

NEWS

PROJECT

MiFRIENDLY CITIES

📍 Coventry, United Kingdom

TOPIC

Integration of migrants and refugees

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Coventry Zoom-in 3: The unexpected results and actions of EMPOWERED MIGRANTS CREATING, DEVELOPING AND EVOLVING - positive evolutions of individuals, associations and local authorities

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This final ZOOM-IN 3 concentrates on the unexpected results of the project, of which, there are many. They are surprising and show how strong individuals, associations and foundations as well as local authorities can be, especially in very difficult times, such as those caused by COVID 19. Ordinary participants of the project, have become the new "protagonists" of the three cities, associations and foundations have developed new skills and partnerships and the three local authorities have joined in new projects. All this to allow newcomers to become ex-migrants and ex-refugees, just citizens!

Key concepts: *placing migrants in the centre, evolving from participants to protagonists, mutualising support between new and more experienced structures, learning to work together, stronger resilience and creativity as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, a real place in the centre of society for ex-migrants and ex-refugees.*

1. Executive summary

The **MiFriendly Cities** project formally closed in May 2021. The partners have written reports and have submitted all the financial elements to the managing authority (Coventry City Council) which in turn has directed these documents to the [Urban Innovative Action](#) (UIA) secretariat in Lille.

As expert for the MiFriendly Cities project, I have been asked to concentrate my work in this final ZOOM-IN 3 on the **unexpected results** of the project, of which, there are many. They are surprising and show how strong individuals, associations and foundations as well as



local authorities can be, especially in very difficult times, such as those caused by COVID 19.

The energy produced through the collaboration of many persons, structures and institutions has empowered potentially active persons and structures, to become almost “hyper active”, in the positive sense, evolving from being “**participants**” of the project to becoming it’s “**protagonists**”, as says Mark Russell from [Migration Work](#).

Positioning migrants and refugees in the centre of information, of the debate about their role, and in general in society, has been the backbone of the work done by the Media Lab. This has empowered the participants/protagonists to become community journalists, speaking up from the posture of someone who has been through the experience themselves, thereby shedding a more original light on past experiences, and proving the added value of migrants and refugees for the country here and now. The situation has been strengthened by direct contacts with MPs, who have taken a particular interest in the situation of migrants and refugees. Such meetings between migrants and refugees and national politicians would not have been possible without the MiFriendly Cities platform.

A protagonist acts and goes forward. This is a common feature of many of the initiatives taken by persons linked in one way or another to the MiFriendly Cities project. For example, some have co-created the “[Network of Migrant Innovators](#)” (NOMI), others have developed to cover new areas of work and help, which needed to be filled during the COVID 19 crisis as did the [African Caribbean Community Initiative](#) (ACCI) with its furniture factory and home makeovers.

The three city protagonists of the project, **Birmingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton** are also exploring new common territories...they have initiated new collaborations between themselves, and with other local authorities (Sandwell) and have largely opened up to new forms of partnerships with associations and foundations, creating networks of complementary structures, which together can take on the challenges for the needed two-way integration of migrants/refugees and the resident populations in a multiplicity of ways.

This ZOOM-IN 3 will look at some of these unexpected results and show how spaces of positive liberty can be filled by those who can lead others, making cities better places for all to live in together. Should this ZOOM-IN 3 miss some important unexpected results, this was not the intention of the author, who in any case had to make choices in what is presented below.

2. Unexpected results

Projects are planned to achieve certain objectives and seem to have a rather stiff approach to change, even though the UIA logic inputs change as a permanent feature of its projects. In the case of the MiFriendly Cities it appears that change has had a major effect on the visibility of what the project does and has achieved. This has been done by reviewing the aims and evaluation, creating a common theory of change and identifying the elements of the project which are significant in actions done on the ground.

From these elements which were not planned, we can deduce the following:

- the project needs to be “seen” from a larger perspective than its actual activity,
- changes in the partnership (formal or informal) gave fresh energy to the project,
- creating a network of confidence among project partners is essential,
- some of the participants of the project have become its pillars as protagonists,
- outside factors (COVID 19) have had both positive and negative effects which could not have been planned,
- the legacy priority identified at the mid-term partnership meeting was of capital importance, and could have been put into practice sooner.

In ZOOM-IN 2 I quoted Professor Mike Hardy (Director of [Coventry University Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations](#)) as saying:

we're seeking to redefine the way cities integrate newcomers by equipping migrants with the skills and knowledge they need to contribute to the economy and social wellbeing of the communities in which they live and finding ways for the whole city to play a part in the process.

