

COHOUSING AND CASE MANAGEMENT FOR UNACCOMPANIED YOUNG ADULT REFUGEES IN ANTWERP (CURANT)



FIRST EVALUATION REPORT

ABSTRACT

This report is the first of three evaluation reports that will be produced during the implementation of CURANT, a social policy intervention combining intensive individualized guidance, cohabitation with a local flatmate, training and therapy with the aim of supporting social integration. The report discusses the profiles and explores the perceptions of and experiences with the intervention of its participants, *i.e.* the unaccompanied young adult refugees and their local flatmates.

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Background and acknowledgements

This report concerns the social policy intervention *Cohousing and case management for Unaccompanied young adult Refugees in ANTwerp* (CURANT). CURANT is an innovative urban intervention offering various types of support to unaccompanied young adult refugees in the city of Antwerp (Flanders, Belgium). For an elaborate introduction and description of the project CURANT, please see the first project report '*Groundwork for evaluation and literature study*' (Mahieu & Ravn, 2017).

The European Union's European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) granted funding for the realization of this project to the city of Antwerp. A consortium of six institutions is responsible for the implementation of CURANT: *OCMW Antwerpen, Jes vzw, Atlas Inburgering en Integratie, Vormingplus Antwerpen, Solentra*, and the *Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies (CeMIS, University of Antwerp)*. The first five institutions are the *executive* stakeholders, OCMW Antwerpen (Public Centre for Social Welfare of Antwerp) taking the lead in the design, coordination and implementation of the intervention. These executive partners will be labelled throughout this report as "the stakeholders" or "the project partners". CeMIS, in contrast, is involved as the *evaluator* of the project and thus not considered as a stakeholder.

In May 2017, the first project report; '*Groundwork for evaluation and literature study*', was published (Mahieu & Ravn, 2017). This report was the first step of a theory-driven evaluation study (TDE, see Chen 2015) examining CURANT. The first report offered a concise descriptive introduction to CURANT first, including among others a brief overview of the above-mentioned stakeholder organizations, basic information on the resources of the project and some contextual information. Second, the report discussed the stakeholders' *change model*, i.e., a causal theory incorporating the stakeholders' assumptions and expectations regarding the intervention that is CURANT. It is an inductively produced theoretical model whose creation was facilitated by the researchers and authors of the report (Mahieu & Ravn) but grounded firmly in the stakeholders' ideas. Drawing on the stakeholders' change model, the third section of the report highlighted some of the central concepts and dynamics of the change model, and related these to academic understandings. The authors presented an overview of academic literature on refugee integration processes and related public policies. As such, it provides the scientific backbone to the stakeholder-based theory on CURANT.

This second project report, '*First Evaluation Report*', is the next step of the evaluation study that is taking place during the three-year implementation of CURANT (from 1st of November 2016 to 31st of October 2019). This First Evaluation Report is the first of three evaluation reports (a second and

a final evaluation will follow respectively after two years and at the end of CURANT). In this First Evaluation Report the focus lies on the two groups that are central to the CURANT project, i.e. the unaccompanied young adult refugees¹ as the central target group of the project on the one hand, and their local flatmates who are referred to in the project as ‘the buddies’, on the other hand. Like the stakeholders whose ‘*change model*’ is discussed in the above-mentioned ‘*Groundwork for evaluation and literature study*’, the refugees and the buddies are also likely to have their own assumptions and expectations of the intervention that is CURANT. As they are the participants who are experiencing CURANT on a daily basis, it is crucial to know what their experiences with the intervention are. After discussing the research methodology that was used to gather and analyse the data, this report continues with two different parts. In Part 1 a profile description of respectively the participating buddies and refugees when entering CURANT is given. Then, in Part 2 the experiences in and perspectives on CURANT of the participating buddies and refugees will be discussed in two separate sections. In the section that focuses on the buddies, we will explore the buddies’ motivations and expectations to enter the project, how they experience and interpret their role as a ‘buddy’, and how they experience cohousing with a young refugee and the social interaction that is taking place. The section that focuses on the refugees will cover the following subjects: refugees’ social networks and the social support they derive from these networks, refugees’ aspirations and expectations for their future, their first experiences in CURANT and in cohousing and the relationship with their buddies.

CURANT is an on-going project in which the project partners continuously try to make adjustments to the project when they see a need for this. The data used in this report were gathered primarily during the initial stages of the implementation of the project, consequently our findings do not necessarily always reflect how CURANT is operating at the time of finishing this report. As a *first* evaluation report, it should be read as an initial evaluation that explores the *first* impressions and experiences of the refugees and the buddies, most of whom are still participating in the project.

The report’s authors are Stiene Ravn, Rut Van Caudenberg, David Corradi and Rilke Mahieu, all researchers at the Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies (CeMIS) at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. The evaluation study is supervised by prof. dr. Christiane Timmerman and prof. dr. Noel Clycq.

¹ For an explanation on the choice of this terminology, see Mahieu & Ravn, 2017. For readability reasons, in the remainder of the text we will refer to this group mostly as ‘refugees’ or ‘young refugees’

Methodology

Introduction: the evaluation approach

For the evaluation study of CURANT, the *theory-driven evaluation approach* (TDE) is used. While there are many variations and their meaning and usage often differ, a TDE-approach is particularly useful “in case of research or evaluation of an intervention in a complex setting and in case of a new type of intervention, for which the understanding of the causal mechanisms needs to be established.” (Van Belle et al., 2010: 3). Therefore, we considered it appropriate for CURANT. Characteristic for TDE is also its strong concern with understanding the effectiveness of a specific programme from the point of view of the different stakeholders involved which underpins its relevance for social policy interventions such as CURANT:

“If a program is effective, such approaches should identify which elements are essential for widespread replication. Conversely, if a program fails to achieve its intended outcomes or is ineffective, a theory-driven evaluation should be able to discover whether such breakdowns can be attributed to implementation failure (...), whether the context is unsuited to operate the mechanisms by which outcomes are expected to occur (...), or simply theory failure (...).”
(Coryn et al., 2011: 207)

At the heart of theory-driven evaluation is the formulation of a “program theory”, to be defined as a set of explicit or implicit assumptions by stakeholders about what action is required to solve a social, educational or health problem and why the action will respond to this problem. As such, “the purpose of theory-driven evaluation is not only to assess whether an intervention works or does not work, but also how and why it does so” (Chen, 2012). More than other evaluation methods, it looks at the transformation process between intervention and outcomes. To grasp and evaluate these processes, a first step is to draft a ‘change model’ describing the expected changes due to the intervention (Donaldson, 2007).

The change model is a causative or descriptive theoretical model, linking the intervention actions with the expected changes and, on a more general level, the (expected) outcomes of the intervention. The model presents a structured overview of the core causal assumptions of the intervention. Assumptions about the causal processes through which an intervention or a treatment is supposed to work are crucial for any intervention, because its effectiveness depends on the truthfulness of the assumptions (Chen, 2015: 67). To put it simply, if invalid assumptions dictate the strategies of a programme, it is unlikely to succeed. The general question the change model answers, is “how do the stakeholders expect their intervention to work?” The change model of the CURANT intervention was discussed and untangled in the first CURANT project report

'*Groundwork for evaluation and literature study*' (see Mahieu & Ravn, 2017) and is attached in the appendix of this report.

The study in this First Evaluation Report represents a second step in the *theory driven evaluation*, namely the first evaluation round of the intervention. An intervention normally entails four different phases: planning, initial implementation, mature implementation and final outcomes (Chen, 2015). This first evaluation round takes place in the project's initial implementation phase and should be seen as an initial evaluation. Therefore, this report should be considered as an exploratory study, analysing refugees' and buddies' first perceptions and experiences in the intervention. The analysis focuses on the buddies and the refugees that entered the project in 2017, and is built on the program theory as it assesses participants first perceptions and experiences on some of the key elements of the change model that represent the key variables that the project stakeholders aim to influence. This allows us to get some first preliminary insights into the extent to which some of the core assumptions and expectations underlying the project design seem to be valid and correspond to the experiences of the CURANT participants.

In 2017 32 buddies and 35 refugees entered the project². The buddies and refugees that enter the project are 'matched' in duos (1 buddy-1 refugee) by the project. There are six houses where 2 duos (4 people) live together and there is one 'student flat' where 6 duos cohabitate. All the other duos are living in a two-bedroom apartment. A fourth type of cohousing arrangement is currently under construction and will consist of 16 modular units (1 duo in each unit), with 4 communal spaces that are being built on one single site as part of the CURANT project.

Research methodology

The first evaluation round is based on a mixed-method approach, including both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews and observations) methods. The quantitative research allows us to gather general information about a number of characteristics of both groups. In the future (when a second survey will be conducted among the same respondents) it will allow us to identify evolutions on certain variables and to examine how both groups have evolved throughout the project. Next to the quantitative data, qualitative research is conducted among a smaller sample of participants, which allows us to study underlying mechanisms explaining certain observations and evolutions more in-depth.

² In the course of 2017 2 buddies and 5 refugees left the project early. The three buddies who remained in the project after the refugee they were cohousing with left the project were rematched with a new refugee, which explains the higher number of refugees than buddies.

Quantitative research

All of the participants that have entered CURANT so far - both refugees and buddies - were asked to participate in the quantitative research. Only the two very first participating duos were excluded from the quantitative research sample because they entered the project a lot earlier than the first group of participants, had not gone through the usual procedures employed by the project, and were therefore considered not representative to include in the sample.

The quantitative research consists of two different surveys for both groups. In order to study evolutions on a number of variables, one survey is conducted as quickly as possible after the participants enter the project (during the first month in case of the refugees, and generally in month 1 or 2 in case of the buddies), and a second survey shortly before the participants exit the project. Given the fact that the buddies and refugees need to be recruited and go through a screening process before they can enter the project, the earliest possible time for the first measurement to take place is when both groups are already participating in CURANT – rather than *before* they enter the project. Nonetheless, the survey after entering and before exiting the project, still allows us to conduct two measurements on a number of variables.

The quantitative study in this report is based on surveys both refugees and buddies filled in during their initial participation in CURANT. It thus entails the analyses of the first measurement. The survey questions gathered data on demographic characteristics of the participants as well as information about both groups' social networks. In addition, the surveys included measurements of variables that differed per group. In total, 29 buddies (out of a total 32 that entered CURANT in 2017) and 35 refugees filled in the questionnaire.

The surveys continue to be conducted among all the buddies and refugees that enter the project in 2018. This will allow us to include (almost) all participants of the project in the total evaluation study

The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS software.

Qualitative research

The qualitative research consisted of: a) in-depth interviews with buddies and refugees, b) observations at activities for buddies, activities for refugees and to a lesser extent activities for both groups together and participation in partner meetings, and c) ethnographic research with a small number of refugees including several informal conversations.

For the sample of the qualitative research, a smaller number of duos were selected. This selection was based on a number of criteria including:

- 1) Housing arrangements: the sample includes both duos that live in two-bedroom apartments and duos who live together with one or several other duos in order to capture the experiences in the various cohousing arrangements provided in the project.
- 2) The psychological vulnerability of the refugees: the selection of refugees was done in consultation with the project's psychologist. Refugees that were considered to be severely traumatized or suffering from severe psychological issues were excluded from the sample.
- 3) Previously established contact with refugees: in some cases, one of the researchers had already established contact with some of the respondents through observations. This has in some cases led to the inclusion of these refugees in the sample because the researcher had already built up some sort of trust relationship with the participant.
- 4) The ethnic background of both groups

Furthermore, the sample includes refugees and buddies that started cohousing at different periods of time in order to capture the experiences of participants that enter the project at various stages of its implementation. A first group entered the project between May and July 2017, a second group between August and October 2017, and finally a third group in November and December 2017.

For the total evaluation study, the participants of our qualitative study will be interviewed three times: once during the first 1–3 months of their participation, once in the middle of their participation and a third time during the month before they exit the project. This will allow us to study evolutions throughout their participation. This report is based on the first interviews and a smaller number of the second follow-up interviews. For this report, in-depth interviews with a total of 16 buddies and with 15 refugees were analysed. In the case of 7 buddies and 2 refugees this includes a first interview in the first months after entering CURANT, and a follow-up interview after more or less six months. For the others only the first interview is included as their participation in CURANT has not reached the stage for the follow-up interview yet. As the second interview takes place after the buddies and refugees have already been in CURANT for at least six months, the data gathered in these interviews differs from the first interview. Therefore, wherever we use the data from the second interview, we will mention this explicitly. Like the quantitative research, the qualitative research is on-going. Observations continue to take place and more in-depth interviews with these (and other) buddies and refugees will be held as their trajectory in CURANT progresses.

A few of the refugees that have left the programme earlier than intended are still included in the qualitative research and the researcher continues to talk with them on a regular basis. Even though they are no longer part of the project, the data collected among these refugees that left CURANT early is still relevant. First of all, because it may provide insights on why CURANT did not work for them, but also because it allows following the refugees' life course and decision-making processes,

and the potential impact the project has on it. In addition, it can generate other retrospective data as these refugees might feel more freely to speak about their experiences in the project when they do not longer participate in it.

The qualitative data was analysed by using NVivo software.

After this brief description of the methodology, the report now continues with the analyses of the quantitative research with both the buddies and the refugees.

Part 1: Who participates in CURANT? A quantitative analysis of the buddies and the refugees

The buddies

The current analysis focuses on the social-demographic and the cultural attitudes of the *buddies* in the CURANT-project who have entered the project in 2017 (i.e., its first year of implementation). The goal of this section is to give a general overview of the profiles of the buddies that participated in this project so far, using quantitative data collected between October 2017 and February 2018. The data was collected using a survey that was either filled in online or on paper with the buddies that entered the project³ between May and December 2017. As such this part will only discuss the information from this survey. This means that the buddies that (for whatever reason) did not fill in the survey are not included in the analysis. Out of the 32 buddies that entered CURANT in 2017, 29 buddies filled in the questionnaire.

General profile

While 100% of the young refugees that entered the CURANT-project in 2017 are male (see next section), the gender division of the buddies seems to be somewhat more balanced. As Figure 1 indicates, there are only slightly more women (N= 15) than men (N= 14) participating in the project. In other words, the prospect of co-housing with a young *male* refugee does not seem to be an obstacle for female buddies to join the CURANT project.

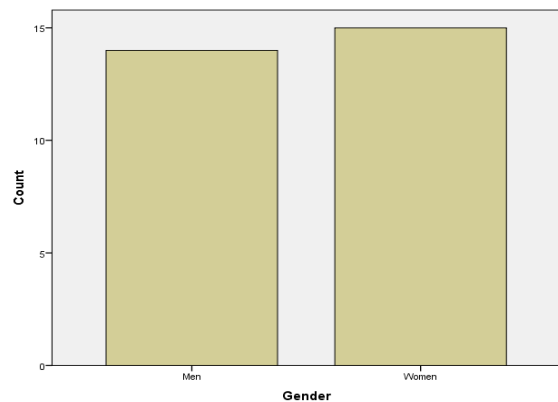


Figure 1. Gender of the CURANT buddies

³ The survey was administered in the first weeks after entering the project. The results of the survey in this chapter is, as such, the profile of the buddies at the start of the project (rather than their profile before they started).

The average age of the buddies when entering the project is 24.2 (standard deviation=2), and ranges between 19 and 28 years old (see Figure 2). This shows that the buddies are usually a bit older than their refugee counterparts. On average there is an age gap of around 6 years between the buddies and the young refugees. This age-gap is not a coincidence but rather the result of a conscious decision of the project designers and implementers to purposefully select buddies between the ages of (almost) 20 and 30 years old as this age group is assumed to have a certain level of maturity while still being close enough to the age of the young refugee to avoid a parent-child like relationship (see Mahieu & Ravn, 2017).

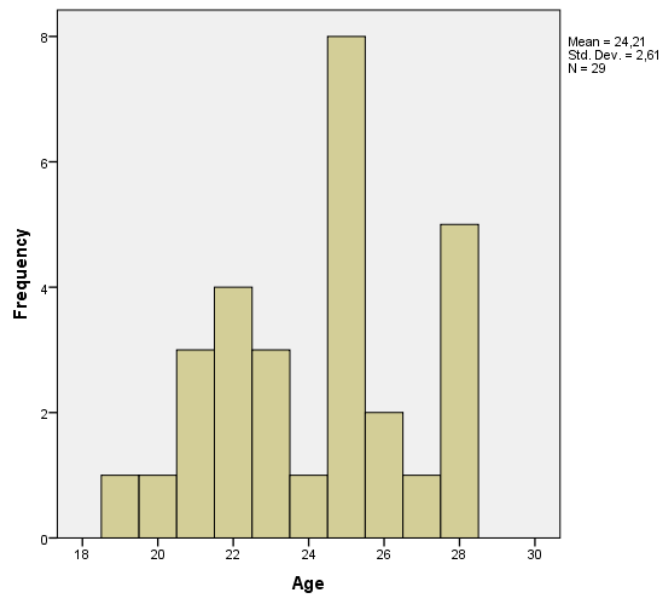


Figure 2. Age of the participants at the moment of filling in the survey

Of the 29 buddies only three participants indicated to have another country of birth than Belgium. One buddy was born in Syria, one in Kenya and one in the Netherlands. Similarly, all of the buddies apart from two (Syria and the Netherlands) had a Belgian nationality. Only one person indicated not having Dutch as mother tongue (Arab). One other buddy indicated having both Dutch and Moroccan Arab as mother tongue.

