The CURANT Project
Journal N°1

Project led by the City of Antwerp
The CURANT project

The CURANT project seeks to provide integrated services for unaccompanied young refugees once they reach adulthood and are no longer entitled to benefit from social protection as an unaccompanied minor. It will combine co-housing and social integration schemes with volunteer buddies (young local residents aged 20-30 years old) for one to one integration and circular integrated individual trajectories. A total of 75 co-housing units will be set up through purchase, renovation and private renting. In these units a minimum of 75 and a maximum of 135 unaccompanied young refugees cohabit with Flemish buddies for at least 1 year. The buddy helps the refugee with different aspects.

The refugees are intensively guided during the whole project, on different levels such as through a social network and integration, education, independent living, language learning, leisure time, psychological counselling and professional activation. During the project, the University of Antwerp measures the impact of the cohousing and intensive support on the integration of the young refugees.

The project aims to help the target group with education, training and work, creating a network of supportive relations and dealing with (war) trauma. The refugees transcend their status as welfare beneficiaries and are able to create a good future in Antwerp. In turn, their success stories set an example for their peers as they personify an effective integration. Positively integrating young refugees to society contributes to a more harmonious urban community and an increased public safety.

The buddy’s will sharpen their intercultural qualities and take up an exemplary role as pioneers of a welcoming society. In the meanwhile, both groups benefit from living in affordable housing. The main partners will have actively acquired expertise on working with the target group. Thus they are able to develop cooperative working methods, allowing regular future services to be tuned.

Partnership:

- Stad Antwerpen
- Solentra (Solidarity and Trauma) - unit of the psychiatric division of UZ Brussel
- JES vzw - ‘urban lab’ for children and youngsters in Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels
- Vormingplus - NGO
- Atlas integratie & inburgering Antwerpen – NGO
- University of Antwerpen
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1 Executive Summary

Humanitarian crises in many parts of the world are generating one within the European borders. The nature of the phenomenon, and the lack of adequate innovative solutions to manage it, poses some main concerns about fundamental rights. Migration is a permanent feature of Europe’s future, but the response so far has been inadequate.

Within the refugee population, unaccompanied minors constitute the most vulnerable group, for which European and international standards offer care and protection. However, when these minors reach the age of adulthood (+18), they are no longer able to benefit from subsidised shelter, enrolment in reception classes, customised trainings, and the support from a legal guardian. By definition this vulnerable group of young adults is unqualified, not in education, employment and training, and develops into protracted dependence of social welfare.

The CURANT project radically wants to break with this reality, by means of two innovations to be tested on a selection of 100 unaccompanied young adult refugees: co-housing with volunteer buddies (not only for reasons of shelter, but as a means to sustainable 1-on-1 integration); individual development trajectories, focused on activation, education, independent living, language, leisure, social integration and psychological counselling. The project’s innovativeness lies in combining the mixed use of a set of policy instruments in a new integrated way to a 'legally overlooked' target group. By combining co-housing and an integrated and personalised approach to support services, the project aims at reinforcing unaccompanied young adults intensely, in multiple areas of life at the same time.

The project’s ambition is to see unaccompanied young adult refugees better integrated in society and directed towards education, training or work. This ambition fits within a wider local, regional and national policy. The partnership has all relevant expertise on board. As per the team, it is composed of highly competent and committed people who go a long way to ensure the project succeeds.

The theory of change behind the project is in theory very simple, but practically very difficult. The theory is that if you treat people with justice and kindness, provide them with some initial conditions for their integration, and build around them a safe net of welcoming relationships, it will be more likely that these people will happily join the community, and make their best to fit and contribute. On the other hand, there are so many different variables to this (starting from psychological conditions and ending with ability to bond with a buddy) that the outcome cannot be predictable, nor ensured.
One year into the project, the CURANT team is into the implementation of all the planned activities. At the time of publication, 26 duos of refugees and buddies live together, that means 52 people recruited by the project team through a careful selection process. The Journal explores some of the tough challenges a project this complex inevitably faces, and the ways in which the project team is trying to overcome them.

