For those who only know the Brussels neighbourhood of Molenbeek-Saint Jean from newspaper headlines at the time of the terrorist attacks on Paris and Brussels, peace may not be the first word that comes to mind. It may therefore come as a surprise that Molenbeek-Saint Jean should be the venue of an exposition of Cartooning for Peace .

" Connecting people – Cartoons for a peaceful coexistence, " is a display of the works of the members of Cartooning for Peace, a United Nations Supported initiative, and was curated in collaboration with local youths and the municipality of Molenbeek-Saint Jean. The area has become known for being the home of many of the alleged perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in Paris.

The French cartoonist, Plantu of Le Monde, President of Cartooning for Peace, immediately accepted when Françoise Schepmans, the Mayor of Molenbeek-Saint Jean, invited him a year ago to work with youth in what he calls "the epicentre of the earthquake that is shaking our fragile Europe."

"Connecting people – Cartoons for peaceful coexistence", is in fact more than a display of cartoons, since cartoonists from France, Belgium Tunisia, Syria and Israel worked with youth in curating it and engaged and debated with the pupils from local schools.

Plantu admits that he was "intrigued" as a Frenchmen when he visited schools in the area, and said that he found three-quarters of the 16-17 year old girls were veiled, some even put their hands in front of their faces to make sure they were not seen.

"But the encounters and the conversations were absolutely positive," Plantu told UNRIC in an interview. "The drawings are no doubt interesting but what was more interesting was the reaction of youth, some who agreed and others who didn´t agree, with the content of the cartoons. I think we have to invent new dialogues with troubled areas, and we have already decided to engage with youth in Verviers in Belgium, Clermont Ferrand in France and elsewhere in Europe."

The exposition of 30 cartoons took place 15-30 November in the Château du Karreveld, in the midst of a park with a peaceful lake in Molenbeek, another reminder of how misleading stereotypes can be. The cartoons were organized according to themes such as stereotypes, migration, refugees, solidarity, dialogue and liberties, respect etc. In some cases the cartoonists had to emphasize to the pupils that cartoons should not always be understood at face value.

"A 16-17 year old teenager engaged with us and asked us why the intention of the cartoonists was to humiliate Muslims," Plantu continues. "We all explained that there was nothing in the exposition that he had just seen, that was humiliating. We always have to explain that the Danish cartoonists and their Charlie Hebdo colleagues did not wake up one day with the intention of humiliating one billion Muslims. Earlier, at one point, I was told that it was good riddance when my friends at Charlie Hebdo were killed. As long as this is the case, we have a lot of work on our hands."

Cartoonists for Peace has been active since 2006 when it was launched by Plantu and the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Plantu thinks that the 162 member strong Cartoonist for peace is as relevant as ever.

"Cartooning for Peace was supposed to be a single event as a reaction to the Fatwa against the Danish Mohamed designers, who we all supported. Kofi Annan then suggested that it would continue as an association. The years that have passed since then have proven that he was right when he foresaw that in the age of the internet a picture drawn in Copenhagen or in the backroom of a brasserie in Saint-Germain de Pres, can have an instant worldwide impact on the net. Cartooning for Peace anticipated the tragic events that have witnessed in Paris, Brussels and elsewhere."

The association with the UN has continued and the exposition in Molenbeek was associated with Together, a United Nations campaign that promotes respect safety and dignity for refugees and migrants.