Regarding their educational level, 65% (n=19) of the buddies have either an associate's degree (HBO5), bachelor or a master degree from a college or university and have mostly (n=11) graduated in the last three years. 20% (n= 6) are still studying (or combining work and study). 75% of the respondents indicate having at least a part-time job, with 5 of those answering that they combine this job with an education. The rest seems to be either student (n=5) or unemployed (n=1), or in an unpaid internship (n=1) at the time of the survey. A little more than half of the buddies had an international experience (i.e., an international internship, travel or a stay abroad) of

more than 3 months (as we will see in the next paragraphs, this is not necessarily an indication of 'being open-minded'). Furthermore, the majority of the buddies had been active as volunteers (usually in youth organizations) prior to joining the project. Indeed, only 5 buddies indicated to have never worked as a volunteer. These aspects indicate an internationally oriented group with a prior interest in helping/volunteering without financial gain.

Given the social context of the project in which participants can live in relatively affordable housing compared to rental prices on the private housing market in Antwerp, we asked them to fill in the subjective poverty scale whereby buddies needed to indicate whether or not and how easy they were able to make ends meet. As Figure 3 shows, only a minority indicated that they had to make 'some effort' to make ends meet, suggesting a relative high difference in the financial means available to the buddies and their young refugee flatmates (compared to the refugees who had a median score of '4', which means that half of the refugees experienced high degrees of poverty- on the same scale when asked about their financial strength in their home country⁴).

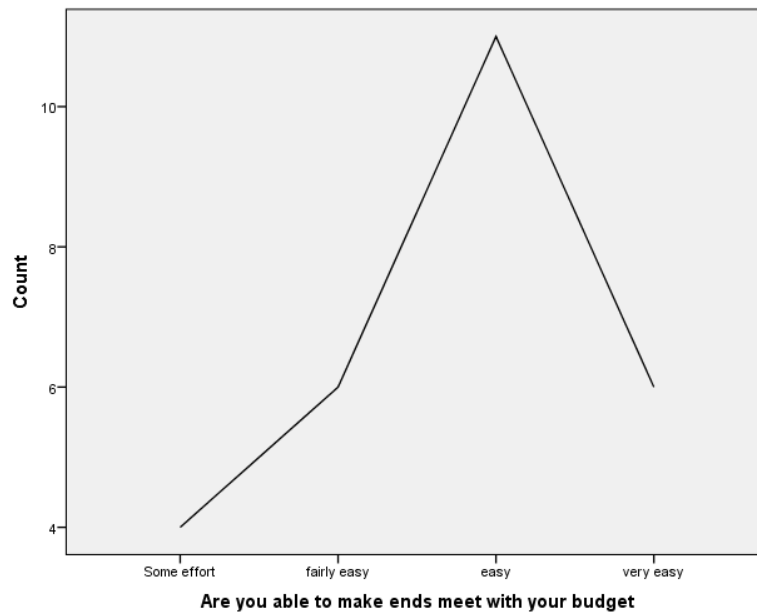


Figure 3. Scores on the subjective poverty scale

⁴ Note that this is a subjective poverty scale, which is an indication of experienced poverty, but remains relative to the context this poverty is experienced in.

Motivations and social networks when entering CURANT

The background characteristics of the buddies described in above paragraphs allow us to shed some light on the general socio-demographic profile of the buddies that joined the CURANT project during its first year of implementation. To get an idea of *why* these young people decided to participate in the project and to cohabit with a young adult refugee, the survey also included a list of possible motivations to give a score from 1 ('does not apply at all') to 5 ('completely applies'). Figure 4 details their answers. Mostly, altruistic reasons were given higher scores, e.g. "I want to contribute to a better world" or "I find it meaningful to help people that need it". Reasons focussing on personal gain, e.g. "this experience benefits me for professional purposes" or "CURANT offers me affordable housing" were seen as less important motivations. However, error bars (the line on each frequency bar) indicate that there is much more difference between participants for these questions (higher standard deviation)⁵. This means that some stated to enrol in CURANT for altruistic as well as personal benefit motivations. Others indicated they only participate for purely altruistic motivations.

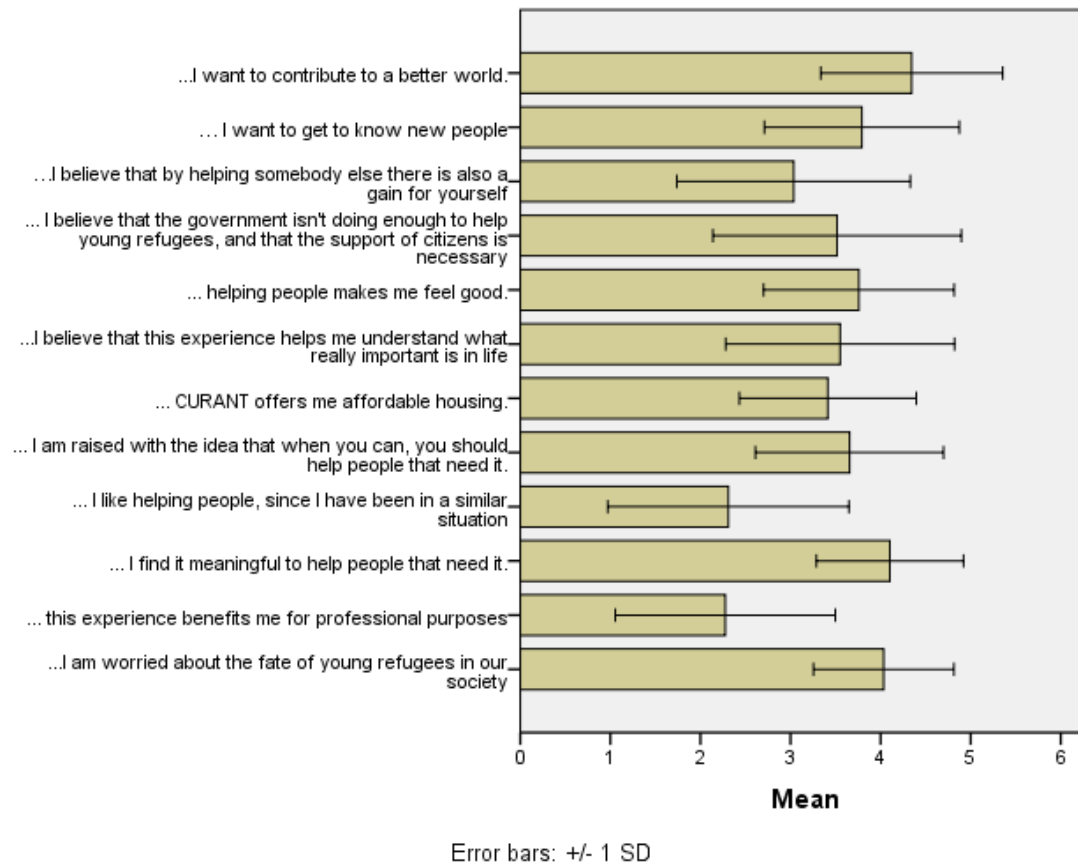


Figure 4. Motivations and their importance for joining CURANT. "I want to join CURANT because...". A high score (5) means an important motivation, while a low score (1) means a low importance.

⁵ When error bars are small respondents tend to have answered more in consensus. When error bars are high, there is less consensus.

Next to their motivations, and just like the refugees, questions were asked concerning their social network. The survey focussed on their network of friends. Figure 5 gives an overview of the answers of the buddies. Interestingly, one notices the homogeneity of their friend network. Most of their friends have a similar background, and the same gender. Few have friends with a different mother tongue, friends with whom they interact in a different language than Dutch, or friends outside Belgium (despite at least half of them had an international experience). Error bars indicate that there is little difference between the answers.

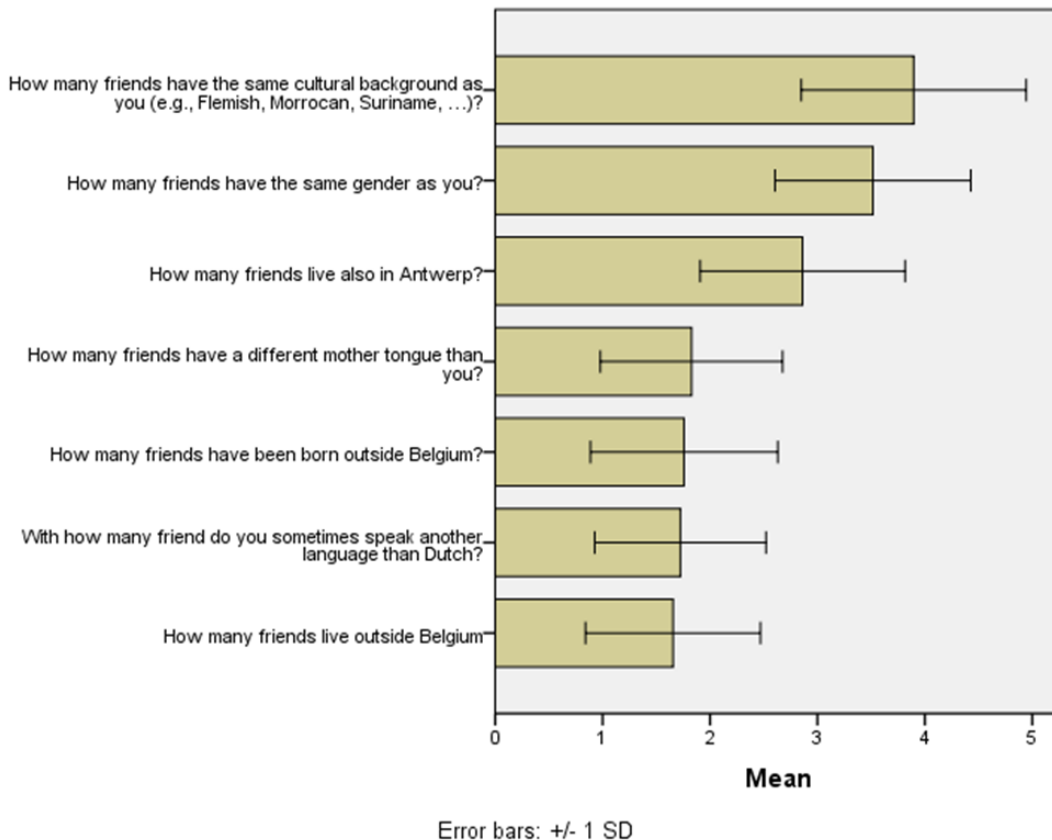


Figure 5. Social network of friends of the buddies. A high score (5) means a lot of friend with the given description, a low score (1) means no or very little amount of friends with that specific description.

Multicultural traits

In the paragraphs above, we detailed some socio-demographic and motivational backgrounds characteristics of the buddies. A second line of questions in the survey focussed on the multicultural personality traits of the buddies. One of the project's main goal concerning the buddies, is that their participation in CURANT will enhance the buddies' intercultural competences. It is assumed that living in a day-to-day situation with a foreign refugee will have an impact on buddies' intercultural competences (e.g. knowledge about other cultures, the way of interacting with someone with a

different cultural background, etc.) Some personality traits might be needed or useful for a CURANT buddy to interact with a refugee. In addition, it is interesting to see whether CURANT attracts certain personality types that seek certain multicultural challenges. To better understand this, we used the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) (Van Der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000), i.e. the multicultural personality questionnaire, which we will describe in the following paragraphs. The MPQ tests the theoretical assumption that there are some personality traits that are more adaptable and adjustable in a given multicultural situation. Using this questionnaire 1) helps us establish how their multicultural traits are showcasing at the beginning of the CURANT programme. Furthermore, 2) it will help us detail which traits tend to have increased, decreased or stagnated.

The MPQ assesses 5 traits, i.e., cultural empathy, open-mindedness or openness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility. Figure 6 shows the results of the MPQ test for the buddies on these 5 traits.

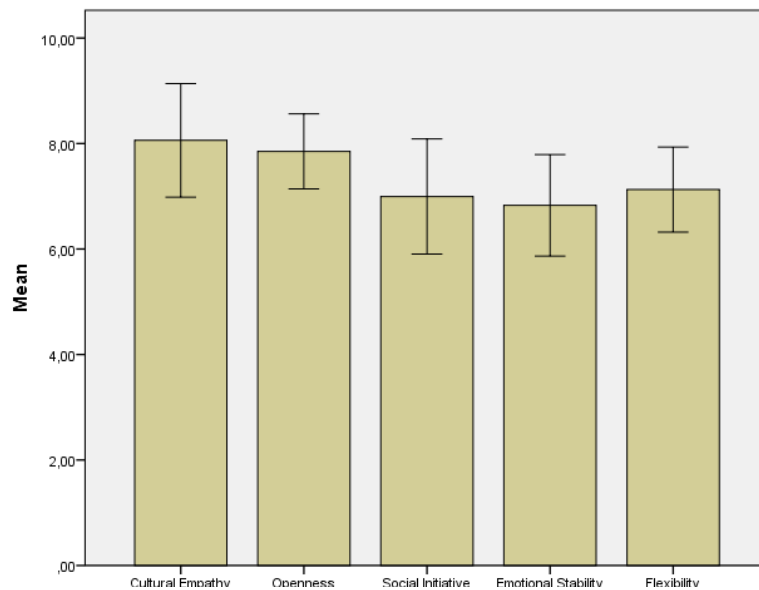


Figure 6. Results of the buddies on the MPQ. 5 traits were tested: Cultural Empathy, Openness, Social Initiative, Emotional Stability and Flexibility.

Cultural empathy entails the capacity to identify with the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of people from different cultural backgrounds. To function effectively with people with a different cultural background, it is important to acquire some understanding of those cultures (e.g., norms, values, habits,...), and cultural empathy seems important to "read" other cultures. People who score high on cultural empathy are able to identify with the feelings, thoughts, and behaviours of people and groups who have a different cultural background. Results indicate, as shown in figure 7, that buddies tend to have a medium to high cultural empathy.

Open mindedness indicates the capacity to be unprejudiced in interacting with people outside of one's own 'cultural group'⁶ who may have different norms and values. People scoring high on this scale, such as the buddies (see figure 6), have a more open attitude and are less likely to be prejudiced towards people who differ from themselves and their cultural group.

Social Initiative determines the degree with which people indicate that they easily (or not) interact with individuals with different cultural backgrounds. Respondents scoring high on this scale tend to create cross-cultural friendships more easily. Scores of the buddies (figure 6) indicate a medium score, i.e. they are no introverts, but still a bit reserved towards social initiative with people from different cultural backgrounds (this is also indicative in their homogeneous social networks).

Emotional Stability, on the other hand, indicates that people stay calm in stressful situations. When living together with people from different cultural backgrounds, it is important to be able to cope well with potential psychological and emotional discomfort. When things do not go the way they do according to one's own customs, this may lead to frustration, tension, fear, social detachment and interpersonal conflicts. Although buddies scored a bit lower here compared to the other traits, they still have reasonable competencies in coping with discomfort and stress. Their (relatively) lower score might imply that in situations with a lack of social support or in high-pressure situations these buddies might experience more fear or tension (compared to people who score higher on this test).

Finally, **Flexibility** is associated with people's ability to adjust their behaviour to new and unknown situations. When living with people from different cultural backgrounds, it is important to be able to change strategies because customary and trusted ways of doing things might be understood or done differently. People who score low are quicker to see new and unknown situations as a threat. In addition they tend to stick to trusted behavioural patterns. Consequently they are less able to adjust their behavioural pattern in reaction to unexpected or constrained circumstances. The score of the buddies (figure 6) indicate that they react with a reasonable degree of flexibility to new challenges. When the situation demands it, he or she is able to change behavioural patterns to some degree.

In general, the buddies' answers to the multicultural personality questionnaire indicate that they already score relatively high on the MPQ-test when entering CURANT. They seem very open minded and empathic towards people from a different cultural background. They do seem to be score lower

⁶ Although it is not always easy to define what the same 'cultural group' specifically is, we assume for this evaluation study that the cultural group of the buddies is seen as different from the cultural group of the refugees.

(compared to the other traits) on social initiative and emotional stability, which could indicate that they could benefit from the guidance in a project as CURANT.

Correlations⁷ between the MPQ and other background variables

The table below (Table 1) gives us an indication how the buddies' motivations correlate with their multicultural traits. While more altruistic reasons for joining CURANT, such as the desire to help other people, or concern towards other people, tend to correlate with cultural empathy and/or open mindedness, a more personal gain, e.g. seeing CURANT as a professional benefit, correlates with social initiative. Possibly, that last result could be understood as participants wanting to test and practice their social skills for professional purposes, and choosing for CURANT as a 'testing lab'. Flexibility is correlated with being worried about the fate of young refugees in Belgium, which might indicate that this concern for refugees motivates a more flexible attitude towards other cultures (or vice-versa).

