The CURANT Project
Journal N°2

Project led by the City of Antwerp

INTEGRATION OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES
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1. Executive Summary

Well into the project implementation, the CURANT team is managing a variety of different streams of activities. At the time of publication, 35 duos of refugees and buddies live together, that means 70 people recruited by the project team through a careful selection process. CURANT takes good care of both refugees and buddies designing and delivering individual customised “trajectories” for both target groups that integrate several types of supporting activities. This support brings administrative burden to the project team, sometimes it requires changes to the original plan but is expected to pay off in terms of results and impact. This brings forth the recognition that innovative projects need flexibility in implementation as the focus needs to remain the expected results and impact of the action.

It is with no doubt one of the greater challenges for the CURANT project, which needs to keep together several pieces of a complex puzzle to deliver at the same time a relevant, comprehensive and adaptable trajectory tailored to individuals. This is surely about good project management, but the success of such an intervention depends greatly on the level of commitment of the people in the team and their capacity to understand the changing landscape of what is needed and to shift the project intervention accordingly, aligning all delivery partners and the wider group of stakeholders.

The CURANT team is also starting to gain reputation at the EU level: representatives from the team will attend in the near future a few international events.
2. The Story of Ahmad continues

Remember Ahmad? Our seventeen year old refugee fleeing with his family from Iraq when their lives are endangered by war, landing in an unknown country, alone, and desperate. After moving from shelter to shelter, unable to see where eventually this would take him, he goes to the first interview to assess whether he is eligible to take part in a project that promises to help him integrate in Belgium: CURANT.

The story of Ahmad takes an interesting turn as he gets accepted into the project as one of its beneficiaries: a new chapter in the life of young Ahmad is beginning.

Two months into his presence in the project, Ahmad lives together with Anna, a young university student in Antwerp with many friends and an active social life. The days in the life of Ahmad are busy with language courses, school, training on interpersonal skills and happy evenings in the company of Anna and her friends. Nobody seems to care about where he comes from, but everybody shows great interest and sympathy for the perils he had to go through to get to Antwerp. Ahmad feels he is not alone anymore, and looks forward to the day he will get his professional degree and will find a job that will help him make a life and send some money back home to the few relatives he is left with.

As Ahmad puts his best effort in everything he does, conscious of the fact he has been given a chance in life, he often dreams at night about his home country, shattered by war, and about his parents, both lost in the journey from his country to Europe. The sadness and despair he feels, are compensated by the hopes that the project is slowly instilling in his heart.

One day, he receives an email from a relative, which says that family back home has lost the last animals left in the farm, and it is now desperate to find a solution to bring food home. This communication shakes Ahmad strongly, and divides his mind between the choice of going back home to help his relatives, or to stay in Belgium and try to provide all the help he can from here. He is tempted to drop out of school and find a job immediately, so he calls up his CURANT mentor to seek advice on what would be the best course of action. At the time of the meeting, the mentor shows up with other people from the project team, and all together try to persuade Ahmad to resist the temptation of leaving school for work too early, as this might have serious consequences for his future, as a difficult labour market for youngsters can be even more difficult for a migrant with little education. Ahmad at first is taken back by what he perceives as a lack of sensitiveness by the people that should take care of him, and after a few days of personal reflection he comes up to his mind and makes a decision that will change his life forever.

3. How is the project unfolding?

At the time of publication, 35 duos of refugees and buddies live together, that means 70 people recruited by the project team through a careful selection process. Of the 66 cohousing units, the project needs to identify and rent or build, so far the team has secured 35: four are from the city's own housing stock, six have been bought and 25 rented. Construction of the new cohousing units planned by the project has started and units will be ready by summer 2018. Now that the design is there and they will be tested in Antwerp, the construction of modular housing
units can be scaled in the city or replicated elsewhere in Europe (Fig. 1).

