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Mayor Ahmed  
Aboutaleb,  
Rotterdam's first  
Muslim mayor.



INTERVIEW

Ahmed Aboutaleb

# The We Society: Giving Each Other Space and Care

Rotterdam's mayor **Ahmed Aboutaleb** moved to the Netherlands when he was 15. In this interview, Europe's first Muslim mayor of a non-Muslim majority city in modern times shares his vision of a "we" society, where people give each other space for even radical ideas while also looking out for one another.

## What are the social issues that Rotterdam faces?

The major challenge of my city is education. Like all port cities, we had a lot of domestic migration, and then international migration. We now have 174 nationalities, with all the religions and cultures of the world. A lot of people come to Rotterdam to work in the port, and they are poorly educated.

If we want to compete with the other cities in Europe—as a knowledge-based economy—we have to invest in human capital.

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**What can other cities learn from Rotterdam when it comes to combatting poverty?**

Cities cannot combat poverty if they don’t invest in human capital. I’m willing to accept, with pain in my heart, that a man in his 50s is living on the edge of poverty, with around 1,500 euros (US\$1,570) a month. We cannot change his social conditions, which could be due to poor education, mental illness or other reasons. But I cannot accept that his daughter, who is 13 years old, will fall into the gap of poverty. I can do nothing to change the situation of such a man, but I can do a lot to change the situation of his daughter.



The best thing we can do is invest in the talents of such a kid. The moment you know the talent of such a kid, you might trigger directed investments, say in sports or music if those are her talents, or in writing or math. In Rotterdam, we expanded the number of hours that children receive in math and language education. We go above the national curriculum of eight hours a week by keeping primary schools open for longer hours. There are a lot of projects in the world that keep schools open for longer periods for dance or music. We do it to invest in language and math. In some areas, we have organised six to 10 additional school hours in primary schools. We encourage parents to speak and practise Dutch at home more often.

**Tell us more about the recently launched “we” society movement.**

Our philosophy involves a “we” community, because “we” is strong, but “I” is weak. We have a debate in Europe about youngsters travelling to the Middle East to join ISIL to fight for the “right” cause. In an interview, I said the “we” society provides space for all citizens. I always do this [links hands with fingers intertwined] when I talk about “we” society. Rotterdam has space for everyone, even people with radical ideas. I welcome people with radical ideas. For many years in the Dutch parliament we had the “Political Party of Radicals”. Radical ideas can be of great importance to how society develops. The only group we do not welcome is people who believe they have the right to use violence.

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- 01 Schoolchildren practise their language skills through games in a Taaltuin (language garden).
  - 02 Mayor Aboutaleb talks about the “we” society during his World Cities Summit 2016 interview.
  - 03 *Droom and Daad* (Dream and Deed), by Mayor Aboutaleb on the “We Society”.



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The citizens of Rotterdam are striving for co-existence without social tensions, polarisation, violence or killing. We want to live in a “we” society, where people from different cultural backgrounds respect each other and have consideration for the circumstances of others.

So the “we” community is really a philosophy of how to create a community that takes care of each other. Imagine if I took care of my neighbours to my right and left. If we all did the same, then we would be covered—the entire city would be covered. There wouldn’t be a need for government intervention. There are a lot of government interventions to take care of our elderly. Why shouldn’t we ask citizens to do that? I’m now travelling with one of my assistants. He is taking care of his neighbour, a woman in her 80s. He has the key to her house, and he checks on her every day or two—he knocks on her door and asks “How are you today?”

I wrote a small book in Dutch about this “we” society. Within a few weeks it became a bestseller. There is a hunger in our society to examine the best options to organise more solidarity in our cities.



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## Why are citizens so important in the running of a city?

I cannot run the city without my citizens' support. Citizens have the ideas and they know what is needed in their own neighbourhood better. If you give them some power, they will come up with very interesting and sustainable solutions. I started engaging citizens in 2009. We would meet in public buildings, such as schools, and I would bring along the chief of the police, the chief prosecutor and the leaders of the services that we provide. We would ask the citizens, "This is what we know about your neighbourhood; these are the statistics. Do you agree with our interpretation of the statistics and what is going on in your neighbourhood? If not, tell us."

I have been working with the citizens in the west of the city, to come up with a plan for their neighbourhood. That took two years. The community did the designing, the writing, the math, and came up with the plan on their own. After some negotiation, we ended up with a plan for 10 million euros (US\$10.46 million). It was delivered to and accepted by the city government. We are about to enter into the implementation phase soon and my city council has asked me to start a new initiative in another neighbourhood.

If you design this plan yourself, you will spend three to four million euros, just for design, without laying a stone on the streets. That's the fascinating thing about running the city with citizens—they know far better what is needed, and they have better ideas. If you engage them, they will take care of the project because they have ownership of the project.

## What is one issue that you would like to share with other city mayors?

There is one recent issue: how we deal with the refugee crisis. When an earthquake happens, there is always a system of response from the international community. For example, the Netherlands is part of the USRT system [Urban Search & Rescue Team]. Press a button and a lot of things happen. We charter an aeroplane; specialists go in; and firemen, searchers, dogs and a lot of support comes from around the world to affected places. Fantastic.

But when something happens that creates a huge group of a few million refugees, these places cannot handle that. It doesn't matter how rich the country is, as there is such a huge influx in such a short period.

We have an international treaty for refugees, a very old-fashioned treaty to support an individual. If you flee from your country and you come to my country, we will host you, interview you and see if you have the right to use that article. That is meant for individuals; it was never meant to handle three million people at once. So we need something different to deal with refugees.

I would be happy if we try to find a system of response to help cities that are experiencing such a huge influx. We have the United Nations, but their response is always too late, too little and too political. Today, eastern Turkey, Amman, Lebanon and Athens desperately need support. Tomorrow it may be my city, Paris or Madrid. I would be happy to see whether there will be the discussion among cities to organise, not political, but practical support.

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**You've said that newcomers need to integrate and that "integrating is participating". How can we encourage refugees or any new migrants to integrate?**

In a city like Rotterdam, which has so many different nationalities, it is vital to have an open dialogue. It is extremely important that we maintain this dialogue. Expressing our feelings of fear, irritation and frustration is the first step towards understanding each other. It is also the first step towards shared hopes, ideals and dreams. I have faith in the one thing that unites us all—the love for our city.

We can encourage refugees and other newcomers by organising such open dialogues: show them which opportunities we can offer for them to take part in society; and explain to them how our society works and what are the basic elements required to join the society. For example, learning Dutch is important. Being able to communicate in the native language opens doors to the labour market and speeds up social integration. There are lots of places they can learn the language quickly; every day on the streets in dialogue with the citizens is probably the best way.

**Which city do you admire most, and why?**

New York is really a good example when it comes to multi-culturalism. You could say that New York City is already practising the "we" society as it was built, over decades, on the shoulders of migrants. The open society, the welcoming hand, the warm feeling you get there makes you want to be part of it. It's where you can start selling cookies and end up as CEO of a company. I think that every city can learn from that. 

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- 01 Everyday interaction in public places such as markets will help newcomers integrate into society.
  - 02 The mayor's office organises Date je College annually, where citizens can engage government officials on any issue.
  - 03 Events like Rotterdam Unlimited are organised to celebrate Rotterdam's cultural diversity.