Table 2, on the other hand, indicates that the social network can be indicative of different traits. While the reasons for joining CURANT seem to be indicative of the buddies' cultural empathy and open mindedness, the social network questions were correlating differently. Emotional stability correlated significantly with having friends with a different mother tongue. This could be interpreted that conversing with people with a different mother tongue might be a bit more stressful. Or that people who were better at dealing with more stressful situations were quicker at interacting (and thus befriending) people with different mother tongues. A second significant correlation in table 2 is between the amount of friends who live outside of Belgium and social initiative. Indeed, if people are more outgoing in terms of social contact, it is probably easier to make friends in international settings.

⁷ Correlations look at the association between two variables. If respondents score high, medium or low on one variable, and similarly, high, medium or low on another one, these two variables are correlated at 1. If respondents score high, medium or low on one variable and contrariwise, low, medium or high on another variable these are correlated at -1. If there is no association, the correlation is 0. An association can, however, be accidental or 'spurious', or mediated by another variable (that isn't measured). As such, it is important to be careful with the interpretation of correlations. In this case, we use correlations to interpret and explore possible indications of relationships. To avoid spurious correlation we explore relationships that are theoretically sensible, e.g., personality traits that could be related to background characteristics.

Table 1.

Correlations between the buddies' motivation to join CURANT and their multicultural traits.

Correlations						
		Cultural Empathy	Openness	Social Initiative	Emotional Stability	Flexibility
...I am worried about the fate of young refugees in our society	Pearson Correlation	,599**	,494**	-,240	-,279	,420 [†]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,001	,009	,219	,150	,026
	N	28	27	28	28	28
... this experience benefits me for professional purposes	Pearson Correlation	,009	,214	,416 [*]	,035	,134
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,963	,283	,028	,858	,498
	N	28	27	28	28	28
... I find it meaningful to help people that need it.	Pearson Correlation	,612**	,222	-,153	-,118	,256
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,001	,266	,437	,550	,188
	N	28	27	28	28	28
...I believe that this experience helps me understand what really important is in life	Pearson Correlation	,252	,385 [*]	-,040	-,262	-,270
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,195	,047	,840	,177	,164
	N	28	27	28	28	28
... helping people makes me feel good.	Pearson Correlation	,473 [*]	,433 [*]	,226	,040	-,147
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,011	,024	,248	,840	,454
	N	28	27	28	28	28
... I believe that the government isn't doing enough to help young refugees, and that the support of citizens is necessary	Pearson Correlation	,365	,383 [*]	-,119	-,166	,148
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,056	,049	,545	,399	,453
	N	28	27	28	28	28

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Coloured boxes indicate a significant correlation. Colours differ depending on the trait the motivation is correlating with.

Table 2.

Correlations between amount and type of friends in the social network of buddies and their multicultural traits.

Correlations						
		Cultural Empathy	Openness	Social Initiative	Emotional Stability	Flexibility
How many friends have a different mother tongue than you?	Pearson Correlation	,062	,325	,353	,410*	,204
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,753	,099	,066	,030	,297
	N	28	27	28	28	28
How many friends live outside Belgium	Pearson Correlation	-,005	,269	,374*	,264	,330
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,981	,175	,050	,174	,087
	N	28	27	28	28	28

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 illustrates that other background features, such as level of financial poverty, can be related to certain attitudes towards other cultures, i.e. scoring lower on the subjective poverty scale is negatively correlated with cultural empathy. Meaning that empathy is a capacity to identify with others, e.g. refugees in the case of CURANT, it is possible that having it financially more difficult increases the possibility to understand others.

Table 3.

Correlations between the buddies' background indications and their multicultural traits.

Correlations						
		Cultural Empathy	Openness	Social Initiative	Emotional Stability	Flexibility
Can you make ends meet with your current budget	Pearson Correlation	-,478*	-,320	,111	,157	-,289
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,012	,111	,590	,435	,144
	N	27	26	26	27	27

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Finally, Table 4 gives a final overview of some background measures, such as social network, a stay abroad and the poverty scale and how they correlate with reasons to participate with CURANT. Having friends with a different mother tongue and having friends born outside Belgium correlates with the desire to help people because they have been in a similar situation, because the government isn't doing enough, or because they want to get to know new people. Although these

correlations do not tell us so much, they enlighten how multicultural traits are related to the motivation to join a project like CURANT.

Table 4.

Correlations between CURANT reasons to participate, social network and other measures.

		Correlations					
		How many friends have the same gender as you?	How many friends have a different mother tongue than you?	How many friends have been born outside Belgium?	How many friends live outside Belgium	Stayed abroad (>3m)	Subjective Poverty Scale
... I like helping people, since I have been	Pearson Correlation	,010	,552**	,556**	,200	-,018	-,084
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,959	,002	,002	,298	,926	,676
	N	29	29	29	29	29	27
...I am worried about the fate of young	Pearson Correlation	,377*	,172	,170	,189	,317	-,274
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,044	,373	,377	,327	,093	,167
	N	29	29	29	29	29	27
... I find it meaningful to help people that need it.	Pearson Correlation	,261	,181	,187	,270	,649**	-,159
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,171	,347	,332	,156	,000	,427
	N	29	29	29	29	29	27
... I believe that the government isn't doing enough to	Pearson Correlation	,234	-,104	-,071	-,376*	,039	-,392*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,221	,590	,716	,044	,842	,043
	N	29	29	29	29	29	27
... I want to get to know new people	Pearson Correlation	,257	-,274	-,282	-,571**	-,201	-,109
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,178	,151	,138	,001	,295	,589
	N	29	29	29	29	29	27

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Concluding remarks

Although the results of the quantitative analysis of the CURANT buddies have to be interpreted with some caution, because correlation are not (necessarily) causal relations, they provide us with a good overview of the participants and their profile. Connecting the dots, i.e. the initial measurement that we have analysed in this chapter, and the final measurement, i.e. a second survey the same buddies will fill in towards the end of their participation in the CURANT project, will result in a

more detailed analysis. We will be able to see how buddies have grown, improved or possible deteriorated or stagnated on certain levels. Especially in the light of the MPQ, which provides us with an interesting backbone to compare all other variables with, the post-test might reveal interesting insights about their changing attitudes during the CURANT project.

The refugees

The analysis detailed in the following chapter is based on a survey research conducted between August 2017 and February 2018. The respondents were 35 refugees, on average aged 18 when filling in the questionnaire, which was usually within the first month of their participation in the CURANT project. The survey was developed in Dutch, and translated into English, Arabic, Pashto, Tigrinya, Somali, Dari and Kurdish. In a first try-out, a pilot questionnaire of approximately 12 pages long was created. Based on the respondents' answers and observations while the surveys were being conducted, we selected a range of questions that were not too demanding emotionally and that were most easy to understand, as the levels of literacy and years of schooling differed significantly between the different refugees (which influenced their answers and the speed with which they answered the questions). The length of the questionnaire was reduced to 5 pages with a main focus on social networks (friends) and (general) future expectations of the refugees. We will start this section with describing the general profile of the refugees, after which we give a more thorough overview of some trends we could observe in the data.

General profile

Most of the refugees left their country of origin in 2015, with only some refugees leaving before 2015 (see Figure 1). The year the participants left their country of origin, however, should not be read as the year they arrived in Belgium as the duration of their flight often takes up several months or in some cases even years and sometimes includes longer periods of living in other (so-called transit) countries. When entering the project, participants' duration of stay in Belgium varies between 11 months and 4 years. Most of the refugees have been in Belgium for about 2 years.

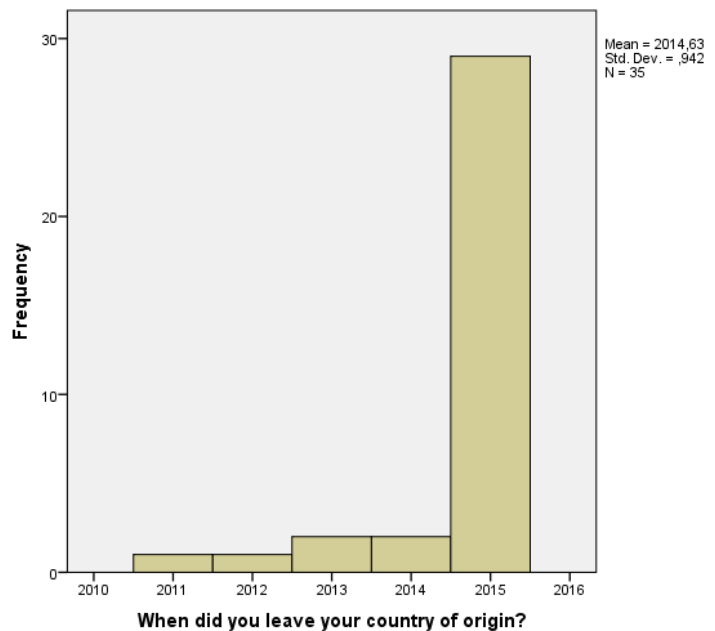


Figure 1. Year the refugee left his home country

The largest groups have central Asian origin, with 54% (n=18) from Afghanistan and 3% (n=1) from Iran. Ethnically this central Asian group identifies itself as Pashtu (28,5%)⁸, Hazara (20%), Tajik (5%) or Afghan (2,8%). The two other larger groups are from East-Africa, with 12% (n=4) from Somalia and 9% (n=3) from Eritrea (ethnically Tigrinya). The third largest group has a Middle-Eastern origin, with 6% (n=2) from Syria and 9% (n=3) from Iraq. Ethnically, 5,7% of the total sample identifies itself as Kurdish, 8,5% as Arab and 3% as Pular (Mauritania). All refugees participating in CURANT at the time the survey was administered, were male.

Most refugees (57%) lived in a LOI (lokaal opvanginitiatief or local reception initiative)⁹ before entering CURANT. Of the other refugees, 27% (n=9) were living in a house or apartment on the private rental market, resided with a family (3%) or were homeless (6%).

Expectations of the refugees

One important aspect of the youngsters' profile is their expectations for their (near) future, represented in Figure 2. In the survey, we used the term 'expectations'. However, we would like to mention that it is possible that refugees have interpreted 'expectations' (what they expect for their future) as 'aspirations' (what they aspire for their future) and do not make a clear distinction between these two terms. We have added error bars (the line on each histogram) to see whether there was a difference between the participants. Some expectations were generally the same for the larger part of the respondents: all refugees had the expectation to get to know new people, most of them had high expectations to find a good job, obtain a diploma, find safety, and get a permanent residence permit in Belgium¹⁰. Other expectations score lower and have large error bars, indicating that there was more variety amongst the answers. Bringing over family, earning money for family back home and moving to another country scored on average somewhat lower, with a lot of difference between the refugees.¹¹

⁸ Percentages are, unless specified, the proportion of the group with a specific characteristic compared to the total amount of participants. The percentages differ for ethnicity and nationality as they consist of different proportions.

⁹ Local reception initiatives are small-scale reception centres for asylum seekers organized by the Public Centre of Social Welfare and funded by the federal government.

¹⁰ The young refugees that participate in CURANT have a legal protection status either as refugees or under the subsidiary protection scheme. In Belgium both protection statuses in first instance entitle individuals to temporary stay in the country: as a refugee, individuals are initially granted the right to stay in Belgium for 5 years, after which they are given permanent stay (CGVS, 2016). Subsidiary protection is granted to those who cannot be defined as a refugee but who would face a real risk of suffering serious harm if he or she returns to the country of origin. The status of subsidiary protection is temporary. It is initially granted for one year and can be extended as long as the risk of serious harm in the country of origin exists. After five years, they are granted a permanent stay (CGVS, 2015) (see also Mahieu & Ravn, 2017).

¹¹ One should keep in mind that some questions could elicit socially desirable answers (e.g., refugees might be afraid to say what they do with the money they receive from the Public Centre for Social Welfare, as this institution is also the organizing institute in the CURANT project).

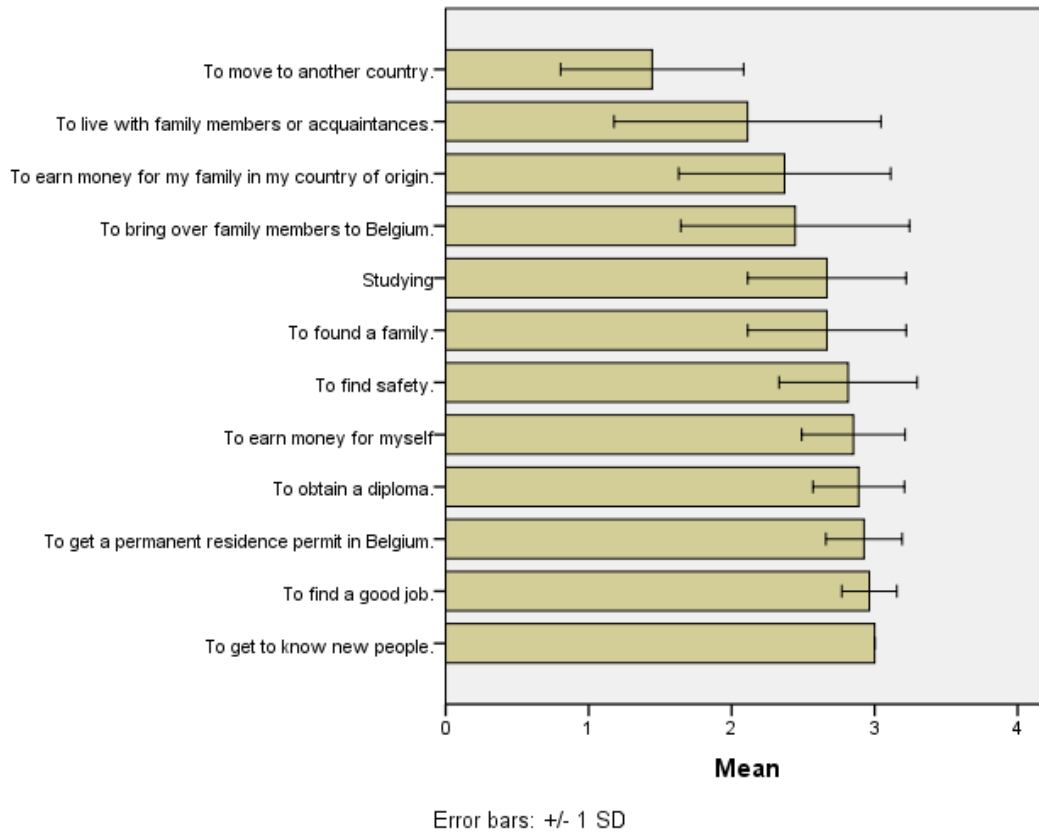


Figure 2. Expectations for the future. 1 means no or little expectations, while 3 means high expectations.

Other questions of the survey help clarify why there is a difference. When asking whether the refugees already knew someone in Belgium, half of them did. Eight people knew one friend from their home country that currently lives in Belgium. Seven had uncles and/or aunts, or cousins/nephews/nieces living here. Two people had siblings living in Belgium. This might explain why some refugees expected to go live with a family member (see figure 2) while others did not have this expectation or had it in a much lower extent.

A second expectation that varied a lot was the desire to send money back home. The box plot in figure 3 shows the experienced poverty in their home country. The line in the middle of the box indicates the median and shows that half of the refugees did not experience poverty, while the other half did¹². Indeed, when correlating the expectation to send money home and the subjective poverty scale, we find a significant correlation (-.405, $p = .024$) between the two measures. This

¹² Compare for example with the buddies whose lowest score on the same scale is 4, the median score of the refugees (see the quantitative analysis of the buddies in the previous section).

correlation suggests that refugees who experienced poverty in their home country are more likely to be expected to (or have expectations to) send money back home.

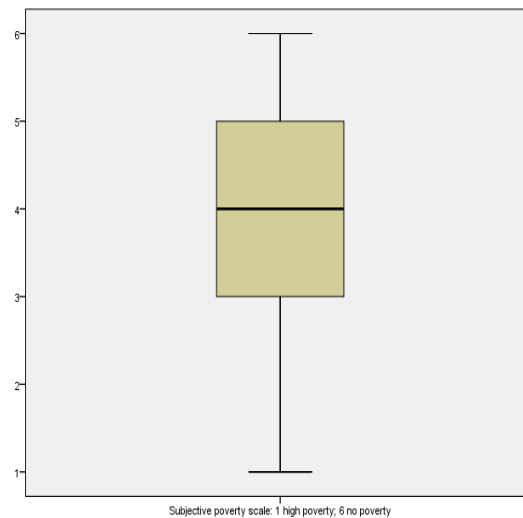


Figure 3. Subjective poverty scale.
A low score indicates strong difficulties to cope with financial income.

Figure 2 also shows that there is a distinction between the expectation 'to study' and the expectation 'to obtain a diploma'. While obtaining a diploma is among the expectations of most respondents, this is less the case for 'studying', which also has a lot more variation within the group. This might be explained by figure 4 (see below) that shows that the type of degree or certificate that the refugees want to obtain are mostly postsecondary or vocational education diplomas that are directed towards direct labour market entry rather than further education. The largest part wishes to get an upper secondary education degree in the vocational track (7th year vocational training) or an associate's degree (in Dutch: HBO5). Both of those degrees train students for a specific job or profession and are steering them towards direct labour market entry rather than higher education. A number indicated 'other', where they usually described a specific profession, e.g. 'car mechanic' or 'cook'. It is possible that these respondents do not know which degree to get for this job, or that they simply want to work in that domain without any further training.