As highlighted in the first journal, CURANT takes good care of both refugees and buddies designing and delivering “trajectories” for both target groups that integrate several type of supporting activities. For refugees: activation trainings with focus on work attitude, competences and career planning, as well as integration courses and individual counselling. For buddies: intercultural training and coaching activities. Also leisure activities are organised, such as networking events and team building workshops. One of the more recent team building events focussed on sports, as a way to build team spirit and experience together fun with healthy and value based activities. The one-day event planned for a variety of sports to be played together, badminton, soccer, hockey, volleyball etc. The project team invited also neighbours and landlords to attend, although neighbours did not show up in large numbers. All in all it was a nice opportunity to be all together, providing a nice feeling to be one group, all connected in the same important experimentation (Fig. 2).
This kind of events are an integral part of the process, and serve the purpose to activate community and team spirit, by breaking cultural and personal barriers. All involved beneficiaries are supported with additional specific programmes, tailored to particular needs identified during the implementation process and geared towards providing additional support for the effectiveness of planned trajectories and therefore for achieving the expected results. Some of these specific programmes are listed below.

The project is currently delivering a programme to refugees on psycho education with the help of an organisation named Human Link. The programme was developed originally by Paul Sterk in 2000 to support asylum seekers and refugees and is delivered in own language and taking original culture into account. Specially educated asylum seekers and refugees run the program together with the GGZ, mental health institutes. The programme has quite an interesting approach as it trains (ex) asylum seekers and refugees as a peer educator/trainer, who works together with a mental health professional.

The aim of the programme is to learn how to cope with the actual situation and loss of identity. Attention is also paid to coping with psychosocial problems that are a direct or indirect result of events that happened in the past in the country of origin of refugees.

For unaccompanied refugees, the target group addressed by CURANT, this means an additional support as they experience their integration challenge without the support of their families, and in some cases bringing with them the trauma of a war they lived in their home countries and the loss of family members and friends. Dealing with trauma is not easy in an estranged context, we will deepen the reflection on this in the following paragraph about project challenges.

Also driving licence information sessions, sessions for the use of digital applications and sessions for healthy cooking have been organised for both refugees and buddies. Each is a two-hour session with around 20 people per round. These activities are as valuable as the more psychologically intense ones described before: integration means dealing with both small and big things of life, and getting a driving license is a great way to feel that you belong to the city as anybody else, with the advantage of easing the possibility to move around, especially to reach school or work. This is a nice example of how the project team was able to respond to needs arising or uncovered in the course of the project implementation. Getting a driving license was a need expressed by a few youngsters, and the team promptly recognised it and acted to fulfil it.

Along the same lines, housing sessions in a real ‘house’ have been organised, where duos get to learn what managing a household means. These sessions deal with anything from energy bills, cleaning, recycling etc. Again, an important example of how the innovation of CURANT lies in the 360 degree approach to the integration challenge.

The team is also busy delivering info sessions for guardians, social workers and other people who have youngsters that fit the CURANT profile. The sessions offer a panoramic view on what happened last year, what will happen next year and illustrate the new screening procedure. Around 35 people have attended the two sessions organised in March.

The situation at present is that 35 duos are currently engaged in the project. From the previous groups, three refugees left the project.
after a positive trajectory outcome, that means they have managed to start on an autonomous trajectory of integration, four dropped out early for different reasons that are independent from the project implementation. The reasons vary from family recognition in one case, to cohousing problems in another, to non-appropriate behaviour in two cases.

The CURANT team is also starting to gain reputation at the EU level. Representatives from the team will attend in the near future a few international events, starting from an international conference on “Missing Children” in Brussels in April. The conference is in cooperation with the urban agenda for the EU. CURANT will be involved as a speaker in the theme ‘housing and reception conditions’. The team will also take part in the working group migration and integration of EUROCITIES in May in Amsterdam.

Further, the team will participate in the thematic working group on ‘youth work role and competence working with Young Migrants, Refugees and Asylum seekers dealing with cross-sectoral co-operation” in Germany. The working group is organised in the context of the “BpE: Becoming a part of Europe” project, which is organizing four International Thematic Working Groups, dealing with four different topics, with experts and practitioners to share their experience and competences with the aim to draft policy recommendations and draft learning needs analysis of youth workers, dealing with YMRA (Young Migrants, Refugees and Asylum seekers).

