENGES AND PROJECT DEVELOPMENT**

The I AM... program aims to recreate and strengthen the sense of belonging and social cohesion through cultural activities that provide meaning and build new social ties. The activities developed seek to improve the understanding of others and their differences, leading in this way to the reinvention of the community. At the center of the program is active citizen participation in the cultural and creative acts, during which citizens rub shoulders, interact and learn to understand one another. Besides working directly on social cohesion, these cultural activities contribute to a solid progress in terms of environment, physical and mental health, economy or urban planning.

An active participation in these activities also leads to empowering local communities to become real cultural actors and citizens within their town, but also throughout other sectors of activity, as this leads consequently to more participatory and inclusive citizen governance and decision-making. In addition to this, new ties and relations are established among neighbors and communities, and isolation and vulnerability due to status and cultural differences are better battled as new networks are fostered. Different groups and actors from the civic society are brought to work together and collaborate. Finally, artists play a key role in



the entire dynamic. They are placed at the heart of the development of their town and considered key actors within the community.

Each year, the I AM... program offers 600 workshops grouped around 50 main activities that incorporate different forms of artistic and cultural practices. It reaches out 20,000 direct and 30,000 indirect participants. A great example of the powerful outreach of the program was the ambitious MOZAIK exhibition for which 40 volunteers from different cultural communities worked together in order to take photographs of the local inhabitants. 10,000 photos were presented of the local inhabitants. The MOZAIK parade, enabled by 1,000 citizens working together with 10 artists each year under a different theme, is a unique and artistic parade for its diversity and creativity. Other small-scale initiatives take place throughout the year targeted at specific groups like elders in retirement homes, young people, women (and children) suffering from domestic abuse and so on.

The program is ambitious and requires the involvement and commitment of different levels and departments of government as well as local cultural actors from the civic and private sectors. Its annual budget is around \$700,000



and this covers human resources related to the project, payment of services offered by artists, organizations and businesses, and finally, support for the involved cultural organizations.

The Vaudreuil-Dorion Chamber of Commerce and Industry has been the project's main partner and for this reason 80 businesses and industries display the project's logo. In addition, many of them have participated in cultural mediation activities throughout the years and took part in the early discussions regarding the creation of I AM... and the cultural policy set out in 2013.

Over the years, the main challenge has been the positioning of the local government within the cultural ecosystem, as the objective is not to overtake the role and work of cultural actors. Although a sensitive issue, it was important to ensure from the outset that the town was not trying to undertake the work of cultural actors, but to give them the necessary means to reach out to the population. These actors have been essential for the program's success, as they have helped to encourage participation from citizens and get closer to the local communities. Integrated health and social services have also played a crucial role in reaching out to vulnerable participants. The same can be said about the education sector, represented by six primary schools and a secondary school.

## IMPACTS


The I AM... program has been very successful at different levels and its benefits have extended beyond cultural mediation and improvement of local quality of life by turning Vaudreuil-Dorion into a highly attractive town for economic investment and relocation of companies. The town-wide program has meant a unique cross-sectorial and multi-community involvement, working together with a large number of the town's employees from all of the city's departments. Furthermore, as I AM... was adopted by the entire organization, several other projects emerged and new connections were created. The cultural mediation model has also been used internally by the town hall in processes like the definition of the government's mission and values. The results and the awards



won by I AM... have filled the team with pride and their boldness has been greatly recognized beyond the regional and national borders.

A testimony of the value of the program has been the more than a dozen regional and national awards received and the invitations to present the project in over 40 conferences held in Canada, France, Spain and Argentina. A regional cultural mediation unit has also been created in Quebec with the objective of spreading, teaching and supporting 65 further municipalities in the development of similar initiatives. Several towns and institutions have already set up projects inspired by I AM... and training by the town's team has been requested from four Quebec regions and its 5<sup>th</sup> largest city, Longueuil. The impact can also be observed at local level as some of the cultural actors no longer require funding from the town and are implementing their own projects of cultural mediation.

When it comes to the 20,000 participants, the program has reached a large group of children and teenagers as these represent 55% of the participants. This has been achieved by the



involvement of schools and parent-child activities together with activities catered specifically to their age interests like hip hop and dance. Adults aged over 55 have also been offered specific activities and probably for that reason they represent 25% of the overall participants, while some activities have been designed with physically and mentally disabled people in mind. In one way or another, the majority of Vaudreuil-Dorion's citizens have benefited from I AM... by participating in or attending the project's outcomes like the parade.

The feedback gathered among the population is encouraging. A new era has begun as friendships have been formed between those of 'native' Quebec origin and new immigrants. Some families do their shopping together and visit each other for religious festivals as a way of learning and sharing. A group of female Muslims have set up an exhibition of photos that show Muslims and Christians doing everyday activities together. The feedback received has shown that certain activities have enabled young school dropout to go back to school and have even prevented some from running away or committing suicide.

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