

How VoisinMalin is changing community life

by

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Overview

You live in Grigny, Villeurbanne, Clichy-sous-Bois or Saint-Denis, these so-called 'tough' or 'difficult' neighbourhoods. You speak a little French but, having to answer complex administrative questions on your own, you are hardly able to assert your rights. You are baffled by the bills you have to pay, suffer from degrading living conditions in silence, and feel constantly hassled. Even the schools your children attend, and the cultural facilities and social centres you visit, are hostile places for you, and you increasingly feel isolated... until, one night, someone from your neighbourhood rings your doorbell. Having overcome your initial mistrust, you discover that this person speaks your language, has simple answers to the questions which have been bothering you, and opens the door to this world where you are losing any hope of ever understanding. You say to yourself that this person's work has real value and that maybe one day you too will be part of a 'VoisinMalin' (literally 'Smart Neighbour') neighbourhood project.

Report by Pascal Lefebvre • Translation by Rachel Marlin

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Seminar organised in collaboration with the Collège des Bernardins and l'Institut CDC pour la recherche, and thanks to the sponsors of the École de Paris:

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From Santiago, Chile to Grigny 2

The idea of VoisinMalin came to me at the end of 2008 following an observation I had made when I was in Chile in the early 1990s. Having graduated with a business degree, I worked in Chile for a microcredit project which was quite original at the time, and took its inspiration from the Grameen Bank. Microcredit gave micro-entrepreneurs from poor neighbourhoods in Santiago the opportunity to buy their means of production. This system enabled large numbers of women to pursue sewing or crafts activities, and in so doing, helped to improve their family's life and the future of their children. These women had only ever dreamt about buying a sewing machine, and so when this became a reality, they wanted to let others benefit from it. During the meetings which took place in apartments, the strength of conviction of these women made a very strong impression on me.

My second Chilean experience during the three years I spent in that country was to observe how, once these entrepreneurs had received a microcredit, they spontaneously started meeting in order to implement actions of solidarity and mutual aid, despite the lack of any institutionalised form of professional insurance for this sort of informal activity. I helped to set up a professional trade union of micro-entrepreneurs, an initiative which formally made them recognise the important contribution they brought to life in their neighbourhoods. They then requested suitable premises from the mayor in compensation for paying municipal taxes. They wanted people to be informed about their products, and also asked the mayor to organise a neighbourhood trade fair to publicise their activities in order to attract potential clients. Managing to organise a group project which had started out as individual activities and which then had a spill-over effect into the community life of these people, made me realise that there was an enormous potential for change which these people did not even realise themselves, and that it was undoubtedly possible to emulate it in countries other than Chile.

When I returned to France, I took a degree in urbanism at Sciences Po and then worked for fifteen years for various organisations which focussed on poor neighbourhoods. The first was an association involved in the renovation of private housing with a social welfare dimension in eastern Lyon. I subsequently worked for the French Housing Agency (*Agence nationale pour l'amélioration de l'habitat* which is now the *Agence Nationale de l'Habitat*) to devise ways in which people living in co-ownership residences in poor areas could take part in administrative meetings. I was then appointed by the *Caisse des Dépôts* and the Ministry for Urban Affairs to undertake a large project in the Évry-Corbeil urban area of the Essonne *département*. In this job, I managed a public interest group whose board of directors was made up of people from such diverse backgrounds as Serge Dassault (an industrialist) and Manuel Valls (a former Prime Minister). I then worked for six years for the Grigny conurbation (a city of almost 30,000 inhabitants) as director of the Grigny-Viry-Châtillon public interest group. I was in charge of implementing and organising more efficient solutions for the population in terms of health, access to employment, and education. Finally, I was the director of the major urban renovation projects for the Grande Borne and Grigny 2 (the latter is a housing estate providing 5,000 apartments and lacking financial resources).