4. Overcoming challenges

A project of this complexity normally faces different challenges to its successful implementation. As radical innovation means trying out things that were never tested before, the risk of planned activities deviating from the original course is higher than in any other type of initiative. What follows is an account of current challenges the project is facing.

4.1. The human factor

CURANT has set from inception a pattern of continuous evaluation and feedback for adjustments. This is because there are many variables that play out simultaneously during the project implementation, including the most unpredictable of all: the human factor.

An example of the difficulty in dealing with the human factor comes from the fact that on a daily basis the project team has to deal with all sorts of unpredictable situations arising from co-habitation. As in normal life, what makes co-habitation not easy is usually around daily household duties such as who was supposed to clean the flat and did not, or take out the rubbish and forgot. As co-habitation is one of the core elements of the project approach to integration, and as it involves young people at their first experience in this sense, in addition to coming from worlds apart, it is not difficult to understand that the time the team has to spend on trying to intervene in these situations was difficult to predict during the project design and application process. Reward though is coming, as one of the refugees answered the question about what he likes to most about his daily life at the moment saying the he likes “living together with my buddy and doing things together: cooking, watching football but also the possibility to meet new people from the CURANT project. Making friends.”
A few refugees are dropping out of school, at the time of writing three of them, because they need to find a job to send money back to their families in their countries of original. Sometimes, it is families that push them to do so, as they rely on their youngsters living in a wealthy western country to cater for original family’s needs at home. As often the type of jobs that young refugees can land without an educational or professional background is quite precarious, as for example working part time in fast food chains, this could create a “job trap” as it will make it even more difficult in the future to land more promising or longer-term type of contracts providing for a more sustainable career. Faced with this situation, the project team is trying to respond in two ways: by organising shorter education trajectories for refugees that have dropped out of school to look for a job, and by helping some other refugees to find a student job for the summer through the city’s social services (such as working in museums, in elderly care, in parks, etc.). Even though working conflicts with participation to planned training trajectories, the recognition of a strong need to raise money to support families back home has convinced the CURANT team that rather than trying to dissuade refugees to enter the labour market too early, it was better to support them in finding a way into the labour market and continue the project trajectory at the same time.

This support, which was not planned for in the project design phase, brings additional administrative burden to the project team, but without the project team’s help it would have been impossible to provide. It changes the original plan (what was in the application) but is expected to pay off in terms of results and impact. This brings forth the recognition that innovative projects need flexibility in implementation as the focus needs to remain the expected results and impact of the action.

4.2. Leadership for implementation

It is teams of people behind UIA projects, and the success of those projects depends greatly on their skills and competences, as well as on their leadership traits. As defined by UIA, new
leadership is about ensuring collaboration across a wide range of people in different departments and organisations.

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The experience of the CURANT project calls for a deeper reflection on the leadership qualities required to bring successful change to cities, and in particular on the leadership treats required today from civil servants, who are the ones in charge of managing complex processes and partnerships to implement projects such as an UIA one.

The upcoming first Zoom In for the CURANT project will delve deeper into this leadership challenge for cities and it will be based on an interview to the two leading figures of the UIA Antwerp project, Marianne De Canne and Jolien Crom, respectively project coordinator and project manager.

### 4.3. Upscaling and Sustainability

UIA projects are pilot actions and as such can only have a limited impact. The CURANT project is an experiment, because the project objectives and activities have not been tried before, and because its measures and deliverables are geared towards a limited sample of unaccompanied young adult refugees (participation of minimum 75 and up to 135 refugees in the project, depending on natural drop-out).

But the questions that the project is already raising in relation to the scaling and sustainability of the project are: what happens to those involved in CURANT after the project ends? And what will happen to the future youngsters arriving in the country if the project does not work on its sustainability in order to provide them with support to their integration?