Today we can affirm, with a whole group of **ex-migrants** and **ex-refugees**, that the stimulus of MiFriendly Cities has allowed them to go over and above the already high hurdle mentioned by Prof. Hardy. They have become leaders, protagonists, defenders of their cause, showing others how to become fully fledged active residents of their cities. As the African proverb says: **“alone you can go fast, but together you can go a long way”**.

3. Successful partnerships

The MiFriendly Cities project has proved over its 3-year existence, that it has been and is a successful partnership:

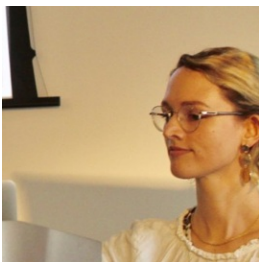
- **it has welcomed new partners during its existence** (some themes led by Interserve were taken on by the Refugee Employment Network), to the point when participants have become actors of the programme, and what is more important, actors of its legacy, taking it forward even further (several social innovators have become leaders of change, eg. have created the Network of Migrant Innovators ([NOMI](#))).
- **the results of the partnership have become “larger” than the partnership itself**. For example, they have had a positive influence on the collaboration between the three partner cities, Birmingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton, as well as at the level of the West Midlands Combined Authority, where the appreciation of the contribution of migrants and refugees, has positively evolved (through the work of the [West Midlands Funders Network](#)).
- **the competences and capacities of all the partners of the project have progressed**; they have learned to work with one another (closer collaborations between RMC and CRMC and the local authorities), they have found out on whom they can count on and they have built enough confidence between each other to be able to produce innovative actions, in the face of COVID 19 (e.g. the virtual [My City Exhibition](#) on the identity of migrants and refugees in the 3 partner cities by Maokwo), giving a priority to local development of areas of the cities, communities and individuals.
- The partnership has also facilitated the **breaking down of bottlenecks** and has shown that such a “consortium” can have a momentum of its own and can overtake, through its energy, the speed with which change is brought about by heavier institutional structures (collaboration between the three partner cities).

All these elements, coincide with the conclusions of an [OECD LEED](#) report on [Successful Partnerships](#), published in 2006.

4. Creation

4.1 Social Innovation.

The project planned to finance an unknown number of “social innovations”, which would be proposed by migrants and/or refugees. 17 projects were submitted and were pitched during a whole-day meeting in Birmingham in March 2019 ([see Journal 2](#)).



Tamsin Koumis

4.2 Common needs.

After suffering from some delays in financing, the social innovators started up most of their innovations, which ranged from building up people's confidence, improving literacy skills, helping migrants and refugees with accommodation, fighting loneliness, or helping to get employers to respect employment laws. [Migration Work](#), through the person of Tamsin Koumis, organised meetings of the social innovators and it soon became evident, that they have complementary needs and could benefit from a permanent structure, which will not terminate with the end of the project.

4.3 A social innovation network.

The “[Network of Migrant Innovators](#)” (NOMI) was created with the leadership of some more experienced social innovators

and the support of Tamsin Koumis and Melvin Lyons (responsible for networking, strategy and outreach) from Migration Work. This was definitely not envisaged at the stage of planning the whole project!

NOMI’s main mission

- to improve all aspects of the well-being of migrants in the West Midlands, starting within our communities.

We aim to:

- Empower migrants
- Be a central pool of expertise on migrant’s experience in the UK
- Connect and collaborate with other migrant-led organizations

We will:

- Increase skills and capacity in individuals to plan and sustain their work
- Form relationships of trust and cooperation formed between projects
- Learn from one another
- Deliver joint projects to bring our communities together



Ake Achi

Ake Achi was elected CEO of the Community Interest Company NOMI. He already works hard as a specialist in law concerning the workplace. For him, NOMI came to be, on the basis of the discrimination and frustration that many migrants and refugees feel and who all have a direct experience of the immigration system. For Ake, it’s the **“lived experience”** which makes you an expert in migration. It’s also this lived experience, which gives people the power to want **“to take back their own lives”**, to take the lead in fighting for their rights. This is just so important, as what appears **“political”** to some, **“is just part of our lives”**, declares Ake.

His vision of NOMI resembles that of what mother nature proposes: *a bird takes a seed and drops it somewhere. The plant grows and bees fly from one flower to the next...*this is the way NOMI functions.