European cities are increasingly becoming attraction poles and will face the challenge of integrating higher numbers of refugees, and this challenge will be more difficult when it comes to the most vulnerable groups of unaccompanied minors and young adults. CURANT is at present probably one of the most innovative solutions in Europe to this challenge. One year into the project means that no one can state whether the project will achieve the expected results, and to what extent, and it will take time after the end of this three-year experimentation to evaluate the systemic impact of the proposed solution. Having said that, some qualitative observations of changes happening in the lives of those young refugees provide hope.
2 Understanding migration in Europe

2.1 The story of Ahmad

Ahmad is seventeen when this story begins. He lives a difficult but decent life in a country faced with many difficulties and uncertainties, Iraq. Together with his parents, he takes care of their small farm just outside Mosul. In the time left from the family business, he manages to study and cultivate a small hobby, making hand-crafted furniture. This is what Ahmad dreams about, to have his own small furniture shop in a larger city one day, to get married and have at least two children he will send to school.

When their lives are endangered by war, Ahmad and his parents seek the help of a well-connected friend, who manages to help them in exchange of their farm. So one night they get smuggled out of their home in Mosul, taking only what they can carry. Their escape takes them for days across the mountains to a Kurdish village, and then to Istanbul, where they eventually board a small open boat to a Greek island in the Aegean Sea. During the crossing, due to the heavy water and agitated sea, Ahmad’s parents are both pushed out the boat, not to be found again.

Ahmad lands in an unknown country, alone, and desperate. In the following months, he gets moved from shelter to shelter, unable to see where eventually this is taking him. The frequent moves do not allow him to make friends, nor to find the protection of some adults.

Finally Ahmad gets moved to a place for some time, in Antwerp, Belgium. One day, an NGO guy, Paul, becomes close friend with Ahmad, and takes special care about his case. Through high-ranking friends of his family, Paul manages to have Ahmad be legally recognised as a refugee, and to get housing and access to welfare services. Considering that it has taken him less than one year to get his status, Ahmad should consider himself lucky, compared to some of his peers for whom it could take up to two years to get it.

So Ahmad begins a new phase in his life, and for the first time in one year he is able to enjoy the company of other young people sharing his same destiny. The real adventure begins when he turns eighteen, as Ahmad will have just two years to create a new life for himself, as asylum special benefits are provided to refugees who are unaccompanied minors with a time limit Ahmad will have to learn a new language, acquire basic skills, find a house and search for a job, in a country in which not everybody sees him as a welcome guest.

One day, he gets an invitation to join an experimental project lead by the Public Centre for Social Welfare – OCMW, which could potentially change his life. So he goes to the first interview in order to assess whether he is eligible to the project and has what it takes to get in.
2.2 The integration problem

The story of Ahmad is the story of thousands of young people that flee to Europe every year in search of security and opportunities.

A total of 4.7 million people immigrated to one of the EU-28 Member States during 2015, while at least 2.8 million emigrants were reported to have left an EU Member State. Among these 4.7 million immigrants, there were an estimated 2.4 million citizens of non-member countries, 1.4 million people with citizenship of a different EU Member State from the one to which they immigrated, around 860 thousand people who migrated to an EU Member State of which they had the citizenship (for example, returning nationals or nationals born abroad), and some 19 thousand stateless people.1

In the EU State of the Union Address 2017 it is reported “in the last few years, Europe experienced the largest number of arrivals of refugees and migrants since the end of the Second World War. The Syrian crisis played an important part in generating this record number, as did conflicts, instability and poverty in many parts of the world. Migration, asylum and border management systems were put under huge pressure. The Union and its Member States were not sufficiently prepared to respond effectively. The scale of the crisis had a powerful impact across the EU. The integrity of both the Common European Asylum System and of the Schengen area of free movement for European citizens was put into question.”

Humanitarian crises in many parts of the world are generating one within the European borders. The nature of the phenomenon, and the lack of adequate innovative solutions to manage it, poses some main concerns about fundamental rights. Migration is a permanent feature of Europe’s future, but the response so far has been inadequate.

Of those entering Europe in search of opportunities or salvation, just in 2015 around 1.250.000 new asylum applications were made throughout the EU, of which 69.040 for unaccompanied minors.2

A tightening of border policies is currently limiting access to asylum in some Member States. In addition, procedures are often lengthy with little access to counselling and information about rights and how to apply for asylum. More than 1.1 million people who sought asylum in Europe during the continent’s biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War were still waiting up to two years later to hear whether they would be allowed to stay, according to a study. In the first Europe-wide analysis of the status of asylum seekers who arrived in Norway, Switzerland and the 28-member EU during the 2015-16 crisis, the Pew Research Center estimated that more than half were still in limbo in December last year.3

In addition to that, some reception centres still face problems with overcrowding and conditions remain poor. The extreme summer heat in some regions also creates a problem due to a lack of protection from the heat. NGOs also reported alleged incidents of police violence and intimidation. Child protection remains a worry.