If the pilot will be successful, the ambition is to scale up the CURANT objectives to the wider population of unaccompanied young adult refugees, and to introduce the lessons learned in the regular activities of the partners and stakeholders involved. But this calls for the creation of a service model that can prove to be sustainable. One way to go about it could be to normalize the costs associated with the provision of sufficient co-housing schemes and the integrated individual trajectories. This would require a clear policy framework at the regional and national level, plus a financing model based on a public-private partnership that would go beyond CURANT. Aware of the importance of policy dialogue, the consortium has structurally built-in policy meetings with supra-local governments. The team is planning policy discussions with the Flemish government (competent for integration of newcomers) and the Belgian federal government (competent for social integration and reception of asylum-seekers and refugees) which will be important in this respect.

As building partnerships will also be key in finding both a short and a long-term answer to the challenge that the project addresses, the CURANT project team has put together a stakeholders group with interesting partners in
the Flanders to see what would need be done on a more structural level for the target group in order to provide continuity and sustainability to the action. Twenty different organisations have decided to join, working in a variety of fields from education to integration, housing and the organisation of leisure activities. The stakeholder group has so far brainstormed about the needs of the participating organisations that the group can help with: is it sharing expertise? Is it training? Exchange of good practice or sharing policy advice documents, etc.

The long-term impact of the project can therefore come from scaling the conversation involving all stakeholders and policy levels, and CURANT is proving an interesting pilot as it has already built in the project activities to seek and gauge engagement from actors that could be the key to its sustainability in the future. CURANT wants to keep investing (at least once a year) to set up and manage a big stakeholder platform with different actors.

5. Conclusions

European cities are increasingly faced with the challenge of integrating higher numbers of refugees, and the challenge is more difficult when it comes to vulnerable groups of unaccompanied minors and young adults, which presents critical aspects related to their administrative, legal, personal and psychological dimensions. The situation calls for new, creative and effective solutions that can solve the problem in the long term. CURANT’s innovativeness comes from its focus on personalised support, built around the project’s analysis of the system conditions needed to provide those young people with a platform for integration. This represents also one of the critical aspects when it comes to project implementation, as customised support adds complexity to an already complex situation. Therefore, adaptability of project support activities requires flexibility in the project team’s ability to change and steer the implementation according to the needs of the target beneficiaries that arise during the project’s implementation. This calls also for a great alignment between the managing urban authority and the delivery partners, as the whole intervention, not just some of its parts, need to be tailored to those emerging needs and on an individual basis.

Very good quality control measures also are necessary, in order to deliver with consistency and the expected quality in an environment that calls for new activities to be designed and implemented all the time.

Connected to this, the leadership dimension is also key, as the original intent has to be preserved notwithstanding the challenges and adaptations that the project implementation calls for. Clarity of intent and the ability to keep all parts of the system aligned in a changing context are both characteristics of leadership, and to deliver on the high expectations that the CURANT project has set from inception is a shared quality that all members of the team need to have and nurture.

Last, but not least, as those types of interventions can really make a difference in the lives of the beneficiaries involved, it is absolutely necessary to build in the design hypothesis on how they are going to be continued and scaled after the project ends. Scaling and sustainability are both key dimensions of successful experimentations.
They are at the core of what innovation is about: testing and piloting radically innovative approaches with the objective to scale them in order to bring permanent positive change to the way things were before the innovation.

This sometimes proves to be difficult to be sustained without the EU funds that funded the innovation in the first instance, this is why the reflection on what are the conditions for scaling and sustainability has to be started soon in the process rather than later.

CURANT continues in its implementation, and we’ll account for more updates in the next journals. As for the desired change that the project wants to create, it is probably sufficient to direct our attention to the effects that the project is having on the beneficiaries. As one of them answers the question on what are his best hopes for the future, the answer sheds a light on what does it mean to give people a chance:

“I want a good education as this will give me the chance to get a quality job and start my own family in this country.”

Cheers to that.
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.

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