As declares Ake:

Come together to build ourselves, move forward and be stronger



For Melvin Lyons, who supported the creation and start-up of NOMI, the collective training sessions were very important. They clearly showed that mutual support from one person or structure to the next was vital, with the stronger supporting the weaker. It has to be underlined, that some persons had never run an organisation in the UK previously. Melvin underlines that the three cities profited in different ways from this network: Coventry invested in the network, Wolverhampton did a great job on home makeovers, whilst Birmingham supported additional mentoring and coaching in the Brighter Future Programme.

4.4 Co-management.

The truly unexpected “icing on the cake” is the co-management of Hope House by NOMI. Hope House is a municipal facility in Coventry, which welcomes all inhabitants, but especially migrants and refugees. It will therefore be run on the basis of a co-management by the network of social innovators with NOMI also running the front desk. What a success!

It truly means that the local authority and other partners have totally signed up to the position of migrants at the centre of what is happening in the city and to the new and legalised idea, that public properties can and should be managed with citizens, as true partners.

Co-management through partnership agreements: in Italy the state laws have introduced the “commons”, as the basis for agreements between local authorities and third parties, in order to be able to really co-manage projects, places, buildings, etc. This has been taken even further by the city of Turin, ([Co-city UIA project](#)) which has developed over 50 partnership agreements with informal groups of inhabitants or associations and foundations, on the basis of a municipal law, guaranteeing the rights of everyone to equal co-management. This experience is now being further developed in 3 other cities (Budapest, Cluj Napoca and Gdansk) in an URBACT/UIA transfer project called [Co4cities](#).

5. Development



An example of development of a structure, is the [African Caribbean Community Initiative](#) (ACCI) which was initially created in 1987, as a response to concerns raised by the Wolverhampton Rastafarian Progressive Association about the disproportionate number of African Caribbean’s suffering or at risk of mental ill health in the local community.

Since that time ACCI has become a very important defender of the rights of persons with special needs and has developed many actions supporting them; supported accommodation, day resource facilities, carers support group, therapeutic & holistic counselling service, housing advice, welfare rights, life skills / emotional support.

ACCI joined the MiFriendly Cities project, mainly due to the fact, that there were persons within the structure, who were very keen

on upcycling and recycling everything, in order to reduce waste and respect the planet. ACCI won the bid to run the Wolverhampton Furniture Factory, under the auspices of Wolverhampton City Council, which aimed to collect used furniture, repair and renew it and distribute it to persons, who for example would be getting their first accommodation after a long period in treatment. ACCI worked in partnership with Right Track (trainings in recycling), Crafty Gardner (soft furnishings) and BME Housing (coordination of migrant referrals, community outreach and engagement activities including the mobile community repairs café).

The COVID 19 situation at first slowed down this process, but soon it became apparent that the ACCI became the 'go to' place, whilst many others had closed down due to the pandemic.



Iranian migrants at work at the Colton Hill Community School

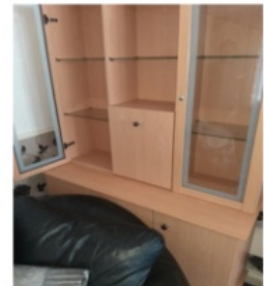
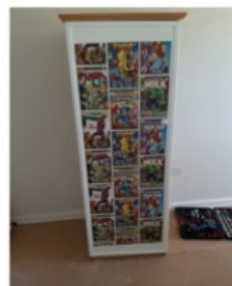
This also meant that migrants of other origins (the Middle East, Afghanistan, Syria) participated in the ACCI actions. For example, the migrants, supported by 17 volunteers completed over **90 home makeovers**. A group of **Iranian migrants** worked to prepare the Colton Hills Community School ready for action after the first lockdown and streamed their efforts back to Iran with pride. All these participating persons also showed they have a real heart. They decided to prepare **"welcome packs"** for the persons benefiting from home makeovers, which included such little things as kettles, toasters, washing up liquid, dish clothes or bath sets. The was very much welcomed by the beneficiaries, who appreciated the **"house to home"** approach. In several instances the flats or houses were adapted to the local situation; e.g. installing curtains, for a flat just by a bus stop to guarantee privacy.

"I found the furniture project brilliant and a massive help considering I'd moved into my new property from a refuge and had hardly any furniture and very little cash to spare..