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1 Source: Eurostat.
2 Source: Eurostat.
Guardianship systems continue to be under-resourced and over-burdened in many Member States with unaccompanied children in particular being kept in poor conditions and being made to wait over 15 months to be interviewed in some instances. The number of children reported missing from reception centres also continues to be a concern.\(^4\)

In most of the Member States, no exact data exists on the numbers or proportion of asylum seekers and refugees who are victims of crime (with some exceptions in a few localities) or convicted of criminal offences. Authorities in some Member States note that asylum seekers are less likely to report being victims of crime. Data are limited regarding the kind of concerns that local and existing migrant communities have brought to the attention of the police before and after the arrival of asylum seekers. One common concern that emerged in several Member States – voiced by both local communities, including existing migrant populations, as well as by asylum seekers or refugees – was the fear of becoming a victim of crime.

And yet with all the threats and difficulties refugees face just to get to a safer place in Europe, the real tough journey begins once they finally get pass the reception centres. Too many of them still find it difficult or impossible to settle and create for themselves and their families a decent life in their new host country. Anti-migrant incidents continue to be reported in many Member States, ranging from public demonstrations and campaigns against migrants, rising hate speech and hate crime including violent attacks. When it comes to migration and refugees, emotions run high on all sides.

And yet a recent OECD report shows that in almost all OECD countries, *migrants contribute more than they take in social benefits*. “They are productive members of society who work, set up businesses and have innovative ideas. Migrants boost the working age population: over the past 10 years, they accounted for 47% of the increase in the US workforce and 70% in Europe. They also fill jobs in both fast-growing as well as declining sectors of the economy, including the care of the elderly and health care in general.”\(^5\)

**Migrants boost the working age population: over the past 10 years, they accounted for 47% of the increase in the US workforce and 70% in Europe.**

Of all the asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors represent the most vulnerable group: too young not to need full support, yet already so beaten up by life. In a new world with so many unknown things, those young people miss both the support of their family, and the cultural references that they are used to. They are in the hands of strangers, some of which

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\(^4\) Source: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

are trying to help. This is why refugees under the age of 18 have been granted a specific legal status, based on an extensive cascade of national and international legislation built on the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. Until age 18, they receive targeted support (e.g. guardianship, reception classes, housing) as a result of their status as minors. There is growing awareness however that once such young people turn 18, and are therefore no longer eligible for these specialist services, they still often require significant support. Those aged 18 years and over require a safe and stable living environment on the one hand and a mixed set of services, simultaneously targeting multiple areas of life on the other hand. These support services need to be sensitive to their needs both as young people at a unique stage of adolescent development without their families present, and as refugees from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

These minors, also when they reach the age of adulthood, will need care (often also psych trauma therapy), support (e.g. help in finding housing) and training. If not, they will run the risk of becoming permanently dependent of social welfare. A systemic solution to those problems is yet to be found, therefore innovation is needed.

3 The CURANT cure

3.1 The ambition

From a CURANT project worker:
“An idea is never crazy enough and in a project you have to think large. I am good at that and that’s why I am sometimes called ‘romantic’ or ‘naive’. But with this attitude I want to solve problems by seeing them as a challenge that can be solved. You have to believe in a solution or a change.”

In Antwerp, 20.8 % of the population is not Belgian. This number grows to 48% if you account for all the people with parents from a different origin country. Antwerp is the result of centuries of “mixité”. On 1 January 2017, the number of refugees in Antwerp was 6.492: today, one out of 80 Antwerp citizens is a refugee. Of those, 1.570 are asylum seekers, mostly from Syria (1.105), Afghanistan (985) and Iraq (935). Recent 2016 figures for Belgium indicate that 12.5 % of all asylum-seekers are unaccompanied minors. Currently 255 unaccompanied youngsters between the age of 17 and 21 are getting financial benefits from the social welfare system in Antwerp, but not special assistance.