In 2005, when riots took place in these neighbourhoods, I was struck by the courage and rallying ability of the local MPs, associations and municipal employees, as well as the way in which the population, which is often discredited by the public, came together, spending nights protecting facilities threatened by arsonists, and 'holding their ground'. In 2008, the Grande Borne neighbourhood started to change with the rebuilding of a school, building work in the apartment buildings, and so on. However, in the local elections, the mayor, who was very involved in this city of nearly 30,000 inhabitants, was re-elected with less than 2,000 votes! I was profoundly shocked by this abstention which demonstrated the population's lack of interest in the life of the community. I was one of the decision-makers in the urban planning process of this city, and it was not easy for us to give a role to these inhabitants who apparently were so poorly trained in handling and understanding complex housing issues. If we had given them some help with respect to the technical, operational, legal and financial aspects, this would have slowed down an implementation process which was already uncertain.

In my work in the public interest group which was dominated by political issues, I had the dual role of mediator between the different people involved and urban designer regarding the urban projects whose total budget was nearly 500 million Euros over ten years. However, I wanted to do more. I needed to invent something to put an end to this lack of interest, and to make the inhabitants become motivated and to stimulate them. Even though they were directly affected by what was going on in their neighbourhood, they no longer trusted the various institutions which had lost credibility and were hardly present in the area: the neighbourhood post office had been closed for a long time; a secondary school mathematics teacher had not been replaced for the entire school year; and the ambulances no longer dared to enter the housing estate. Their feeling of abandonment was well and truly founded. Nevertheless, things were happening even though the inhabitants may have thought that it was not for their benefit. To prove them wrong, the departments which wanted to improve the situation had to meet up with the inhabitants.

Since the institutions were no longer considered suitable, and since some associations lacked the energy, and even the most enthusiastic of their members who had been living in these neighbourhoods from the very beginning wanted to be replaced, it was obvious that we had to invent something which would involve the inhabitants, and enable them to become an active part of the changing nature of their city. We also had to extricate ourselves from the major national programmes which were too dependent on the political sensitivity of the serving Minister, and in which local inhabitants found it difficult to put themselves forward for the long term. Therefore, it was necessary to find a different economic model in order to be able to re-motivate the inhabitants.

The origins of VoisinMalin

When I was the director of the Grigny-Viry-Châtillon public interest group, we found about ten inhabitants who spoke the languages of the various countries represented in these cities, and who agreed to act as translators, for example between a teacher and a family so that the family could understand the school's remarks and proposals especially with regard to the academic success of their children. We worked on this project despite institutional reluctance, for example from the departmental Prefect who feared that such an initiative would discourage people from learning French. However, we were convinced that most of them were determined to integrate into French society so that their children could succeed. Managing to guide them towards a reading and writing class or some sort of institutional support, which they had not known about, with help from an acquaintance, met their expectations. In one year, we placed about one hundred families in contact with schools.

The translators, who wanted to help others, started to create initiatives themselves. Evening story-telling gatherings which took place in the social centre were translated into the original languages. People who had been unable to understand them before in French could now take part and bring their children along. This made us appreciate the enormous potential of these translator-intermediaries, and we tried to find them a real role whereby they could come into contact with the greatest number of people and also get something out of this for themselves. At this time, I realised that we had to create a 'profession' of intermediaries by giving these people a professional status which corresponded to an additional activity lasting an indefinite period which was also part-time. Because they shared the same experiences as their fellow citizens, these intermediaries would be even more representative of the diversity of the neighbourhoods, rather than being confined to a full-time employee status and attached to some sort of institution. These pioneer *Voisins Malins* ('Smart Neighbours') were of all ages, professions and cultures.

The role of the *Voisins Malins* is to meet the inhabitants of an apartment building by conveying a message which is useful to them in order to establish a relationship built on trust. The message should be in the form of information which will help inhabitants to find a solution to a problem that they are experiencing, an opportunity which they should not miss, changes in their local environment, and so on. These specific topics are prepared in advance with a professional. For example, information about breast cancer prevention was prepared with the Essonne cancer screening association and the regional health agency. Before the door-to-door campaign, the person in charge of the project ensured that there were radiologists close by who would agree, for example, to screen low-income people who had universal medical coverage or received medical financial aid. In such delicate and intimate circumstances,