The guys who run the project were great. I can see they were extremely hard working and passionate about the project. They were friendly, very welcoming, and made me feel comfortable to ask for the help.

They were also very informative of the other projects they were involved in and I'm hoping to take part as a volunteer in the near future.

I strongly feel it would be a good idea to expand the project and give it the appropriate support and funding as I feel a lot of residents in Wolverhampton require and would benefit from the help I received"



42 participants from many different origins were trained through the Furniture Factory process (Iranians, South Asians, Ethiopians, Eritreans, Syrians, Zimbabweans, Sudanese, Egyptians, Singaporeans, Kurdish) and their motivations are numerous:

- to learn and practice my English,
- to learn new skills that might help me get a job,
- to help in setting up my own business,
- to make new friends and meet new people,
- to learn new skills that will help others,
- to get out of home and do something useful,
- to use the skills I have from back home,
- to support and teach others,
- or to keep in touch with my community.



Some of the work was done with a mobile Repair Café, allowing participants to be active, as they worked outside, during the pandemic.

As says one of the participants:



I did my Masters in sustainable materials how to up-cycle and re-cycle. Furniture is about sustainability. My passion is to use things again and not throw them away.

In the world we have, people who are very rich and people who have nothing and they still throw things away. We can help those people by up-cycling and re-cycling.

ACCI has become a major player in the circular economy world as well and affirms the following elements to be the legacy of the MiFriendly Cities project:

- Established a new workshop base for up cycling and storage
- Developing a gardening and grounds maintenance team
- Established a home makeover group with well-resourced materials and equipment
- Network of organisations and individuals supporting the project through furniture donations and volunteering
- Starting home clearance business
- Established referral networks and widen beneficiary network to migrant and non-migrant communities
- Support from local businesses and community stakeholders
- Established training programmes

What's more, these actions showed that **the residents of Wolverhampton and the surrounding areas were more than eager to help**: the residents of a rich village pledged to not sell or give away their furniture without first offering it to the Furniture Factory, Green Square Housing gave away 30/40 wardrobes. A medical centre, which closed due to the pandemic, donated all the furniture necessary to renovate a house in Wales, including wipe down mattresses, single beds, etc., which will all benefit Wolverhampton residents.

6. Migrants at the centre

The MiFriendly Cities project, due to its networking, numerous partners and diversity has managed to facilitate the positioning of **migrants and refugees at the centre of many of its actions**. During the midterm away-day, participating partners underlined the fact, that integration is a two-way process and actions should involve the resident community as well as migrants and refugees.

It's the migrants and refugees themselves, who have responded to this challenge, doing many things which developed in size and depth, to include much of the resident community, persons in other regions of the UK and other countries. In part, this was achieved, due to the fact that many actions had to adapt to the lockdown caused by the COVID 19 pandemic, often multiplying their effectiveness.

6.1 Central England Law Centre (CELC):

This structure, which was mainly doing legal health checks and promoting this in face to face meetings in schools, had to stop this initiative due to the pandemic. CELC adapted their offer in two ways; they contacted over **500 schools across the West Midlands** to share specially adapted on-line content about citizenship, touching many more migrant and refugee youth than before. They also brought to the surface and acted on the very complex situations in which migrants and refugees found themselves, due to the pandemic, which changed their immigration status, made it impossible for them to return home due to the new rules and regulations etc.

6.2 Share My Language Rhymetime:

The weekly sessions in public libraries were also stopped by COVID 19 regulations. The staff of MyFriendly Cities, concerned about how the boundaries between work and home were becoming blurred due to work from home, invented 30-minute fun-filled activities for children, which were produced live and continued to encourage language learning, helped with understanding the coronavirus regulations etc.



Seyedeh Naseriniaki

6.3 Health Champions:

Migrants and refugees were trained to be Health Champions so as to help their own communities by signposting where they could get appropriate medical services from. This network became invaluable during the pandemic, as the Health Champions were able to inform their communities as to what was happening, how to stay safe, what to do in case of infection etc. so as to limit the spread of COVID 19. They were supported by Public Health England, with whom they could discuss more detailed questions.

One of the Health Champions Seyedeh Naseriniaki, a highly qualified Iranian, became the coordinator of the Health Champions, thereby leading this initiative, through additional funds found by the project, with the help of the legacy officer Ros Johnson and Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre (CRMC).