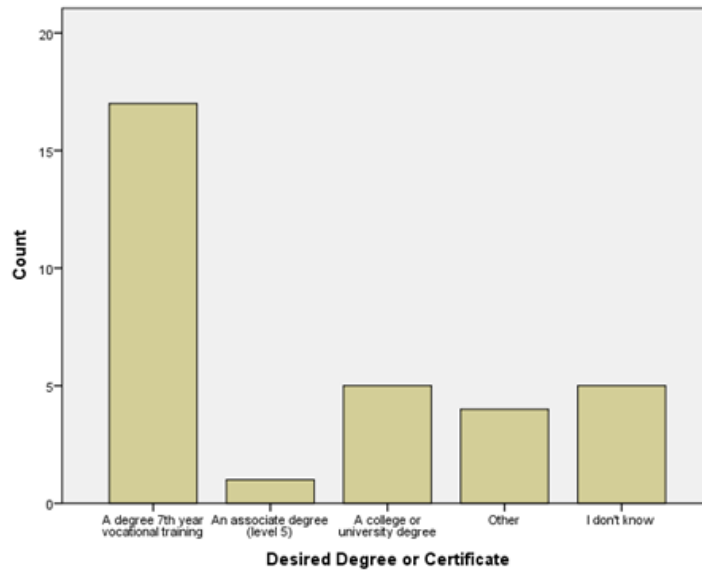


Figure 4. The degree or certificate most refugees are trying to get

Only a small part (n=5) indicated that college or university are in their line of expectations. On average refugees attended school for 5,7 years in their country of origin, but the difference between the refugees is large: 28% indicated to have had only 2 years or less of schooling, and 34% indicated to have had 9 to 12 years of schooling. Refugees with a Central Asian background indicated having studied a bit less on average (M= 4.85) compared to refugees with other backgrounds (M= 6.85), but the difference does not seem to be significant (numbers are too small to interpret the differences). Years of schooling correlated significantly (.386, p=.029) with the expectation to obtain a degree.

Social networks when entering CURANT

One important goal of CURANT is to have an impact on the social networks of the participating refugees. More specifically, through cohousing and training and learning activities, the project partners hope that refugees will develop more ethnically diverse, informal networks with peers. Therefore, it is important to understand what refugees' social networks look like when entering CURANT. In our survey, we have chosen to focus on their network of friends and obtaining information on a number of characteristics of that network. As indicated in the introduction, half of the refugees have no family in Belgium and their social network of people living in Belgium is, apart from administrative people (e.g. social workers), mainly consisting of friends.

Figure 5 shows that most refugees have more or less a similar network of friends. Error bars indicate that the proportions differ and that some indicate to have more friends than others. Yet the trend is the same for the refugees: most friends have the same sex (i.e. male); only one refugee

indicated the opposite; most of the respondents' friends have the same mother tongue, religion and origin as them; most of their friends are also located in Antwerp; and much less of their friends have been born in Belgium or go to the same school as them. This could indicate that refugees, similar to the buddies¹³, tend to find friends in people with a similar background.

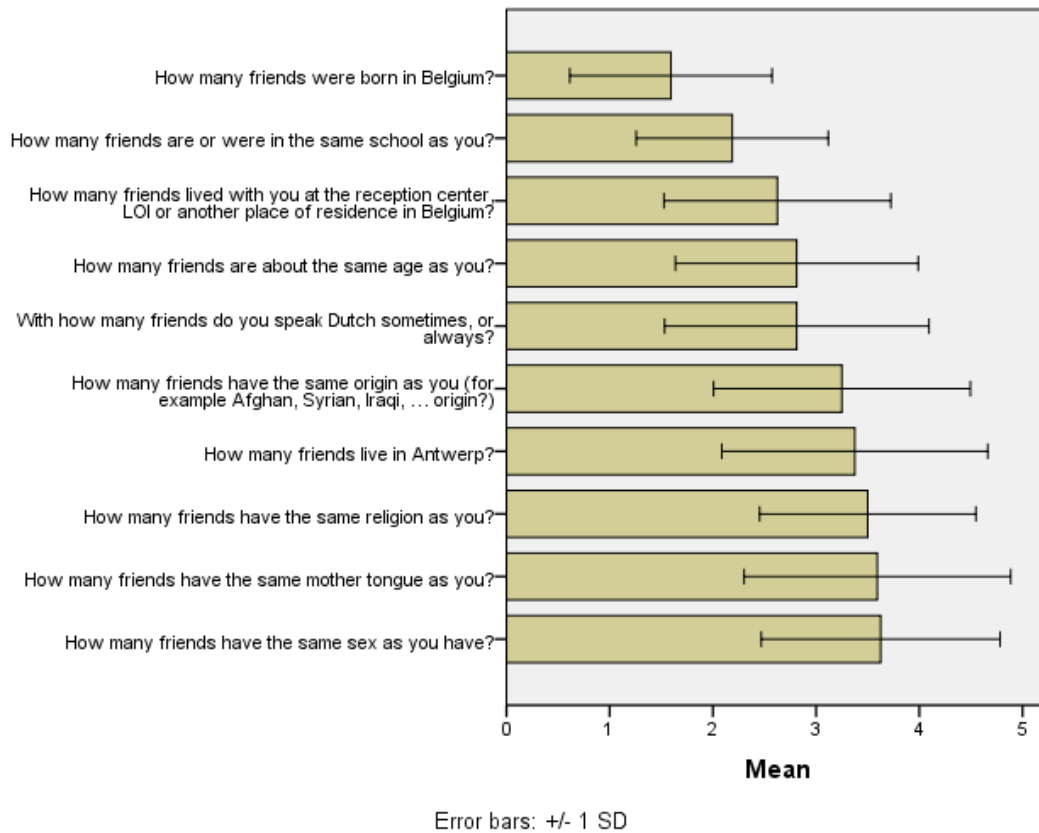


Figure 5. Amount and features of friends in the refugees their social network
1 indicates few or no friends, while 4 indicates many of the friends have a certain feature

This homogeneous background is also indicative in the following correlations we have found: friends with the same mother tongue and friends with the same origin correlate (.602, $p < .001$), and both of these variables correlate negatively with friends born in Belgium (-.625, $p < .001$), or friends they can speak Dutch with (-.486, $p = .004$). Years of schooling correlates positively with the amount of friends speaking Dutch (.397, $p = .022$), and it correlates negatively with friends with a same religious background (-.524, $p = .002$). This could indicate that refugees with higher levels of schooling are more likely to interact and make friends with Dutch speakers, or that Flemings tend to be more open towards higher educated refugees. However, it could also be explained by the fact that some respondents originate from countries of which only small groups live in Belgium (e.g.

¹³ See the quantitative analysis of the buddies in the previous section

Eritrea, Kurdistan region). These respondents speak a different language and might have a different religious background than the more dominant refugee groups (and in this study also more years of schooling). Therefore, they might tend to speak more Dutch to other refugees and interact more with refugees with a different religious background than themselves.

The social networks of the refugees with a central Asian background (n= 19; e.g. Tajik, Hazara,...) tend to be more homogeneous than the social networks other refugee groups (n= 13). They tend to have less friends born in Belgium (M= 1.2) compared to the others (M=2.08), they have less friends they speak Dutch with (M= 2.47) compared to the other refugees (M=3.23) and they have less friends living in Antwerp (M= 2.79), compared to the other refugees (M= 4.2). Most of the refugees from a central Asian background know more people from a local reception centre (M= 3.16), compared to the others (M=1.79). However, the groups are too small to know whether this difference is significant or rather by accident.

Concluding remarks

Since both the social networks and aspirations/expectations are important factors to consider in the evaluation of CURANT, it will be interesting to see whether and in which way CURANT influences these outcomes. Have refugees' expectations for their future changed during the course of the CURANT year? Have the refugees' social networks become more ethnically diverse, including more native Belgians, and does it include more people they speak Dutch with or that are born in Belgium?

Part 2: What are the experiences of the participants in CURANT? Exploring the perceptions of the buddies and the refugees

The buddies

In this first section of Part 2 of this report, we turn our focus back to the buddies. While they are not the central target group of CURANT, as the refugees' 'local flatmates' the buddies are expected to take up a crucial role in the project. Moreover, as stated earlier, an important assumption of the project is that their participation in CURANT and specifically the fact of cohousing with a refugee, will have an impact on their social skills, and in particular on their intercultural competences. Therefore, it is relevant to also include their perceptions and look at their experiences with the project and their role in it. Findings discussed in this part are based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with a sample of 16 buddies as well as observations during the monthly CURANT buddy-sessions that are organized by one of the CURANT project partners. In a first section, we look more in-depth into the buddies' motivations and expectations to enter the project that have already briefly been touched upon in the quantitative analysis discussed in Part 1. Next, we explore the buddies' experiences and interpretations of their role as a 'buddy' in CURANT. In a final section, we will discuss some preliminary insights into the buddies' experiences of cohousing in CURANT, and how social interaction in these cohousing arrangements is taking form.

Motivations and expectations

In order to better contextualise the buddies' motivations to enter CURANT, it is important to understand how they come to participate in the project in the first place. Contrary to the young refugees, there is generally no in-between person who will approach the CURANT project on their behalf. Instead, it are the potential buddies themselves who contact the CURANT project team or personally attend an information session about the project organised by one of the project partners together with the project coordinator, usually after hearing about CURANT via social media, the press, flyers, or via family, friends or other people in their networks. If they are interested in participating in the project, they will be invited to an intake interview organised by one of the project partners. During this individual interview, certain background information about the buddy is collected, such as age, current job/studies and where they currently live. Furthermore motivations and expectations regarding cohousing with a young refugee are discussed as well as what the buddy is looking for in a flatmate and whether s/he has certain preferences (e.g. specific neighbourhood, house or apartment, etc.). If after this intake interview, the potential buddy

remains interested in participating s/he will be asked to follow a training together with other interested buddies. This training consists of three evening sessions that focus on general topics such as e.g. the asylum procedure and integration of refugees as well as on more practical issues regarding “cohabitation with a young refugee” (e.g. how to communicate with them, how to act in certain hypothetical situations, etc.), and one ‘fun activity’ that the buddy and the refugee who have been matched by the CURANT project team as a potential cohousing duo attend together to meet each other and see whether they are both comfortable with the idea of living together¹⁴. When the buddy has participated in this training s/he is considered ready to start cohousing.

This trajectory from initial interest to actual participation in CURANT indicates the high level of agency that is expected from and given to the buddies, in the sense that the initiative to approach the project, as well as the decision to take part in the training and finally participate in the project is – almost – entirely up to them. Indeed, the project partner who is responsible for recruiting, training and supporting the buddies, states that in their experience the interested candidates will make their own evaluations after the intake conversation and pull out when they consider themselves to be unsuitable or “too vulnerable” to cohousing with a refugee. Only in rare occasions will a potential buddy be advised against participating in CURANT, e.g. when the individual has no network to fall back on would s/he encounter difficulties during the project. In this context, it is not entirely surprising that the buddies that enter CURANT share a strong belief in the project. In Part 1 we already briefly touched upon how they are mainly motivated by ‘altruistic’ reasons such as ‘wanting to contribute to a better world’ and ‘being worried about the fate of young refugees in our society’. Our qualitative data allow us to dig a little deeper into these ‘altruistic’ motivations, and explore the meanings the buddies attribute to CURANT and their participation in it. These data indicate that overall the buddies’ ideas about CURANT reflect the project narrative in which cohabitating is expected to have an impact on the refugees’ integration. *“I think it’s a beautiful project. And I believe that refugees also will integrate better this way than when they all go and live with each other,”* one of the buddies (male) stated, suggesting that to be able to ‘integrate’ cohousing with local Flemish people is better than staying within ‘your own group’. Cohousing is considered an effective way for the refugees to learn about Belgium and how the country and its inhabitants are.

“When they ask like ‘what is a Belgian’, or ‘what does a Belgian do’, or a Fleming or a Walloon, then you can teach them that when you live with someone. [...] That you get to know new cultures, maybe that’s the best way.” (female)

¹⁴ At the time of writing this report, this training had recently changed and now consists of two group evening-sessions, one ‘fun activity’, and finally one individual conversation with the project partner when the buddy is already cohousing and that will take place during one of the monthly CURANT buddy-sessions.

Apart from that, when entering CURANT most buddies also seem to share the project's assumption that the young refugees have relatively small social networks. Given the strong focus of the CURANT project on the refugees' social networks (or the perceived lack thereof) and the fact that the buddies have attended the above-mentioned information session and training before entering CURANT, it is likely that the buddies highlight this issue because this was pointed out to them by the project team. In that sense they may be taking over the project narrative and come to consider 'helping the refugees to build a network' an important value they see in the project.

"I like to be able to be part of a network of someone who actually does not have a network"
(female)

"Helping young refugees to stand on their own feet and live by themselves after a year, to give them an opportunity to [meet] people that have already been here for a longer time, and to accompany them in cohabitating, yes that's a really nice initiative." (male)

As will become clear in the next sections, however, these perceptions about the young refugees' existing networks tend to change once the buddies come to realize that these young people in fact are often surrounded by (a lot of) friends, acquaintances and sometimes even family. Important to note is that the idea of 'helping' is not only related to wanting to help the young refugees' enlarge their social networks, but also more broadly to the issue of wanting to help those who are believed to need it, to give them support and to *"help them stand on their own feet"*, as the final quote above suggests. In that sense, when entering CURANT the buddies share the project partners' understanding of creating 'empowered' young refugees as one of the main purposes of the project (see Mahieu & Ravn, 2017). Data indicate that the buddies link this desire to help those who are constructed as 'the needy' to who they themselves are as a person, for instance: someone with *"a soft spot for the target group or something"* (male) or someone who *"like[s] it to do these kind of things."* (male). In some cases the buddies with a history of migration reflect on the fact that this migration experience makes them more sensitive to the needs of the young refugees. *"I really know what it means, when someone needs help"*, one of the buddies who is a refugee himself said, while another buddy explained how he came from another country and knows *"what it's like to have nothing and to have no one."* Other buddies explain their interest in CURANT in more general terms and situate the project and part of their motivation to participate in it in a broader context of the 'refugee crisis' and the societal issues they consider are related to it.

"I was mainly really looking for something to be able to contribute to this entire refugee crisis and to our society, and the problem that surrounds it" (female)

"I think Belgium is not offering enough help. (...) When you see it on television or in the media I think we're really... I read this article that said that of all the rich countries we are the worst [when it comes to] integration, so I wanted to do something small." (female)

The quantitative analysis discussed in Part 1 indicated that the buddies are generally an internationally oriented group. Indeed, many (though certainly not all) have spent short or longer periods abroad, either in the context of e.g. an intercultural exchange programme, an internship or summer job or, when they were younger, because of their parents' job. Others refer to their fondness of travelling – *"the farther, the better"*, as one of the buddies (male) put it, or have more local experiences with internships in which they came into contact with people with different cultural backgrounds. They recall the positive memories they have of those times and see CURANT as an opportunity to create similar experiences. In this context, the buddies are drawn to the 'multicultural' aspect they see in CURANT and more specifically to the idea of being able to live with people 'of another culture'.

"I'm someone who travels a lot and then also gets to know different cultures" (female)

"I really like that, refugees, new cultures especially. During my internship I also [worked] with young people from abroad. I really liked it. I mean, I'm not comparing this with an internship, but it appeals to me. Different cultures... refugees also." (male)

In case the buddies have lived a short or longer period in one or several other countries, they think that these experiences will help them relate to the young refugees a little better, e.g. in the sense of knowing what it is like to have a culture shock, to learn a new language or get to know people in a place where you do not know anybody. At the same time they nuance their own experiences and the context in which these took place and consider their privilege of being able to go places voluntarily while also acknowledging that their experience is very different compared to what the young refugees are going through, as this quote illustrates:

"I always did it out of free will, while for the newcomers in CURANT that's not the case. (...) So I cannot imagine what they feel like when they think about the situation back home and the fact that they were forced to leave. In my case it was always voluntary and for fun, and to see the world, so positive considerations, while for them it has more of a negative connotation or I don't know. In that sense I'm always like, I cannot place myself in their shoes one little bit, in spite of all my experience." (female)

While the international orientation and interest in the 'multicultural' aspect of CURANT was frequently mentioned, the idea of living together with someone from another country or with a different cultural background is not a motivation for everybody. For some, the main emphasis

remains on the issue of 'being able to help': *"It wasn't really the fact that they came from another country, but more the fact that I could help them that appealed to me,"* one of the buddies (female) explained. Some buddies link this with their own personal experiences in which they could have used the support of 'a buddy' – in the sense of having someone that would have been there to give support – but did not have that.