By definition this vulnerable group of young adults is unqualified, not in education, employment and training, and develops into protracted dependence of social welfare. The CURANT project radically wants to break with this reality, by means of two innovations to be tested on a selection of unaccompanied young adult refugees: co-housing with volunteer buddies (not only for reasons of shelter, but as a means for sustainable 1-on-1 integration); individual development trajectories, focused on activation, education, independent living, language, leisure, social integration and psychological counselling. The project name is an

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66 Source: City of Antwerp, Jaarrapport diversiteit OCMW-stoentrekkers 2016.
acronym for Cohousing and case management for Unaccompanied young adult Refugees in ANTwerp.

The project’s ambition is to see unaccompanied young adult refugees better integrated in society and directed towards education, training or work. The unaccompanied refugees involved in the project will transcend their status as welfare beneficiaries over time and will be able to rebuild for themselves a positive future in society. Even though the project will “just” engage between 75 and 135 refugees in its life span (current estimates point at around 100), the whole process is designed as an experiment, which could be to scaled up to the wider population of unaccompanied young adult refugees. So what do you need to make such an ambition work out?

You need an idea with enough political backing, resources for a meaningful experimentation, a good team of committed and passionate people, a consortium of partners that can cover the wide range of competences and disciplines needed, coherence with the larger policy and legal framework if you do not want your efforts to be useless, and a plan. All things the CURANT project has.

The CURANT ambition fits within a wider local, regional and national policy. The multi-annual programme 2014-2019 of the city of Antwerp stipulates that all refugees have to be socially activated, while improving their Dutch language skills. On a regional level, the Flemish government’s Action Plan for combating poverty aims to foster participation to society through formal and informal learning and stresses the need to provide sufficient housing for everyone. On the Belgian federal level, the 2007 federal law for the reception of refugees compels the Belgian authorities to provide all unaccompanied minors with shelter until they reach the age of adulthood. From this moment onwards, they will have two months to find adequate housing.

The CURANT partnership has all relevant expertise on board. The Public Centre for Social Welfare – OCMW - of the city of Antwerp is the promoter of the project. Within the local administration’s organisation, OCMW is an independent legal entity, and its mission is to contribute to maximum realization of social rights for everyone living in Antwerp, and to strive towards full social integration and increased social mobility.

Solentra, short for Solidarity and Trauma, is a unit within Paika, the psychiatric division of UZ Brussel (University Hospital Brussels) for infants, children and adolescents. Solentra is specifically responsible for the screening of the refugees and for the therapy sessions related to their possible psychological traumas. Solentra has experience in diagnostic and therapeutic support to refugee and migrant children and their families. JES vzw is a urban lab for children and youngsters. JES is responsible for providing activation training to the unaccompanied young adults, focusing on work attitudes, competences and career planning. JES’s is training social workers in order to strengthen their skills in order to enable them to provide the training sessions.

Vormingplus has 13 centres spread across Flanders and Brussels. Vormingplus is taking care of the recruitment, intakes, training and coaching of the volunteers, both individually and in group processes. Vormingplus has a long experience in emancipatory educational processes with adult groups of different ethnic/economic backgrounds.

Atlas is the organization for the integration of newcomers in Antwerp. Within the city
organization, Atlas is an independent entity, with own legal status, established by the City Council decision of 24 November 2014. Atlas provides integration courses, customized for the target group of unaccompanied young adult refugees. Atlas is also responsible for directing these refugees to intensive Dutch language courses, leisure activities and secondary education.

The Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies – CeMIS is leading the project’s evaluation and communication. CeMIS is an interfaculty centre of the University of Antwerp and supports academic education on migration and multicultural societies.

As per the team, Marianne De Canne, Head of Staff Service for the Social Integration and Development department of OCMW and Project Coordinator, and Jolien The Crom, Project Manager, assembled a team of highly competent and committed people who go a long way to ensure the project succeeds.

As Anneloes Van Osselaere, projectworker and trainer, puts it:

“The refugee crisis in general, and the unaccompanied youngsters in transition to adulthood in specific, ask for new creative ideas. A project like CURANT is new and innovative and one in which I want to engage myself completely. This project asks for an open and flexible mind. As a project worker in CURANT I start to identify a lot of things in my private life where the project is impacting. The project challenges you intellectually, but also confronts you with a lot of practical issues. So if in the end you do really reach results, it’s amazing.”