6.4 Citizen Social Scientists:

Coventry University proposed a course for migrants and refugees, giving them capacities to act as citizens social scientists. The course was planned for 35 participants, **120 registered and 80 took part!**The participants learned to do interviews, increased their observation capacity and collaborated with experienced social scientists. They have proved to be so motivated and qualified that **5 of them were employed by the West Midlands Combined Authority** to do research on the situation of migrants in the area. Another unexpected success and result.

6.5 Emerald Book Club:

Joshua, who runs a book club was astonished to find out, that when he went virtual due to the pandemic, that over **2000 persons were participating, some of them from South Asia and Africa.**He interpreted this success to be a result of people being stuck at home during the lockdown, but it is also his success as a social innovator to come up with a service, which corresponds so well to people's needs everywhere.

6.6 From participant to anchor person:

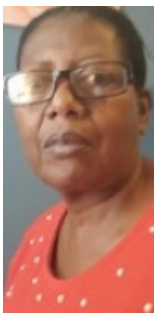
Victor Iringere, originally a participant, had so much energy and competencies, that he was employed by CRMC, ran the Coventry Health Champions, led ESOL and ESP delivery and looked after the delivery of the Hope House project build. Mary Thomas, another participant and social innovator, created the [Padendere Community Sewing Group](#), so as to bring together isolated individuals in Wolverhampton. She also completed the Health Champions training and took part in the Media Lab training by Migrant Voice. **Since she has become the Director of the Network of Migrant Innovators NOMI**, mentioned above. Loraine Masiya Mponela, also a participant and social innovator, created **Right2aHome**, building up the UK's first migrant led housing project for destitute migrants. She also participated in the Media Lab and Newsroom activities and was largely featured in the media.

6.7 Media Lab:

The original project planned to train migrants and refugees in such a way that they can speak, and write for themselves, basing this on their **"lived experience"**. This training took place and evolved into virtual sessions due to the pandemic. Some of the participants got so involved, that they started to organise regular weekly news-room meetings and to produce more and more material. The climax of this work, which was led by Migrant Voice, became the production of a magazine by the news-room team called ["Beyond"](#) (see photo and description in Journal no 5), which really gave the voice to persons living in the UK, but coming from elsewhere.

As says Althia Barnett, one of the anchor persons, this was the first time that they felt that they had

more impact. Previously they felt they were not represented. Althia underlines, that stories were always positive and accurate. The magazine was shaped with the migrants in order to be fair and accurate. Althia underlines, that she loved doing it, it was really exciting. She is now writing up other people's stories and wants to continue. Some of the team have even had articles ordered by the city or regional press.



Althia Barnett

Without MiFriendly Cities - says Althia - as migrants we would not have managed. But because the project was based on the realisation that we are all clever, that we believe in our competences, that there is a space for ideas to grow. The participants felt strong, were brought together and now want to continue.



Laura Nyahuye

6.8 The mother's womb – a shared space for all

My Friendly Cities wanted to produce an exhibition about the project, but the pandemic made this impossible. The My City [exhibition](#), which you are invited to visit, thus became a virtual project and it was curated by [Maokwo](#) (which in the Shona language used in Zimbabwe means 'hands') a CIE specialised in assisting marginalised groups helping them to accede to the art world. It presents what is common to us all as human beings, leading you around the actors of the three participating cities with ease and professionalism, through photography, poetry, art and reflexion.

Laura Nyahuye, founder, creator and CEO of Maokwo says:

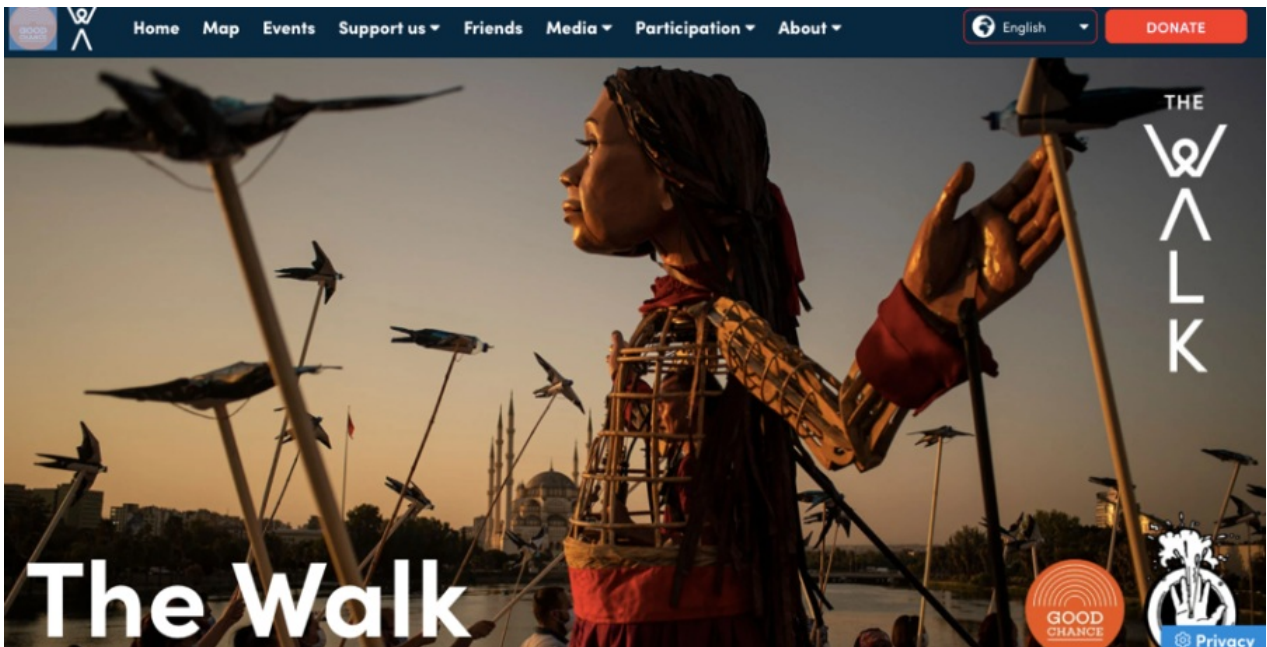
I migrated from Zimbabwe. My existence as a mother, artist, storyteller, curator, producer, founder at Maokwo is intertwined with my heritage, my lived experience as a migrant in the UK. I embody my work, it's my calling. I believe I have something to give, **I believe OUR Human existence is a cry, a call to something beyond our Human understanding!** One of my quests in life is bringing Humans together. In my work and the work we produce at Maokwo you will find a strong emphasis on the 'Human' That's who we are beyond systematic structures and labels that separate us, beyond the twang in my tongue. **We share a common space... 'the mother's womb'.**



The title page of the virtual exposition

6.9 Little Amal and children's citizenship ceremonies:

Up till now there was no way for children, whose stay is legalised in the UK and become UK citizens, to officially celebrate this. The project for the introduction of a **Children's Citizenship Ceremony**, as a heritage of the MiFriendly Cities, will be introduced as part of the [City of Culture](#) events in Coventry coinciding with the arrival of '[Little Amal](#)' a 3.5m high 9-year-old puppet who is walking from the Syrian border to Manchester, 8000km, calling at 70 towns and cities on the way to be 'welcomed'. This is going to be a **'breath-taking and beautiful celebration of identities'** and it will be wonderful to introduce a Children's Citizenship Ceremony as part of this event (October 27th 2021).



Thus the MiFriendly Cities project dissolves into the West Midlands and especially Coventry, underlining the international solidarity that we all need to share.

7. Looking forward:

The journey of improved status and integration of migrants and refugees in the West Midlands has gained a lot of speed; due to the work of the passionate partner organisations, but perhaps most of all, from the **new protagonists** of the area of work and life, who are the **ex-migrants** and **ex-refugees** themselves.

In Journal 1 I asked the question:

when do we cease to be migrants and refugees?

I am a migrant 4 times over, but of my own choice, which is completely different, from those who have to leave their country to survive.

I sincerely hope, that many of the actors of this ZOOM-IN 3 will recognise the fact, that they were migrants and refugees, but that at some point, they become residents, citizens, just like all the others. This realisation will also depend on **whether other residents and citizens are ready to do the same.**

This ZOOM-IN 3 has tried to give a glimpse of what they have all done, on the basis of many interviews and texts, which go much deeper into these realities. However, it seems important to give some indicators to readers from elsewhere in the UK and the European Union, about this two-way process of integration, at a moment, when **many EU countries are welcoming a new wave of refugees from Afghanistan...**

A final Journal of the MiFriendly Cities project will be produced in May 2022, to witness how the numerous legacies of the project are doing, a year after the end of the project.

[Integration of migrants and refugees](#)

[See on UIA website](#)