On the other hand, next to these 'altruistic' motivations, buddies also contemplate more 'personal' motivations, such as the fact that they believe that participating in CURANT will allow them to grow personally. Some of the buddies stated things like *"If it doesn't break me it can only make me stronger"* (male) or *"It can only make me grow and learn new things. I'm a very curious person and like to learn new things"* (female), indicating that CURANT is considered a potential 'learning experience'. Moreover, one of the buddies reflected on how the project would allow him get out of his 'comfort zone' and put into perspective the 'norms and values' he grew up with:

"What also appealed to me is the fact that it will take me out of my comfort zone. Like your own norms and values that you're so used to, that you don't realize anymore that this is something cultural. We think that's just the way of life, but it's not, it's only because we were born here." (male)

Apart from 'personal growth', the buddies also refer to the fact that CURANT might allow them to diversify their social networks. The quantitative analysis described in Part 1 already showed how the social networks of the buddies indeed tend to be quite homogeneous and predominantly include people that are similar to themselves in terms of their socio-economic, ethnic and cultural background. However, while having an impact on the social networks of the refugees - in the sense that these networks are expected to grow and diversify - is a major goal and important assumption of CURANT, the project does not contemplate that it may also have an impact on the buddies' social networks. The assumed impact of participation in CURANT for the buddies revolves mainly around improved intercultural competences (see Mahieu & Ravn, 2017) while their social networks as such are not a point of attention. By expecting a one-way impact (i.e. buddies will contribute to diversifying and enlarging the refugees' networks) the project seems to consider the existing networks of the buddies as 'normal' and not in need of change, as opposed to those of the refugees. Whether and to what extent the social networks of the buddies will indeed diversify as a result of cohousing in CURANT remains to be seen as the buddies' participation in the project progresses; but is interesting to notice that contrary to the project's uncritical stand on the buddies' networks, interview data show that the buddies in fact do sometimes critically reflect on their existing networks and – in some cases – explicitly seek to diversify them by participating in CURANT. They are aware of the fact that the people in their environment, the people that they know, have lived with and interact with are often very homogeneous and similar to themselves. One of the buddies (female), for instance, stated how *"as a high-educated person, it's really difficult to get into contact*

with this kind of milieu". Other buddies made similar reflections, and explained how by entering CURANT they hoped to meet new people, and more specifically people they would usually not come into contact with.

Buddy: *"I was kind of tired of living with the same type of people all the time. So I liked it to have a kind of challenge and to live with other people."*

Interviewer: *"Yes. And when you say 'the same type of people', what do you mean?"*

Buddy: *"You know, like the white person in higher education. I've always cohoused with girls... who come from like tiny towns and are not very open-minded."*

(female)

"Because you get to know new people, and it's very different than if you go and cohoused with other people [that are not young refugees]. There's much more to it this way." (female)

Finally, and although the quantitative analysis indicates that it is considered somewhat of a less important motivation, buddies also think about the financial burden of living in a big city or living alone. Although not necessarily because of the financial benefit – some do just not want to live alone (yet) - nearly all buddies were looking for a place to live in a cohoused context in Antwerp when hearing about CURANT. While the buddies seem to always prioritize the 'social' aspect when talking about their motivation to participate in CURANT, the fact that the project allows them to live reasonably cheap was not unimportant, especially for those who need to live on a relatively tight budget.

Experiences of being 'a buddy' in CURANT

When talking about the buddies' experiences of being 'a buddy' in CURANT, it is important to note that the insights we will discuss here are predominantly based on the first round of interviews, which were conducted between a few weeks up to around three months after the buddies entered CURANT. In the case of the buddies that were among the first to enter the project, issues that came up during a second follow-up interview that took place between five up to nine months after entering the project, are also included. This means that at this stage our data only allow us to provide preliminary insights into how the buddies who are in the early to mid-stage of their trajectory in CURANT experience what 'being a buddy' is like. Further data collection, which will include follow-up interviews with those who entered CURANT more recently as well as a final interview during the buddies' final month in the project will allow for a more profound understanding of the buddies' experiences and whether and how these experiences change throughout their trajectory in CURANT.

The role of 'the buddy'

We begin this section with an extract of the fieldnotes we took while observing an activity during a monthly CURANT buddy-session. These sessions are group sessions that are organised by one of the project partners and the buddies are asked to attend them on a monthly basis¹⁵. The buddy-sessions are meant to be a platform to provide peer support and to exchange experiences among the buddies. Sometimes the sessions also have a more educational purpose in which case usually a professional from the field will come to the session and teach/inform the buddies about a specific theme (e.g. the integration trajectory of newcomers, psychosocial guidance of refugees,...). This particular buddy-session focused on the way in which the buddies take on their role as a 'buddy'.

There are 6 papers on the wall with each a specific buddy-role written on it: brother/sister-buddy, friend-buddy, neighbour-buddy, mentor-buddy, google-buddy, and father/mother-buddy. Each role is explained in a few bullet points... The project partner explains to the group that they came up with these roles except for the 'google-buddy', which was introduced by one of the buddies during the session of last week¹⁶, as that is how he felt as a buddy. The buddy-roles on the wall are all underlined in a different colour. The buddies are asked to colour the blank drawing(s) of a person they all have in front of them and who is/are representing the young refugee(s) they are cohousing with, in the colour of the buddy-role they think they are taking on. Everybody starts colouring. (...) It is striking that nobody uses one single colour but at least two and often even more. It appears that the buddy-role they see themselves taking on does not seem to be as straightforward as the typology of buddies on the wall suggests. (fieldnotes, 30/01/2018)

The simple exercise described here illustrates a certain tension between clearly demarcated 'types of buddies' on the one hand, and the more complex way the buddies interpret their role as a buddy on the other hand. The fact that nobody used one single colour suggests that they consider themselves to be taking on multiple roles, which cannot be fully captured in a specific 'type of buddy'. The typology of buddies indicated in the exercise represents indeed 'ideal-types' that do not exist as such in reality. The buddies clearly emphasize that being a buddy is a very "individual experience", which everyone fulfils in his or her own way, and also depends on a person's motivations and expectations towards CURANT and their role in it. In that sense, the buddies see noticeable differences between themselves and other buddies, stating that other buddies are "much more protective" of the refugee, or that those who consider themselves "a good Belgian who will go and have their say on how it all works here", will have a different relationship with the young refugee than those who "just want to cohause with someone". Nonetheless, our data suggest that there are certain recurrent interpretations on what it is like to be 'a buddy'. First of all, the buddies

¹⁵ Buddies are requested to attend at least six sessions per year.

¹⁶ The sessions are organised twice a month, allowing buddies to choose which moment is most convenient for them. Usually, both sessions cover the same topic.

emphasize that they do not feel responsible for the refugee they are cohabitating with. Indeed, “*we’re not responsible for the refugee,*” is a phrase we frequently heard during our interviews. In that sense, the buddies seem to clearly position themselves outside of the network of professional caregivers who do bear a specific responsibility vis-à-vis the young refugee. The project partner that recruits and trains the buddies before their participation in CURANT and organises the above mentioned buddy-sessions, also transmits this message to the buddies, for instance by assuring that they are not responsible to find housing for the refugee when the refugee leaves CURANT (fieldnotes, 26/09/2017). At the same time, however, the buddies do tend to see themselves as having to be a sort of ‘role model’ for the refugee, and believe it is expected of them to set a good example. If they feel they do not fit this profile, they may start doubting whether they can be a ‘good buddy’, as illustrated for instance in this quote of one of the buddies who lives in the student flat¹⁷:

“We’re students who also don’t have a good routine in our lives yet, and who also aren’t perfect and stuff. And I don’t know if it’s expected of us that we be kind of like a good example, I think that’s kind of the idea...” (female)

While CURANT assumes a ‘less hierarchical, a more balanced, two-way relationship’ between the buddy and the young refugee in which the buddies ‘equally struggle with problems’ (Mahieu & Ravn, 2017:18), this feeling of having to set a good example and the concern expressed in the above quote indicate that in practice a certain ‘hierarchy’ is present in how the buddies’ interpret their role. In this same line, the buddies also consider that by entering the project they have made a certain commitment, which includes for instance making the refugee(s) they cohabitate with aware of the importance of respecting and showing up for appointments and of reading and reacting to official letters they receive. While the buddies go about this in different ways, e.g. by following-up on the young refugees’ appointments and reminding them of it the day before, by emphasizing that it is important to show up for these appointments in order to not get in trouble, or by teasing the refugees with the fact that they are constantly showing up too late for an appointment, they do seem to share this sense of responsibility towards the refugee. Furthermore, they also consider that motivating the refugee to participate in the activities organised by CURANT is something they should do. By not only inviting the buddies to specific moments of the activities organised for the young refugees, but also communicating to them what the activities consist of and what their purpose is, the project partners also confirm this sense of responsibility in the buddies. It is considered important that the buddies know about (the content of) these activities so they can contextualise the refugees’ possible complaints that “*they have been playing all day,*” when they come home from an activity, and point out the idea behind and the importance of these activities to them.

¹⁷ CURANT provides different cohousing arrangements including one student flat (see section on Cohousing and social interaction further on)

On the other hand, the data indicate that the buddies also delineate certain boundaries when negotiating this sense of commitment and the feeling of having to be a 'role model' with a rejection of a more formal responsibility towards the refugee. An example is how far they feel they should go in motivating the refugee to go to school when they notice that he has trouble getting out of bed in the morning or has been skipping class. While they may consider it their task to motivate the youngsters, for instance by stressing that it is important to go to school in order to get a diploma, they generally do not believe that dragging the young refugee out of bed or dropping him off at the school gate is something that should be expected from them. Or, as one of the buddies puts it:

"If you're cohousing with other people, there's also no one that will tell you 'can you make sure that your flatmate goes to school?'" (female)

In this context, it is also the buddies' reluctance to being pushed into a more parental role towards the refugees that plays a role. *"I don't think I have to start and act like a mother"* one of the buddies (male) said. Furthermore, the buddies' professional background is also a reason to mark specific boundaries, particularly when their job (current or previous) is closely related to the tasks of the young refugees' social assistants in CURANT. One of the buddies, for instance, indicated that for him it is really important to keep a strict line between him being a buddy in CURANT and his profession as a social assistant, in order to not bring his job into the house:

"I'm really a flatmate here and not a caregiver. That's really important because otherwise it never stops, right? Then I close the door from work and open it again here. Of course I'm concerned, on a human level. (...) But ... I mean, I don't feel responsible for his situation, or for the things that happen. But I do want to be there for him." (male)

Demarcating this limit, however, is not always easy for the buddies and may be experienced as a learning process. During a follow-up interview, another buddy (female) who also works as a social assistant explained that it took her a few months before she was able to 'let go'. *"I still get a lot of questions. I will help solving certain things, but for other things I just immediately say 'you better call [name social assistant],'"* she said. Where to draw the line when creating these boundaries is different for every buddy and may also shift with time, which the buddies also relate to the refugee having to learn to take responsibility. For instance, while some of the buddies see no problem in the fact that they are financing certain things that are to be shared in the house (e.g. cleaning products, toilet paper, etc.) during the early stage of cohousing, they do think that with time the refugees should take their responsibility and 'learn' to contribute to these purchases as the buddies do not consider it their role to *"provide for them"*. It should be noted here, however, that our data show that in most cases these costs are already shared since the beginning. Only in exceptional cases will buddies consider it their task to buy these items that are to share, for instance out of pity for the refugees' having to live off a relatively low social welfare allowance.

Types of support provided by the buddies to the refugees

When talking in more concrete terms about the support the buddies are giving to the refugees, data indicate that this support is mainly practical and in many cases involves, e.g. showing the refugees how to sort the garbage and when to put the garbage bags outside, translating the letters they receive, or explaining to them what the letters are saying. A lot of buddies note how these letters often use a very bureaucratic language, which makes it hard even for them to understand, let alone for the refugees. Also helping the refugees to use online banking or accompanying them to the bank is frequently referred to as a type of practical support they are providing. Furthermore, explaining how to get to places, how to get a pass to use the city-bikes or public transport, drive the young refugees to places or show them where in the neighbourhood they can buy the cheapest products are examples of practical support the buddies brought up during the interviews. The buddies generally consider it part of their task to provide this kind of support. Nonetheless, when there is limited social contact between the buddy and the refugee, the fact that they are predominantly giving this kind of practical support is sometimes experienced as somewhat frustrating. *“Sometimes I’m more like a helpline than a flatmate”* one of the buddies (male) said, pointing to the fact that he felt that his interaction with the refugee revolved around answering practical questions instead of having ‘real’ conversations. It is also in this context that the ‘google-buddy’ that was mentioned before should be read. However, the support is not always limited to practical issues. Support that goes beyond mere practical support, and includes e.g. helping the refugees with their school work, seems to occur less frequent. In some cases the buddies’ social networks (family or friends) are also involved in providing this practical or other types of support, for instance by tutoring the refugee in a particular school subject, or by fixing things (e.g. a bicycle). For the moment, though, this remains relatively rare and it are mostly the buddies themselves who provide this support. Apart from this kind of support, in some cases the buddies also referred to ‘being there’ for the refugee, offering him a listening ear and moral support or advice. Interesting to note is that when referring to this type of support, the buddies sometimes hesitated whether it actually qualified as ‘support’ or ‘helping’ the young refugee.

“Actually helping, not really... I think, well, that’s also a form of helping of course, offering a listening ear, you know. That he can come to me if he wants to. But also that did not happen very often or very extensively yet. (male)

“It’s not that I’m consciously thinking like ‘I have to help him now’ or something, but... I think just, listening to each other and exchanging about the stuff that you are doing.” (female)

While the buddies want to be this listening ear for the refugee, they are also somewhat cautious about prying too much, or asking too many questions. They want the refugee ‘to feel comfortable’ at home and do not want to overburden them, in part because they see that the CURANT project is already asking them many questions:

“They are asked already so many questions by the project. So I don’t want to do that [ask more questions] on top of that. If he wants to share something, he will tell me.” (female)

The buddies are also advised against asking the refugee about the conditions under which they fled from their country of origin or about their flight in general by the project partner that provides psychological assistance to the refugees, who emphasizes that their home should be a safe space for the refugee: *“[As a buddy] you can mean more in providing support in the here and now, and not in resolving their trauma’s or past.”* (fieldnotes, 26/10/2017). At the same time, the fact that the buddies may know very little about the refugee’s past sometimes makes them wonder whether they can do certain things in their presence, e.g. watch war movies or play violent games on PlayStation. Indeed, some buddies intentionally avoid doing this when the refugees are in the room.

On the other hand, our data also reveal that the buddies notice that the refugees they are cohabitating with do not always need their support, and in some cases even seem to know better what to do than them. *“A while ago he had to go to the doctor, and he actually knew better than us what he had to do with the health insurance,”* one of the buddies (male) said. Another buddy explained how he did not know the city of Antwerp very well when he joined CURANT and how it was the young refugee that showed him around. When the buddies realize that the young refugees know how to go about things and are actually handling things on their own, they tend to be somewhat surprised by this, as illustrated by this interview quote and the extract from the fieldnotes during one of the buddy-sessions:

“He knows how he has to take the bus, and the train, and you now, like all the practical stuff he really knows all that. [...] Other than that, he’s handling things by himself really well actually, more than I would have expected.” (female)

The buddies are having a group discussion together with the project partner about specific cases they have talked about in small groups. They are sharing some anecdotes of personal experiences with the young refugees. [Name buddy] tells how he had arranged with his flatmate to go and accompany him to get his official address registered at the city hall on a Wednesday afternoon. But on Tuesday he noticed that the letter [ordering his flatmate to go to the city hall] had already disappeared from the kitchen. Somewhat worried he asked [Name refugee] where the letter had gone, to which he replied very casually ‘oh, I’ve already taken care of that’. When hearing this anecdote, the group reacts enthusiastically to the fact that [Name refugee] had taken care of it all by himself.” (fieldnotes, 26/09/2017)

The fact that the buddies are surprised by the level of initiative some refugees are taking, in a way is to be expected taking into account how the refugees that participate in the project are predominantly perceived by the project as well as the buddies when entering CURANT as ‘needy’ of

help and support. The fact that the buddies come to see that the refugees are in fact not seldom resourceful young individuals who know how to go about things, could be an opportunity to deconstruct this initial perception and turn it into an experience of a more equal form of cohousing among 'flatmates'.

During the interviews, we did not only ask about the support the buddies see themselves giving to the refugees but also the other way around, i.e. whether the buddies felt that they had already been supported or received help from the refugees. Most common answers were also practical support in the sense that the refugee help them carrying heavy boxes, putting together pieces of furniture or moving this furniture around the house. Some also mentioned watering the plants in their absence, or fixing things. These issues the buddies are helped with by the refugees are however not considered comparable to the issues of the refugees; "[these] are problems of a different kind, of course" one of the buddies (male) emphasized. In rare occasions the buddies would also refer to less tangible things, for example how the refugee is helping them to put things into perspective as for instance in the case of this buddy (female):

"You see the world differently if you hear so many stories. I don't know. Sometimes I can be really sad over nothing and then he is standing there all happy in my kitchen and I think like 'yes, ok'. (...) Just, what they've been through and the amount of resilience they have. It's really insane."

A final remark to be made is that in cohousing arrangements where more than one duo lives together, the data show that the buddies do not consider themselves to be only the buddy of the young refugee they have been matched with by the project, and their support is not necessarily (only) directed towards this person, but towards the other refugees as well. Moreover, support can be exchanged between the buddies themselves, not only in terms of being a buddy in CURANT but also more generally, as explained by this buddy (male): *"When you live with a lot of people, for instance, when I'm bored or if I have a problem or feel depressed, then I can talk to some people."* In the next and final section, we will go a little deeper into some preliminary findings regarding this issue of cohousing and the social interaction between the CURANT participants.