3.2 Why can this be a solution?

As Jolien De Crom, project manager of CURANT, says:

“If you work on this topic, you will be working on a lot of different topics on the same time. When you talk about unaccompanied refugees, you also need to invest in housing, partnership, education, work, etc. This topic tackles so many issues that are as important for a refugee as for any other person. These are human needs and thinking this is only a refugee problem, isn’t true.”

The CURANT project tries to fill an existing dangerous gap for those young adults after the age of 18, which presents itself as a critical pitfall towards durable integration of unaccompanied newcomers in virtually any host country. Missing out on such a crucial passage in those vulnerable young adult’s lives can trigger a self-reinforcing spiral of failure for life.

The project’s innovativeness lies in combining the mixed use of a set of policy instruments in a new integrated way to a ‘legally overlooked’ target group. By combining co-housing and an integrated and personalised approach to support services, the project aims at reinforcing unaccompanied young adults intensely, in multiple areas of life at the same time. The co-housing scheme is based on a carefully conceived buddy recruitment and matching system, and potentially generates opportunities that can only
emerge from an informal one-on-one relationship. The personal support for the young adult refugees entering in the project will follow a circular model instead of a linear one, meaning that no clear end or beginning for service provision are defined. Instead, **multiple areas of life are continuously stimulated, accompanied and evaluated, allowing for constant fine tuning of the type and intensity of support services, according to the refugees’ needs.**

In this way, the unaccompanied young adults manage to build supportive relationships, are empowered to deal with their trauma, restore confidence in political systems, institutions, human rights and the rule of law. **Being gradually integrated in society, and provided both hard and soft skills, young refugees see their chances to find a job increase over time, which will represent the stepping-stone to a decent and autonomous life.** Also the volunteer buddies receive benefits by participating in the project, with the possibility to increase their multicultural relationships skills and to be perceived by peers as pioneers of a welcoming society. Successful young buddies personify an opposing force to growing fears about failed integration and radicalisation in Belgian cities. One might say in Europe at large.

**3.3 The status quo**

One year into the project, the CURANT team is into the implementation of all the planned activities. At the time of publication, 26 duos of refugees and buddies live together, that means 52 people recruited by the project team through a careful selection process. On the refugees’ side, at present 100% of them are male, with an average age of 18 years. Out of the group, 42% comes from the Antwerp local shelter for refugees. Their main countries of origin are Afghanistan (59%), Syria (14%), Eritrea (10%), Somalia (7%), Mauritania (3%) and Iraq (7%). On the buddies’ side, at present 50% of them are women, with an average age of 24 years. They come from different backgrounds, although many of them are social workers or studying to become one (but in the group there are also architects and biologists). For refugees, activation trainings with focus on work attitude, competences and career planning have begun, as well as integration courses and individual counselling. For buddies, intercultural trainings and coaching activities have begun as well. All involved beneficiaries are supported in different ways at different times. The CURANT team pays frequent visits to the duos and stays in touch regularly. There have also been leisure activities organised, such as networking events and team

*More in general, connecting young refugees to society contributes to more cohesion, a more harmonious urban community and an increased public safety.*

The theory of change behind the project is in theory very simple, but practically very difficult. The theory is that if you treat people with justice and kindness, provide them with some initial conditions for their integration, and build around them a safe net of welcoming relationships, it will be more likely that these people will happily join the community, and make their best to fit and contribute. On the other hand, there are so many different variables to this (starting from psychological conditions and ending with ability to bond with a buddy) that the outcome cannot be predictable, nor ensured.

**Being a bold experiment, CURANT is being scientifically evaluated,** in order to understand under which conditions it can be successful, and what is the gap between what project designers had in mind at the time of writing the proposal, and what the end of the process will have clarified in terms of adjustments needed along the way.
building workshops. Those kind of events are an integral part of the process, and serve the purpose to create community and team spirit, by breaking cultural and personal barriers.

Of the 75 co-housing units, (rented and new), the project needs to identify and rent or build, so far the team has secured 1 student place, a student house with 12 studios able to accommodate 6 duos, 14 two bedroom apartments and 5 houses for two duos each. Procurement for the selection of the construction company for the building of the new studios is now closed, with the selection of one provider. The construction will follow the design of a young architect’s studio, also selected via public procurement, and the attention to both sustainability and relational spaces will be high, in order to create a beautiful prototype of modular housing units that can be replicated again in the city and elsewhere in Europe.