Cohousing and social interaction

An important assumption of the CURANT project is that cohabitation between a refugee and a local buddy will offer a setting for them to have 'regular, informal, meaningful social interaction' with respectively a 'young local citizen' and 'a young refugee' (Mahieu & Ravn, 2017: 16). The project considers this social interaction to be a spontaneous process; that is, by providing the conditions for the young refugee and the buddy to cohabitate (i.e. a shared housing) it is assumed that the social interaction will follow. While not an intervention action in itself, the expected social

interaction as a result of cohabitation takes up a central place in the CURANT project (see change model V1.1, Mahieu & Ravn, 2017). Therefore, it is relevant to explore how the buddies experience cohousing in CURANT and the social interaction that is (or is not) taking place in this context of cohabitation. Equally as for the previous section, the insights that we will discuss below are based primarily on the first round of interviews, and a first round of follow-up interviews in the case of the buddies that were among the first to enter the project. As the buddies' experiences are not static and are expected to change with time, the findings discussed in this section should not be read as conclusive but rather as a first glance into how cohabitation with young refugees is experienced and how social interaction is taking form.

Cohousing with young refugee(s)

Before the young refugee and the buddy move in together, they have been officially 'matched' as a duo by the project partners and in principle have already met each other during a 'matching activity'. While this is not always the case, ideally, the buddy and the young refugee move into their CURANT-house or apartment around the same time. When the buddy(ies) and the young refugee(s) have all moved in and cohabitation has started, in some cases the buddies make certain agreements with the refugee. These agreements are mainly about practical issues that have to do with daily living arrangements and household tasks, e.g. allocating a specific place in the fridge for personal and shared food items, coming up with a cleaning schedule, or agreeing to each contributing a certain amount of money every month to buy shared household items. Other buddies say they have not made such agreements and indicate they did not feel comfortable or did not think it was very pleasant to make rules right from the beginning and prefer to let 'living together' grow more organically and in a more informal way. One of the buddies (female) furthermore explained how she did not want to come across as a 'control freak' as she felt the others in her house did not care that much about e.g. having a clean house as she did. Regardless of whether or not agreements have been made, small irritations do show up in several cases. The buddies generally emphasize that the annoyances they have experienced so far are indeed "*small*" and experience that these are in fact very similar to the problems they encountered when they cohabitated with Belgians, e.g. making too much noise, not cleaning up your mess, not cleaning the house, etc. Furthermore, these irritations can go both ways. One of the buddies (male) for instance explained how when the apartment was in quite a messy estate, the refugee complained to him and said "*dude, you have to clean up your mess!*" In that sense, cohabitating with a young refugee is considered not that different from previous cohousing experiences.

A recurring issue that some of the buddies seem to be struggling with, or feel they need to get used to, is the fact that the refugees often have a lot of people coming over to the house. In some cases these people also stay when the refugee himself is not there, which may make the buddies feel somewhat uncomfortable. The buddies also see how the refugees often take their friends or visits to their bedroom, instead of receiving them in the living room. "*They always tend to go to their rooms.*"

So often it's the case that there are like 10 people in house and I'm sitting in the living room by myself, that's really crazy," one of the buddies (female) explained. Although the issue of gender could also play a role in this particular situation, in the sense that the refugee's all-male group of friends may not feel comfortable joining a female flatmate in the living room, similar experiences are expressed by male buddies. The buddies indicate that when time passes and they get to know these people a little bit, or at least recognize their faces, they come to consider this extra presence in the house as a somewhat normal part of the cohabitating experience, and tend to frame it as part of the refugees' 'culture' in which hospitality takes a central place. While the buddies experience the small irritations of cohousing described above as not that different from cohabitating with Belgians, at the same time there is also a strong tendency of cultural framing in the way they perceive cohousing with a refugee, and often things are thought of in terms of 'cultural differences'. Another buddy (male), for instance, explained why he thought it was difficult for his flatmate to remember to take off his shoes when entering the house: *"He didn't learn it, different culture and taking off your shoes [you do] only for the mosque or the bedroom. Or when you walk on carpet."* Consequently, the most effective (hypothetical) solution was seen in putting carpet in the house: *"From the moment I buy a carpet, I think they take their shoes off much quicker."* This cultural framing is also present in the discourse of the project partners; e.g. during one of the buddy- sessions a project partner emphasized that as buddies in CURANT they *"will be confronted with cultural differences on a daily basis"* (fieldnotes, 26/10/2017). Being aware of cultural differences may indeed help the buddies to contextualise certain customs, ideas and behaviours of the refugees (and of their own, for that matter). Nonetheless, it is equally important to be aware that a too strong emphasis on 'culture' runs the risk of essentializing the refugees' country of origin and ethnic backgrounds, turning this idea of 'culture' into a lens through which everything they do (or do not do) is seen. This may in fact impose stereotypical assumptions of a common culture (e.g. *"in the West we have a talking-culture that encourages us to share our feelings. In Afghanistan they don't have this, they have fairy tales, stories etc. but those are not individual expressions [of feelings]"*, (fieldnotes, 28/11/2017) or leave such assumptions unchallenged (e.g. the idea that taking off one's shoes or not is a 'cultural thing') on a heterogeneous group of young individuals, leaving little room to consider individual differences and choice-making. During buddy- sessions, for instance, when the issue of the young refugees' friends and extended network coming over was a topic of discussion, one of the buddies (female) came to think of the refugee she cohabitates with as abnormal because he appears to have only one good friend. After hearing the discussion about the importance of 'hospitality' in the young refugees' culture and how difficult it sometimes is for the refugees to stop their friends from coming over, another buddy (male) started to doubt whether the refugee's friends who are regularly at the house are actually there because he invites them and wants them there, or whether it is because hospitality is 'in their culture' and, consequently, he cannot refuse these visits:

[Name buddy] says that after hearing today's discussion he has started to wonder about the refugee he is cohabitating with, and who also has friends coming over all the time. He says that

now he thinks that it might not be the refugee who is inviting these friends, but that it are the friends who are inviting themselves to their house. (...) He decides that he will definitely discuss it with him. The project partner shows enthusiasm and appears to be happy with the fact that [Name buddy] has been inspired to see the things from a different perspective. (fieldnotes, 26/09/2017)

The initial assumption that the visits are a result of the refugee's own choice, is thus replaced by the idea that it might be a 'cultural thing', making the buddy feel he should talk about it with him. This change of perspective pleases the project partner, and indeed the fact that the buddy is looking at the situation from a different point of view suggests that he is 'opening up' his perspective. On the other hand, one could wonder if this persistent cultural framing may obstruct rather than facilitate developing the profound and meaningful relationship between the buddies and the refugees the project aspires, as this way boundaries between 'us' (the local flatmates) and 'them' (the refugees) tend to be emphasized instead of broken down.

Social interaction

When it comes to social interaction between the buddies and the young refugees, it is clear that the buddies enter the project with the idea that it is important to build a relationship with the young refugee(s) they are cohabitating with and that social interaction - in the sense of doing things together, having conversations, etc. - is something they want and feel they should strive towards. Important to not here is that the buddies may express this importance because during the training sessions they attended prior to entering the project, they may have been made aware of the central role of social interaction and their relationship with the refugee within the CURANT project. During one of the buddy- sessions, one of the buddies (male) for instance explained how after a few weeks of living together he talked to the young refugee about their cohabitation and told him that he expected him to show somewhat more of a "community feeling" (fieldnotes, 28/11/17). A commonly mentioned method to try to create such a community feeling is by trying to cook or eat together on a frequent basis; however, so far only in exceptional cases this actually has been turned into a regular practice. Indeed, data reveal that in most cases social interaction seems to remain somewhat limited. While cooking or eating together is considered a good way of stimulating social interaction, in most cases it is something that occurs rather sporadically, if at all. For example when they happen to be cooking at the same time or when the young refugee is making dinner when the buddy happens to come home or walk into the kitchen.

"When he's making food and I come home, because I'm someone who, I never really cook, and then he will always say like 'do you want some of this?' or 'do you want some of that?' And for me it's the same, when I go and get take-out and he arrives, even though it was only for me, you will always ask [if he wants some of it]." (male)

“One month ago I was in the kitchen and [Name refugee] was cooking for his friends. He invited me to eat together with them. And then I ate rice and meat with them.” (male)

Also other activities the buddies and young refugees do together seem to be rather limited and revolve mainly around e.g. watching television together occasionally, smoking a cigarette together, or cleaning together. Activities outside of the house appear to occur on an even less frequent basis and consist primarily of helping the young refugee arrange practical issues (e.g. accompanying him to register his official address) or going to the grocery store together (see also previous section). While some buddies say they also do ‘fun’ things together in their spare time, for instance playing sports or going to watch a soccer match, this remains quite rare. The buddies stress that they want this social interaction and the fact of doing this together to develop in a spontaneous manner. *“It’s going to grow spontaneously, or it’s not going to grow”*, one of the buddies (male) insisted. Another buddy (female) explained that she tried to cook or at least eat together once a month, but that at the same time she *“let him be”* saying that she did not want to be *“his mum and like take him by his hand.”* On the other hand, the buddies also realize that – in many cases – the level of social interaction with the young refugees remains somewhat limited, and during the interviews they often tried to look for an explanation for why this is the case. In this context, the buddies who are quite busy because of their jobs, studies, internship or general social life see the fact that they are unable to spend a lot of time at home as an important reason as to why they have not done more things together with the young refugee.

“I maybe would have expected that there would be more contact between us; because we don’t do a lot of things together, apart from cleaning for example. But I also think that’s because of me, because I’m extremely busy at the moment, with studying and my job and then I also try to see my family every once in a while during the weekend. I’m sort of not coming around to it.” (female)

The buddies expect that once they will be less busy, this will automatically make it easier to have more contact and do more things together. On the other hand, the fact that the buddies and the refugees often have different routines and daily rhythms is also considered to make it more difficult to do things together. Particularly the fact that the refugees often eat at different times makes eating together – which is usually seen as one of the more ‘easy’ ways to do something together – somewhat complicated. Some of the buddies also refer to the religious background of the refugee in the sense that what they consider a common way to do something together and break the ice, i.e. going and have a drink in a bar, is not an option when the young refugees do not drink alcohol because of their religion. In some cases the buddies also mention the language barrier and explain how they feel that the refugees’ sometimes rather limited knowledge of Dutch makes it difficult to have conversations that go beyond the more superficial ‘how are you’-type of talk. Furthermore, in the buddies’ experiences planning to do something with the refugee ahead of time seems to rarely

work out. While they are usually used to making plans and thus often have quite busy schedules, doing something together with the refugee requires more spontaneity and flexibility. *“The trick is to invite them in the moment itself, and to try to also get their friends to come along”*, one of the buddies (female) explained. Finally, also the age difference between the buddies and the refugees is sometimes considered an obstacle to develop a closer relationship and do activities together that are fun for both.

At the same time, in some cases the buddies also see that the refugees are often very busy themselves. Not only do they have to go to school and participate in activities organised by the project, often they also have their own network to spend their spare time with. When the refugee is not home very often and not very ‘present’ in the cohabitation spaces (e.g. the kitchen or the living room), building a relationship with them is considered more difficult.

“Actually I’m the only one who actively uses the living room and the kitchen... while he’s spending much more time outside. So that also makes it a little bit more difficult, the relationship, but for example when he comes home we do talk for a little while. Then it’s like ‘How was your day? What did you do? And things like that.’” (female)

On the other hand, the fact that the refugees are spending a lot of time with friends and in some cases family also makes the buddies realize that they already have (extended) networks. Given this fact they understand that the refugees want to spend time with the people they know. *“It also makes sense in a way, that they also want to go to their friends”*, one of the buddies (male) said. While the buddies sometimes think it is a bit of a pity that they are not doing more things together with the refugee - *“Often it’s more living together apart than really living together”* - sometimes it is exactly this reality, in which they each have their own lives and are not constantly together, that is considered the reason that cohabitation is working. The quote below, for instance, illustrates how one of the buddies reflects on the fact that he does not think they are “living next to each other” just because they do not do many things together:

“Next to each other’ is wrongly formulated. Because for example just now, when I knew I was going to be a little late because of work and I knew you were coming, I texted him like ‘Are you at home? Can you then maybe let her in?’ Or sometimes we send each other, like for example when I was in [holiday destination] I sent him some pictures once in a while like ‘look, this is such and such’. (...) It’s wrong to say that we are living next to each other, because we do have contact, but there aren’t many things we really do together.” (male)

Important to note is the fact that, when talking about social interaction and the activities they are (not) doing with the refugees, the buddies tend to emphasize how “so far” this has been rather limited, suggesting that they expect that this will change with time. Follow-up interviews with the buddies who have already been living with the refugee for a longer period of time, however, suggest

that this is not necessarily the case. While in a few cases the buddies and refugees seem to have grown toward each other and have established a way of cohabitating with relatively speaking a lot of social interaction – although still mainly only within the context of the house or apartment -, in other cases social interaction remains quite limited. While for some this limited contact may work just fine, for others the fact that the refugee is spending little time at home or that there is no real feeling of ‘cohabitation’, can become a source of frustration. *“I think things could really go a lot better here at home”*, one of the buddies explained, also pointing out that according to him the fact that the young refugee is hardly ever home is *“not really how it should go”* in CURANT. However, as mentioned before, the data used for this report include follow-up interviews with only a limited number of buddies. Further data collection will provide more insights into what the impact of time is on the cohousing experiences and level of social interaction.

The influence of the type of cohousing arrangement

The CURANT project offers different types of cohousing arrangements to its participants. The participants that entered the project in 2017 are living either in an apartment (1 duo), in a house (2 duos) or in a student flat (6 duos)¹⁸. It is to be expected that the type of housing will have an impact on the way cohabitation is experienced and the social interaction between the people that are living together takes form. Overall, the buddies see both advantages as well as disadvantages when it comes to cohabitation among one, two or more duos. The buddies that live in a house with two duos generally seem to like the fact that there is more than one other person in the house to interact with. Some of the buddies cohabitating with only one refugee, on the other hand, consider living with more people rather a disadvantage as this also means that you need to get along with more people, and have a bigger chance that the different personalities may not match. According to them, irritations or cohabitation issues may arise more easily in this context, while if you only live with two *“there’s actually only one person you need to adjust to”*, as one of the buddies (male) explained. Furthermore, cohabitating with two is believed to allow for the flatmates to have more privacy and live in a somewhat quieter context. Especially the buddies that live in the student flat notice how living with twelve people can become very busy and loud, not only during the day but also at night. While they recognize that cohabitating in the student flat is ‘fun’ and ‘brings more life into the house’ and that it has the advantage that there is always somebody around, they also experience that cohabitating with that many people is not necessarily easy and influences the sort of social interaction and relationship they can develop with the refugees. In the buddies’ experiences, the fact that there are always a lot of people makes it more difficult to have in-depth conversations with the refugees and really get to know them, as explained by this buddy:

¹⁸ A fourth type of cohousing arrangement is 16 modular units with 4 communal spaces that are being built on one single site as part of the CURANT project. As these modular units are still being built and no participants are living there yet at the time of writing this report, this cohousing type is not included in this analysis.

“It’s also difficult to have deep conversations because you’re always with so many people downstairs [in the shared living area/kitchen]. And then it’s really difficult to have a long and good one-on-one conversation with someone. Because at night, most of the times, there’s 13 people, you’re there with more or less everyone. (...) And I think that’s the advantage if you’re one and one or two and two [in a house], that then you get to know each other much better. In our case it always remains sort of a student flat in which you can always withdraw in your room, like in your own space. And like that you’re also not always aware of who is where and doing what, because we’re so many.” (female)

Even though our data so far suggest that cohousing with one or two duos does not necessarily lead to in-depth conversations and close relationships, it is interesting to note how in the perception and experiences of the buddies in the student flat, the shared living areas are too crowded to really get to know the refugees. *“I’m not someone who asks a lot of questions, unless it comes naturally. And when you’re with so many I find it uncomfortable. You also don’t want that they have to talk about something, I prefer that they tell something themselves. And the dynamic also isn’t like ‘oh I would like to tell you something’ because there’s always so many people. It’s fun but it’s not very personal. (...) Everybody has friends coming over and we cook together and we laugh. But I’ve never really had any intimate conversations [with the young refugees],”* another buddy (female) explained. In the experiences of these buddies, living with a lot of people in a way obstructs real cohabitation with the refugees, that goes beyond having a laugh and includes more personal and in-depth social interaction. In this cohabitation setting, in fact the only place to have more quiet and private conversations would be the buddies’ or refugees’ bedrooms. However, while the buddies spend time in each other rooms, and the refugees often receive friends in theirs, the buddies perceive the bedroom of the refugees as a space that is difficult to enter, and vice versa. In other words, a place to create personal social interaction as a way to develop a relationship with the refugees seems to be lacking in the student flat. Moreover, since the buddies and refugees also moved in at different times, without having had the usual ‘matching activity’ beforehand, they basically met each other for the first time in the staircase or in the shared living space of the student flat – sometimes without an introduction from the project partner, in case the buddy was not able to be there when the refugee arrived at the flat accompanied by the CURANT social assistant. Because of this, the buddies emphasize the importance for the project partners to also focus on organizing activities with the group of people living in the student flat – buddies and refugees together – instead of the customary CURANT activities for the buddies and the refugees separately or for all CURANT participants. While the buddies explained that a matching activity in the student flat was foreseen, it had not taken place yet at the time of the fieldwork¹⁹. On a more general note, it remains important to provide sufficient joint activities for refugees and buddies, also after the ‘matching

¹⁹ Since then, this ‘matching activity’ has taken place and consisted of baking waffles together. The buddies were also invited to a cleaning session that was organised by one of the project partners in the student flat.

activity' has taken place, as a too strong focus on activities for buddies on the one hand and activities for refugees (to which buddies are occasionally invited) on the other hand, may contribute to upholding an 'us' (the local flatmates) versus 'them' (the refugees) perspective (see also earlier).