4 Overcoming challenges

A project of this complexity needs continuous evaluation and feedback for adjustments. There are many variables that play out simultaneously, notwithstanding the most unpredictable of all: the human factor. Furthermore, radical innovation means trying out things that were never tested before, therefore the risks of planned activities deviating from the original course is higher than in any other type of initiative. If it does not run the risk of failing, it cannot be real innovation, and it is not worth pursuing, so they say in Silicon Valley.

What follows is a list of seven challenges to the implementation of the projects that have been identified and that are potentially common to all UIA projects, independently of the policy field they focus on. These are:

**Leadership for implementation**
New leadership is about ensuring collaboration across a wide range of people in different departments and organisations.

**Smart public procurement**
Public procurement can be a dead hand on innovation by over specifying the method by which results should be achieved and by the domination of the large market players.

**Organisational arrangements within urban authorities**
It can be hard to involve departments that are not taking the lead. While projects are rarely totally integrated themselves, they need to link with other units within the local administration.

**Participative approach for co-implementation**
Everyone is signed up when you bid for a project, but sometimes they fail to contribute in the implementation phase.

**Measurement of results**
Measuring outputs is relatively easy (e.g. square metres of workspace created), but measuring results is more complex.
Communicating with target beneficiaries
Not only beneficiaries but also communities need to be kept up to date. Digital tools could be relevant here such as social media, but person to person still counts.

Upscaling
These are pilot actions and as such can only have limited impact. The long term impact comes from growing but this is not necessarily by scaling up it can also come from spreading out.

Those challenges run together across all activities in such complex projects. In the first year of implementation of CURANT, some of them have emerged more powerfully than others. The project team did not expect for instance to encounter difficulties in finding refugees. No recruitment campaign is allowed on one side, and long security procedures makes it hard to enrol a refugee in such a programme. Plus, lack of police records for minors makes it hard to get a complete picture of the person: being responsible for their selection and matching with a Flemish young person, you might want to be overly cautious if you do not want to be faced with bad surprises. This is what happened one day, when a project female buddy reported that she suffered from “pressures” from her refugee housemate. This was not expected and came as a shock to the whole team. Exploring the issue brought to light the fact that the young refugee had already experienced some problems in the country (a minor problem with drug use and a small fight), but not having access to police records made it impossible to guess he had a previous history. The team immediately took action, and acted on several fronts at the same time. First of all they secured all the possible attention to the female buddy, in the end she decided to report officially to police, but no hard evidence was found. They excluded the refugee from the programme, ensuring that from the social affairs office he would get extra attention in terms of counselling and coaching.

On the media side, of course this story could have been bad for the project, so politically it was decided to focus less on communication and go under the radar screen for a couple of months. The media attention created some anxieties in the project partners as to what extent this accident could push the government to interfere with future planned project activities. But in the end, thanks also to the political capital of the project, there were no political consequences impacting the project.

Most often these unexpected turns in innovation projects require swift responses, social and political capital, plus an ability to manage crises or problems.

The accident actually proved to be an opportunity to improve some of the project’s processes, starting with screening.

On the buddies’ side, the project team runs monthly recruiting presentations, which generally get a good attendance. The problem is the retention, not everyone buys into the idea to live with a refugee, especially sometimes his or her parents. This is the effect of an ill-informed public opinion, which gets influenced by both political views and their media echoes.

It is not news that Europeans are split as to whether to open their borders or not, and fear puts an extra layer of resistance on top of political views. The way the project team is trying to counter balance this effect is by running a media campaign that portrays buddies as contemporary pioneers, working to deliver a more open, multi-cultural and just society. Of course participation to the project bring extra
benefits, such as subsidised housing, free training and networking events. With the money they save because of affordable housing, they are able to pay studies and some leisure activities. The project team is good at highlighting both the experience and the benefits that come with joining the programme when they run their recruiting events. It take courage after all to be a pioneer, and the project puts incentives on the table for those who have to pave the way for others in the future.

The project had to also face some problems with finding or building housing units for the project. Public procurement and obtaining building permits can be a long and difficult process, especially when you are trying to do something completely different. As delays can be normal, the team did not get discouraged and simply worked extra hard to follow procedures and work its way through the meander of such public procedures.

Again, inter departmental cooperation is key to the success of such initiatives, and the informal networks that constitute the building block on how things get or do not get done in any public administration made the difference in this instance as well. On top of that, in Belgium affordable quality housing is becoming harder to find, especially in a real estate market which is under pressure from demographic growth. Even a local authority itself as purchaser - renter will face this difficulty, and that reflects on project budget. The project team did not despair, and brought on board a seasoned colleague from another department with real estate expertise and useful connections. That is helping, although budget figures had to be re-adjusted accordingly.

There is another challenge this new colleague is helping with: property owners are reluctant to rent out when they hear the words “social welfare” and “refugee” in the same conversation, yet another perverse effect of a divided public opinion. Strangely enough, there are many properties available on the market, and the local administration should be considered as a better payer that the average citizen. The real problem is the amount the project can pay for rental, too low to convince a reluctant property owner to accept hosting somebody they do not necessarily consider a desired tenant. Thanks to the new colleague, spending time meeting face to face both owners and real estate agencies to explain the project, the team is benefiting on the results and finding properties is not a problem anymore.

Current legal framework for co-housing only deals with disabled or elderly people, which imply that there are no good national or regional practices to build upon. As this project is the first of its kind to ‘experiment' with co-housing for unaccompanied young adult refugees, instances of ‘trial-and-error’ will probably arise and will be dealt with in the next issues of the Journal. All in all, the project is running smoothly, and the main reason behind this is that the team believes in the project beyond their official organisational role. What drives them is the passion for what they do, and the meaning they see in it.

As Jolien De Crom, project manager, explains:

“We work with people, more specific with vulnerable youngsters who are in puberty and have a difficult background. Those ‘difficult’ youngsters are not bad, but they are ‘difficult’ because they have a difficult time finding their way in the host community. These youngsters are looking for their spot in society, a society with a huge sense of responsibility and freedom of choice. Of course those youngsters will make mistakes. But we will give them a chance and focus on their talents.”
5 Achieving results

The approach of the CURANT project is to offer customised care, support and training that fits the needs of the most vulnerable, and to fully integrate them into society. The lessons learned will be of great value to many cities that currently deal with the same problem.

European cities are increasingly becoming attraction poles and will face the challenge of integrating higher numbers of refugees, and this challenge will be more difficult when it comes to the most vulnerable groups of unaccompanied minors and young adults. As we have seen with the statistics on asylum applications in Europe, in particular those made by unaccompanied minors, there is a clear need to deal systemically with this 'influx'. This puts a heavy burden on cities, confronted simultaneously with several complex problems and ever more stringent budgets. The situation calls for such new, creative and cost effective solutions that can solve the problem for the medium to the long term.

CURANT is one of such solutions, at present probably one of the most innovative in Europe. One year into the project means that no one can state whether the project will achieve the expected results, and to what extent, and it will take time after the end of the project to evaluate the systemic impact of the proposed solution. Having said that, some qualitative observations of changes happening in the lives of those young refugees provide hope:

Zeremi is teaching Jwan how to drive. Mirwais is building IKEA furniture together with Elke. Thomas helps Raziullah with the subscription to the city social housing programme. Sarah regularly goes shopping with Abdio. Mili was dying to show his grades at the end of the year to his buddy. Jelle and Mustafa have become close friends and stay up all night on their terrace discussing the politics of Mustafa’s home country.

So what do those things mean? They mean the birth of a friendship, the start of a new life, and maybe the beginning of a new way of dealing with integration.

As Jolien De Crom, project manager, nicely puts it:

“On a personal level, I do hope CURANT can mean for some youngsters a fresh start, a new beginning, the chance to have a good start in this community. We understand that CURANT can’t solve all the problems for the target group and will not help every youngster, but if we can change one youngster’s life by giving him or her the start for a new future, we should be happy.”

A few days before closing this Journal, Marianne De Canne, Project Coordinator, informed me that one of the refugees has found a job. The company is a long way from where the refugee lives, so his buddy helped him finding the way to the company and they often go together.
Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) is an Initiative of the European Union that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges. Based on article 8 of ERDF, the Initiative has a total ERDF budget of EUR 372 million for 2014-2020.

UIA projects will produce a wealth of knowledge stemming from the implementation of the innovative solutions for sustainable urban development that are of interest for city practitioners and stakeholders across the EU. This journal is a paper written by a UIA Expert that captures and disseminates the lessons learnt from the project implementation and the good practices identified. The journals will be structured around the main challenges of implementation identified and faced at local level by UIA projects. They will be published on a regular basis on the UIA website.