As mentioned before, the cohousing arrangements also impact how the buddies perceive themselves as 'buddies', or more particularly whom they consider themselves to be the buddy of. While there is a clear one 'buddy'- one 'refugee' focus in a context of cohabitation in the case of one duo, this is less the case when two or more duos live together. Indeed, *"in our flat we don't do buddies"*, was a remark one of the buddies of the student flat (female) made during one of the buddy- sessions, indicating that there is less of a one-on-one focus in this cohabitation setting. In a cohousing context in which two duos live together, it is also clear that the buddies do not tend to think in terms of 'duos' and therefore do not consider themselves to be only the 'buddy' of the refugee they have officially been matched with by the project (see also earlier). However, as the CURANT project is built around the idea of 'matched duos' the buddies that live with more than one refugee sometimes feel that the communication from the project partners towards them happens 'selectively', i.e. only when it concerns the refugee they have been matched with, and not when it concerns the other refugee(s). In their experience this does not necessarily make sense *"when you all live together in one house"*, as one of the buddies (male) insisted.

On a final note, when talking about the social interaction that took place in the different cohousing schemes, some buddies explicitly refer to a specific place or item in the house that seems to facilitate interaction among the buddies. One of the buddies (female), for instance, explained how *"the kitchen really is the place where the magic happens"*. Because of the fact that the kitchen is right there when you walk into the house and quite big with enough space to sit, it seems inviting to hang out also when not cooking or eating yourself:

"You come home and someone is cooking, so you just go and sit there. There's a lot of talk happening there. (...) In the kitchen a lot of stuff happens."

Another buddy (male) talked about how the refugees' shisha became a piece around which their social interaction happened, not only with the young refugee but also with his friends, including also more in-depth conversations: *"Instead of having a beer, there's now the habit to do the shisha"*. This reveals how physical aspects of the house, its rooms and the items within it, may impact cohabitation and social interaction dynamics (cfr. how the buddies in the student flat consider the lack of a quiet shared space as limiting the possibilities to create more in-depth social interaction). Further data collection and analysis will allow exploring this in more detail across CURANT's different cohousing arrangements.

The refugees

Similar to our approach above, after the quantitative analysis of the total population of refugees participating in the CURANT project in Part 1, we will now continue with our qualitative analysis of the refugees' perceptions and experiences. Qualitative data were gathered via observations of refugees during CURANT activities as well as in-depth interviews and informal conversations with a sample of 15 refugees. We will first focus on the social networks of refugees upon entering CURANT and the type of social support they derive from their network. The second part deals with refugees' aspirations and expectations for their future. The third section discusses refugees' first perceptions about, and experiences in the project while the fourth section explores how the cohousing and the relationship with the buddies is experienced and perceived by the refugees during this initial phase of their participation in the project.

Social networks/social support

The quantitative analysis in Part 1 already gave insights into refugees' social network of friends. This analysis showed that, similar to the buddies, refugees tend to find friends in people with a similar background (same sex, mother tongue, religion and origin). Most of their friends live in Antwerp and much less of their friends have been born in Belgium or go to the same school as them. Complementary to the quantitative analysis, the qualitative study allows us to zoom deeper in on the composition and characteristics of refugees' wider social networks, not only including friends. Through various intervention actions (e.g., learning and training activities, interaction with the flatmate) the project partners expect/aspire a significant impact on refugees' social networks (see Mahieu & Ravn, 2017). More specifically, they aim at broadening refugees' social networks and supporting them in developing ethnically diverse, informal networks with peers. In order to study evolutions, refugees' social networks are examined in the beginning of their participation in CURANT and once again upon exiting the project. For this purpose, a specific method was used: the convoy social support model (Akiyama & Antonucci, 1987)²⁰. This instrument allows us to map different variables characterizing refugees' social networks. First, refugees were asked to think of people that they feel close to and that play an important role in their life. These people can live anywhere: in Belgium, their country of origin or other countries. Second, they were asked to write the names of these people down in the provided three circles. The middle point of the circle diagram represented the refugees themselves. The first circle surrounding them represented the people that participants feel the closest to and that play the most important role in their life. The second represented people that are still important but not as much as those in the first circle, etc.

²⁰ A similar methodology was used to map the social networks of the buddies when entering CURANT. Although not analysed in this report, this will allow us to look at similarities and differences in the refugees' and buddies' networks, as well as identify changes in the social networks of both groups after having participated in CURANT in subsequent analyses and reports.

This provides us with a visual image of the group of people surrounding the individual. Third, respondents were asked a number of questions about the composition of their social network (e.g., age, sex, geographical proximity, ethnic diversity, language, frequency of contact) and a number of questions to obtain functional information (amount and type of support provided and received) about their networks. Individuals' social network models are dynamic, changing across time and situations. In this stage of the research, the data collected through the social network models provides us with information on the social networks of the refugees in the beginning of their participation in CURANT. In this report, we will now continue with a description of the structural and functional characteristics of refugees' social networks in the beginning of their enrolment in CURANT. We will do so by discussing the categories of people that were most frequently placed in refugees' social network models.

Family

One clear observation is that almost all refugees place their first-degree family members (parents and siblings) in the first circle. All participants of CURANT are young adult unaccompanied refugees. Consequently, the first-degree relatives of all participants (except for one participant whose brother lives in Antwerp) either live in their country of origin, in countries neighbouring their home countries, in other (transit) countries or to a lesser extent in other European countries. Several refugees we have interviewed have lost either one or both parents. A number of refugees are currently involved in a family reunification procedure. Two refugees were reunified with their family while participating in CURANT and therefore left the project earlier than their predetermined estimated participation. Some other refugees in CURANT are currently trying to cope with the fact that they will not be reunified with their family in Belgium because they were unable to complete the procedure before turning 18²¹ or because their parents have decided not to reunify with them in Belgium. All of these family situations cause stress and/or grief for participants (more on this in the section 'Aspirations concerning family'). The observations and conversations with the participating refugees really showed how for all refugees, family is their primary concern, as illustrated in the quote below from an informal conversation with one of the refugees held not long before New Year's evening:

He says that every year, he is just waiting to see his family again. He says: "I am not happy about the new year. 2016, 2017, 2018, ... It doesn't matter." [Name refugee] says that the years

²¹ European legislation concerning family reunification for unaccompanied minors was modified in April 2018. Before, refugees that entered European member states and requested asylum as a minor but turned eighteen during their asylum procedure were considered to be adults, and no longer eligible for a family reunification procedure. On the 12th of April 2018 however, the court issued a judgment on this matter in which it stated that: "a third-country national or a stateless person who was underage at the time of arrival in a member state and at the time of applying for asylum, but who becomes an adult during the procedure and is subsequently recognized as a refugee, must be qualified as a "minor" within the meaning of that provision." (C-550/16, Hof van Justitie, 2018).

just pass by for him and that every year is just another year without his family. His family is his biggest priority. (fieldnotes, 20/12/2017)

This extract indicates that this participant's life in Belgium revolves around waiting for him to see his family again and that this is a constant worry. At the time of the interview, he had not seen them for four years. The difficulty of living alone in Belgium without family was a recurrent issue that was brought up by refugees during the interviews. Family is a constant concern for these youngsters because almost all of them find themselves in either one of the following situations, both causing feelings of stress and/or grief. First, several refugees have lots of worries on their mind because they are enrolled in a family reunification procedure confronting them with many uncertainties (such as worries about the status and the outcome of the family reunification procedure and the necessary administrative burden this places on the refugees). Second, another group is trying to come to terms with the hard reality of never being reunified with their family in Belgium which causes lots of grief. A third group are those refugees that have succeeded in bringing their family over (and are thus no longer participating in CURANT), and are also burdened with many new worries and tasks (e.g., about administrative hurdles to obtain social welfare benefits for the family and the extremely difficult task of finding a house) because they are the only ones with some Dutch language proficiency and knowledge about administration procedures in Belgium.

The relationship and type of interaction that refugees have with their family varies a lot as the participants of CURANT find themselves in very dissimilar, sometimes contrasting, situations (regarding safety of the family, facilities for communication, (lack of) wealth of the family, etc.). There are a number of refugees who are in contact with their family on a weekly or daily basis, while other participating refugees do not seem to have that much contact with their family. Many participants only interact with them every few weeks or even months. This is often due to the fact that their families still live in unsafe places and/or do not have the facilities to be in contact more often.

During interviews, refugees were asked about the type of support they derive from the people they place in their social networks. Generally, (with a few exceptions) refugees did not indicate their family, especially first degree family, as a source of **emotional support** whom they rely on when going through difficult times or feeling bad. It is important not to generalize, but based on testimonies of some refugees it seems as if the interaction between refugees and their first degree family members (mostly living in the country of origin or transit countries) often revolves around the following questions: how the family in the country of origin is doing, how the refugee in Belgium is doing, whether the refugee is still going to school and studying well, whether he is eating well, etc. The gathered data on this subject does not allow us to draw hard conclusions about the type of communication between families and refugees, but it seems as if, in some cases, there is the tendency to give social desirable answers to their families' questions that may not always reflect

how the refugee is really feeling or thinking. One of the refugees for example explicitly says that he does not talk about the difficulties and worries he encounters in his life in Belgium: *R: "I don't tell them that I'm tired of life in Belgium. I tell them that everything is okay, I'm studying."* This quote shows how difficulties of life in Belgium are not discussed with the family, in contrast, the participant tells them that he is doing fine and that everything is okay. A possible explanation could be that refugees do not want to burden their families back home about difficulties they experience in Belgium. However, it is important to note here that many participants indicated not to rely on anyone when experiencing negative feelings and having a hard time, as illustrated in the two quotes below:

"I: and, for example, when you're having a hard time, you're not feeling so good. Is there anyone you would approach or talk to? R: when I feel bad, I take distance. I'll go to my room, just sitting there and trying to relax or I keep busy on my phone."

"I: is there someone who listens to you when you're not feeling so good. For example when you feel sad, is there someone you can talk to? [...] R: yes, sometimes I miss my family, but what should I do? I should not call to tell them. I: no? What do you do then when you... R: just, just, uhm... Not talking. What do I have to do?"

The quotes above illustrate how refugees often rely on their own when having a bad time or feeling sad. Many of them seem to turn to themselves and do not feel the need or do not want to talk about it with others. Here, we notice a disparity between the fact that refugees place first degree family members in the first circle of their social network model and the fact that these family members seem to provide them with little or no emotional support. While they (mostly parents) are indicated as the most important people in their life that they feel most closely connected to, refugees cannot or do not want to rely on them when they are struggling emotionally. This could be an important factor causing psychological pressure for participants.

Second-degree relatives (uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents) are often placed in the first or second circle of refugees' social network models. Many participants have second-degree relatives living in Antwerp with whom they have a lot of interaction. The type of social support refugees derive from their relationships with these second-degree relatives is often **social companionship**, meaning they spend time together in recreational and leisure time activities. Regularly, and especially when it involves relatives that are older and/or that have been in Belgium longer, these family members are also perceived as a source of **instrumental support** (practical assistance, provision of financial aid, material resources and services) and **informational support** (advice, guidance, suggestions that provide a person with information that can help him solve problems).

Friends

A second large group that is represented in refugees' social networks is friends. The people that refugees indicate as friends mostly live in Antwerp (with a few exceptions of friends living in their country of origin, other neighbouring countries or other European countries). Remarkably, when doing the social network model exercise together with the participants, some refugees place very little people indicated as friends in the model. However, when talking about their lives in Belgium later on, some of those refugees do appear to have a lot of people surrounding them with whom they regularly spend time and for example do recreational or leisure activities. When hearing those refugees talk about their social life in Belgium, one would at first hand assume that this person has quite a large social network with lots of friends and social interaction, while a glance at their social network model would suggest the opposite. This might be (partly) explained by an issue that was brought up a couple of times during observations and interviews, namely, that some refugees do not consider their friends living in Belgium to be very close friends, as one of the refugees explicitly says in the quote below:

"I: And your friends? R: I have many friends, but not so close. I: Not so close? R: yes many friends but no close friends."

The reason as to why many refugees do not consider their friends to be close friends might have to do with the fact that they have only spent two to three years in Belgium. As said before and as illustrated in the quantitative analyses in Part 1, the friends that were included in participants' social network models usually live in Antwerp, indicating that participants don't have many friends (anymore) in their country of origin that play an important role in their lives at the moment. Refugees mostly met their friends through reception centres or school. As refugees have only been here for two to three years, they have only been able to build up friendship relations for a limited amount of time. One of the participants explains how he has friends to do recreational activities with, but he would not consider them to be close friends who play an important role in his life and therefore did not include them in his social network model:

"I: are there people with whom you like to do activities, to go outside, to the cinema or play soccer for example? R: With [name friend], with other people too, but I have not written them down here [in the social network model]. [...] R: many little friends. I: little friends? R: yes, they come here, or we go to the sea or play after school, but not like from back in the days. I: do you mean they are not your closest friends, best friends, but only a little bit? R: yes, my first friend, only this one. I: he is your best friend? R: yes, but he lives in Eritrea. He was my friend for ten or eleven years."

This participant has many 'little' friends – friends he does not feel closely connected to – to do activities with in his spare time, but he did not include those friends in his social network model. He

explains how he only has one best friend who he has known for ten or eleven years. The quote suggests that refugees generally do receive support from their friends (usually living in Antwerp) in the form of **social companionship** (spending time with others in recreational activities). However, these friends are often not considered to be very close or best friends and therefore not placed on the social network model.

For some refugees, the role friends play in their lives at the moment might be reinforced because of the lack of family present in Belgium or because they lost either one or both parents. One of the refugees refers to the fact that it is important to have friends in Belgium because he does not have a family, as he explains in the quote below:

"I: yes, and within your friends, are there a couple of friends that you think of as your best friends, that you feel really close too and that are important to you? R: Uhm yes, I see myself saying, I don't have family in Belgium and then I have to make friends because uhm, like a family. [...] R: I will always tell them everything, for example when I'm in trouble, when I'm sick, because I don't have a mother, no parents, nothing. I: uhu. R: I have my friends that help me because I am alone in Belgium. I: uhu. R: and then I think to myself, I have to make friends with others, yes, we have to have friends."

This participant argues that it is important for him to make friends in Belgium so that he can rely on them in case something happens and he needs assistance or support that he would otherwise receive from his parents. As the above quote already slightly indicates, refugees do not only rely on their friends for social companionship, but for **instrumental support** as well. In the following quote, one of the participants for example says that he and his friends help each other out financially: *"R: Or for example, sometimes you need 10, 20 or 30 euros, for us, not a problem, I give him. Next month he gives it back to me."*

Besides instrumental support, some refugees also rely on friends for **informational support**. One of the participants for example has had a positive outcome in his family reunification procedure and relied on friends for advice and help on what he should do next, as he explains in the quote below:

"R: it is a bit difficult if my family comes here, but a bit easy because I have a lot of friends their family comes here. I have a lot of contact with them too and I have learned a lot, what do I have to do when my family comes here. I: ah, you learned a lot from your friends? R: yes, they talk to, a lot to me: you have to do this, you have to look for an apartment, you will have to wait two months, the Public Centre for Social Welfare will only send money to your family after they wait for two months because I have to make identity card for my family. I: and are those your friends from school who help you with this? R: yes."

This participant's friends, also (former) unaccompanied minors, have already gone through a family reunification process and are therefore a source of informational support. Finally, a couple of refugees have girlfriends, living in Antwerp or other Belgian cities, that were also placed on their social network model and that also provide social support to them.

Others: caregivers/teachers/legal guardians

Another category of people that were to a lesser extent placed in refugees' social network models could be broadly labelled as caregivers. This category includes: teachers, legal guardians, voluntary godmother, social workers (mostly from the social welfare agency). This third category of people generally provides refugees with instrumental and informational support, particularly social workers (an analysis of the relationship between the social workers of CURANT and the refugees will be discussed more in depth in the section 'Perception about the role of CURANT's professional caregivers'). Some refugees are still in contact with their legal guardian, of which a few feel a deeper connection than purely the providers of practical help. Several refugees placed (former) teachers in their social network model. As illustrated in the quote below, teachers sometimes go beyond their purely educational role, and in doing so, take up a special position in the lives of these young refugees:

"I: and why are those two teachers so important in your life? R: Yes [name teacher] she lives close to my home and sometimes she comes here. She helped me in school last year. Yes, she does many things for me. Sometimes she gives me, she cooks and she gives it to me. Yes, [name other teacher] he always gives advice to us. Yes, to me surely, he really. R: what kind of advice does he give you? R: about life, about lots of different things. He is really smart."

This participant clearly feels supported by both teachers, as they take up a more caring function in this youngster's life, providing him with different types of social support.

Only a few refugees placed their buddy in the third circle of their social network model. An analysis of the type of relation and interaction between refugees and their buddies can be found further on in the section 'Cohousing and social interaction'. In general, refugees seem to mostly rely on their buddy for instrumental and informational support. Generally, there are not many Belgians included in the social networks of the participants. The Belgians that are included belong to the third category and are thus mostly caregivers (professional or volunteers), such as social workers, teachers, legal guardians, and as said before, in a couple of cases, the buddies. In the next section we will discuss some findings regarding the participants' perspectives about contact with Belgians.

Contact with Belgians

The quantitative analyses indeed showed that refugees, similar to the buddies, tend to befriend people with a similar background. A couple of refugees have expressed their desire to have more

contact with Belgians. One of the project's objectives is to broaden and ethnically diversify the refugees' social networks, particularly in the sense that CURANT is expected to contribute to making these networks include more Dutch-speaking locals²². The project partners expect that this would enhance refugees' bridging capital²³ and in turn facilitate their integration in Belgium. However, many participants find it difficult to make contact with Belgians due to their limited knowledge of Dutch. When refugees talk about the difficulties they encounter in making contact with Belgians, they generally mean native Belgians without a migrant background. Some refugees stated that Belgians talk very fast to them and that they are unable to understand them. Therefore, lacking Dutch language skills poses a barrier in making contact. In addition, various youngsters said that Belgians are more closed compared to people in their country of origin. The combination of refugees' limited knowledge of Dutch and the sense of Belgians being more turned to themselves and not that open, makes interaction and becoming friends with Belgians difficult for some refugees, as illustrated in the quote below:

[Name refugee] says: "Belgian people are really difficult." He starts talking about how people in Iraq always help foreigners. If a foreigner comes to Iraq, Iraqi people will invite this person into their homes and will do everything to help him. [Name refugee] says that this is not at all the case in Belgium. He continues by telling that language is a big problem for him as well. He does not always understand what his fellow students say in class because they talk so fast. Often he just nods his head without understanding what they are really saying to him. He says that, sometimes when he is walking outside with [name friend], he sees groups of people, Belgians, sitting together and talking to each other. Then he says to his friend: "how are we ever going to be like them?" He tells me: "I always feel like outside, that's why I don't want to stay here." (fieldnotes, 20/12/2017)

The difficulty of getting in contact with Belgians due to the fact that he cannot always understand what people are saying and what he perceives as cultural differences makes this refugee feel excluded. Another element that might contribute to the difficulty of making contact with Belgians is experiences of discrimination. Several respondents talked about incidents in which they felt discriminated by Belgians including: by other students in school, when trying to buy a train ticket in the station, when looking for an apartment or when being falsely accused of stealing in a clothing shop. Another important element here is how refugees think Belgians perceive them. A number of other participants talked about how they sense that some Belgians are scared of refugees and therefore avoid contact with them, such as the youngster in the quote below:

²² When the project partners state they aim to ethnically broaden refugees' social networks including Dutch-speaking locals, they refer to native Belgians as well as Belgians with a migrant background.

²³ When constructing social networks during resettlement processes, refugees may build ties with individuals from the same ethnic group leading to the development of so called bonding social capital. Bridging social capital on the other hand involves ties between individuals from a different ethnic group (Putnam, 2007).

“I: what’s it like for you to make contact with Belgians? R: It’s a bit difficult. Because Flemish people are scared of refugees. I: Yes? R: yes, he doesn’t talk to refugees. Sometimes not scared, sometimes social. I: and how do you notice they are scared? R: I don’t know. I: do you feel it? R: I think that they are scared.”

This quote suggests that, for some participants, the feeling that (some) Belgians are scared of refugees poses an extra barrier to make contact. While several participants talked about difficulties in getting in contact with Belgians, other said that they have no problems in interacting with Belgians and find it easy. Two of the refugees for example play soccer and are the only non-Belgians of the team. They feel very positive about the contact they have with their team players. Still, language remains a barrier them as they have also indicated that it is often difficult to understand them.

After analysing refugees’ existing social networks upon entering CURANT, we can conclude that their networks are homogenous (regarding ethnicity, mother tongue language, etc.). Generally, first degree family members are perceived as the most important people in refugees’ lives followed by second degree family members, friends and to a lesser extent other caregivers (e.g., teachers, social workers, etc.). Refugees seem to have a rather limited social network when it comes to emotional support. While first degree family members are listed as the most important people in their networks, refugees do not seem to rely on them for support when they encounter emotional difficulties and have a hard time. Generally, participants do have quite a broad and strong network for other types of social support. Second degree family members and friends are important for social companionship, instrumental support and informational support. The last two types of support are also provided by other caregivers in refugees’ social networks. While this is not the case for all of the participating refugees, our data shows that many refugees do have quite extensive social networks upon entering CURANT that provide them with different types of social support.

After zooming in on the social networks of the participating refugees, we will now continue with a section on refugees’ aspirations and expectations for the future. First, refugees’ general aspirations and their aspirations regarding family will be discussed. Then, we will illustrate how there are certain inconsistencies detectable in the aspirations that the CURANT project (partners) have for refugees’ future and the aspirations of the refugees themselves.

Aspirations and expectations for the future

a) Aspirations

An important project objective in CURANT is to influence the participating refugees' aspirations in order to make their aspirations more clear, realistic and suitable for their new life in Belgium (this is discussed more broadly further on). Therefore, an important element to understand in this early stage of our evaluation study, is what refugees' aspirations look like upon entering CURANT.

General aspirations

A number of youngsters have highlighted that there was no space to think about the future and reflect upon future aspirations when they were living in their country of origin. All of the participants come from countries that are severely affected by on-going war, protracted conflicts, heavily controlling governments, etc. Various participants indicate that they did not really reflect upon future aspirations in terms of education or work in their home country due to the fact that they had far more pressing and existential worries on their mind, as the quote below by one of the participating refugees illustrates:

“R: honestly, you can't do anything. [...] Don't talk about the government. Just looking into your future, it's not like that. [...] That's not important in my country. Here, yes, it is important. But in my country it's normal to not think about your future like 'when am I going to work?' You will just think: 'when am I going to die?'”

This quote demonstrates that many of these young refugees have never had the luxury to be able to reflect upon future aspirations in their country of origin because their mind was heavily preoccupied with day-to-day survival strategies and existential worries about safety. It is important to note however, that worries about safety do not necessarily end now that these youngsters have been granted refugee status or subsidiary protection, live in Belgium and participate in CURANT. Fears about the safety of family members at home still continue and other worries arise (e.g., uncertainties about the status and outcome of the family reunification process), preoccupying the minds of many of the participating refugees.

When asked what they want their lives to look like in five years, the majority of the participants mentions more general aspirations including: having an educational degree, a job, a house, a nice car and sometimes a wife and/or family. Many of the refugees seem to believe that their life only “truly” starts once they begin earning money, are able to rent their own house, to buy a nice car and later on, to have a wife or a family. From this general perspective the future aspirations of all participating refugees, who have very distinctive backgrounds, are quite similar.

When asked what they like about life in Belgium, many participants first mention the fact that they can go to school in Belgium. Many refugees indicate that schooling is of great importance. The importance of working is also highly stressed by the majority of the participants, as the quote below illustrates:

“To get a house or a car, you have to work hard. Do you understand? If you don’t have hard work, then, then, ... then nothing will come. For sure, you have to work, work, work, hard, yes.”

This quote shows how a lot of focus is being put on work. When talking about aspirations, education and work (earning money) are generally the main themes brought up by the participants.

Most of the youngsters want to stay in Belgium for the long term. Some of the participants do indicate that they would like to return to their country of origin if the circumstances would ameliorate extensively and they would be able to live there safely. Only two participants indicated that they would like to move elsewhere within Europe and one participant said he wants to move to Turkey where his family lives. Besides these more general aspirations, refugees also discussed aspirations concerning family.

Aspirations concerning family

Some of the participants have started the process of family reunification and thus aspire to be reunified with them in the near future. Others are not eligible anymore for family reunification due to their adult age or have families that are unable or do not wish to join them in Belgium. It is important to note here, that for the family reunification procedure, the family in the country of origin has to collect many different official documents from the Belgian embassy in the home country. Several of the participating refugees’ families still live in dangerous places in the country of origin and are not always able to reach the Belgian embassy due to safety hazards. Besides future aspirations to be reunified with family members, a number of participants talked about their aspiration to found their own family within the next five to ten years. For some refugees, the lack of a family close by or the loss of one or both parents, seems to reinforce the desire to start their own family:

He tells me with a lot of passion that he wants a good family later. He says that he will take very good care of his children. He says that he would give them everything and that he would do everything to ensure that they do not have to live the life he has had. [...] Shortly after telling me this, [name refugee] starts talking about how difficult it is not to have a family. He says: “only when they are gone or dead, you realize how important they are.” (fieldnotes, 18/10/2017)

This participant has lost both parents at an early age. During this conversation he focused a lot on his aspiration to find a “good girl” and start a family. This desire might be more strong for him because he does not want his children to experience what he has been through, growing up without a family.

While analysing refugees’ general aspirations for the future, it became clear that there seem to be inconsistencies between what CURANT and its project partners aspire for the participants’ future and what the refugees themselves aspire. These inconsistencies are explored in the next section.

Tensions between CURANT’s aspirations and refugees’ aspirations

The tensions between what the project partners desire for the participants’ future and the youngsters’ own aspirations was particularly noticeable when it comes to educational and work aspirations. Building on interviews conducted with all project partners, the first CURANT project report described the stakeholders’ aspirations for the future of the participating refugees (Mahieu & Ravn, 2017). From stakeholders’ perspectives, young refugees either lack aspirations or have unrealistic aspirations that are not suitable for their new life in Belgium. Therefore, an important project objective is to (re)shape refugees’ aspirations in order to increase their participation in the Belgian labour market and society, while taking into account their personal wishes and capacities and their disadvantaged position in that labour market. This objective is realized through personal guidance of the participating refugees and training sessions in which youngsters’ are oriented towards an appropriate future trajectory. Generally, CURANT focuses more on orienting participating refugees towards an appropriate education (mainstream education or shortened trajectories outside of regular education) and obtaining a diploma rather than on assisting them in finding a job as soon as possible.

During the interviews with the participating refugees, it became clear that this general emphasis on education rather than on working straight away is also felt by participants. For various youngsters, this does not coincide with their own aspirations, which can lead to frustration. A number of participants dislike the fact that it takes many years of studying before obtaining a degree in Belgium. Some participants explained that in their country of origin they can learn a vocational profession (such as auto mechanic, bakery, hairdresser, etc.) by actually starting to work and not studying these professions through vocational education programmes first for several years. Several refugees feel that their educational trajectories take too much time and they would like to work sooner, if not straight away.

An important element to take into account here is that all participating refugees are dependent on social welfare benefits from the project coordinator, the city’s Public Centre for Social Welfare. While the clients of this agency usually do not have an income (as they are dependent on welfare benefits), exceptions are made for those refugees that are enrolled in CURANT. If participants start

working over the course of their participation in CURANT, they are allowed to finish their trajectory within the project. While the focus on education was more strongly present in the beginning stage of the project, the project coordinator has adjusted the project so that participants are able to work while remaining in the project as they have also noticed that many refugees wish to work sooner. In addition, more attention has been given to orienting refugees towards shorter educational trajectories outside of mainstream education that aim at a faster participation in the labour market as well as trajectories in which students combine part time learning with working. Notwithstanding, when subscribing for CURANT one of the admission criteria is that candidate participants do not have the intention to start working straight away. While the project partners do try to take refugees' desire to work soon into account (e.g., by orienting them towards short term educational trajectories focused on work), there is still a general tendency of orienting refugees towards education rather than working straight away. There are a number of reasons as to why this focus on education conflicts with the aspirations of some refugees to work sooner.

First, age plays an important role. Several participants have argued that they will be too old when they graduate. As mentioned before, it seems as if many youngsters believe their life will only 'really start' when they begin working and earning money. For many refugees, having a job is considered the first step of their general life plan of getting a house, a car and later on a wife and/or family. Here, it is important to note that in Flanders, when under the age of 18 refugees (as well as other non-Dutch speaking newcomers) are required to follow minimum one year of reception education that focuses on language acquisition before they can enter mainstream secondary education. In addition, some refugees have had limited years of schooling in their home country and/or have lost several years of schooling because of their flight from their home country to Belgium. As a result, when exiting reception education and entering mainstream education these refugees are usually much older (and often older than 18 years old) than their peers in mainstream education. Because of their older age, studying for multiple years first is not something that many of the participants aspire, as illustrated in the quote below. At the time of the conversation, this refugee was not enrolled in any education and encountered difficulties in figuring out what to study or what to do in his life.

[Name refugee] is thinking about studying car mechanics. But he says that this education would take him five years and that is something he's not up for. He says he would be 24 when he graduates. By then he would like to be working already and have a car. He doesn't like the fact that he would only be able to earn money in five years. He would be up for an education that would take one year. However, [name refugee] is convinced of the fact that he wants to obtain a degree first and not start working straight away. (fieldnotes, 03/11/2017)

This extract shows how for many refugees, it is not evident or common to study for several years and only start working around their mid-twenties.

A second reason as to why some refugees dislike the idea of studying several years before starting a job is that they do not want to stay dependent from the Public Centre for Social Welfare for several more years. Third, family is an explanatory factor. First of all, some of the participating refugees have stated that they want to work so that they can send money to their families in their country of origin. Several participants have mentioned that it is hard for them to make ends meet with the social welfare benefits they receive, let alone to save up money at the end of the month to remit to their families back home. In addition, family values and expectations and the role some of these refugees play in their family, can have an impact too, as illustrated in the following extract:

[Name refugee] tells me that people in his country take care for their parents when they're old. He says that his two sisters will marry later, so the task of caring for their parents will be on his shoulders. He says: "what if my mother needs help in three years, and I'm still studying in Belgium then, I will not have saved any money." (fieldnotes, 20/12/2017)

The quote shows how besides sending remittances, some of the refugees feel responsible for other family-related tasks too. This participant wants to "start his life" and earn money soon, so that he will be able to assist his parents later, when they are older and might need care and help. It is important to note that the project partners are aware of these sometimes contrasting aspirations and (most) of the underlying reasons. Some of these issues, such as the mandate of some refugees to send money home to their family, were anticipated upon before the project started and mentioned as having a possible influence on the outcomes of some of the project's interventions. Notwithstanding, the differences and tensions between what the project aspires for the refugees' future and the aspirations of the youngsters themselves (regarding this education-work issue) causes frustrations for a number of participating refugees.

Of course, not all refugees share this view and feel the same way about it. There are other voices too, stating that they do want to go to school first so that they will have a 'better' job later, as illustrated in the following quote of one of the participants:

"I: do you like to go to school? R: definitely. I: why do you like to go to school? R: to have a better future, better life. If I start working now, yes, I will like the fact that I will get money. If, uhm, I get older, I will not like it anymore, I will get tired. And yes, if I study now, then I will work as well, but better work. Nicer and easier work."

This participant does not seem to have a problem with studying for several years first as he believes it will benefit him on the long run. He would like to earn money sooner, but he claims that studying first will enable him to find a better job later. This view seems to be more of an exception than the rule in refugees' perceptions. It might be important to take into account that this particular refugee

had had seven years of schooling in Syria and that his family was at the time in a relatively stable situation, living in Turkey and waiting for the family reunification procedure to come over to Belgium. Such background characteristics influence refugees' aspirations and whether or not they feel pressured or frustrated because they feel they have to, or are, studying before working.

There seem to exist some inconsistencies in participants' narratives on this subject. On the one hand, as explained above, a significant number of respondents dislike the fact that it will take them a long time to finish education because they would like to work sooner for various reasons. On the other hand, when asked what they like about their life in Belgium for example, the first thing that many respondents highlight is that they can go to school in Belgium (and find a good job after obtaining a diploma). Refugees often link education to "building a better future" in Belgium. Here, an inconsistency is noticeable between refugees' dislike for the fact that they have to study several years before being able to work while at the same time listing education and schooling as one of the positive elements of life in Belgium. As mentioned before, many refugees stress the importance of education. This importance given to education is probably very genuine for most of the refugees and the preference to work sooner is then linked to the above mentioned issues that are mostly linked to their particular situation (e.g., the mandate to send remittances, other family-related tasks, wanting to become independent from the Public Centre for Social Welfare, age).

With regard to this, there might be another factor that could possibly have an influence on some of the refugees' perceptions on this subject. However, this is just a hypothesis or another element that might be relevant to consider in this regard. It could be interesting to explore to what extent refugees reproduce certain discourse and to what extent social desirability (whether consciously or unconsciously) plays a role here. In other words, to examine to what extent refugees say what they think is expected of them to say or to aspire (by the project partners, buddies and/or the wider Belgian society) for their future (e.g., stressing the importance of education and of learning Dutch), while this may not always truly reflect how they really feel or think. It might be possible that refugees, and maybe particularly these refugees that have been selected to participate in an "integration" project such as CURANT, feel pressured to conform to certain expectations and norms and therefore reproduce a more generally accepted discourse even though it does not fully reflect their own visions or aspirations.

We can conclude that refugees' future aspirations are linked with their particular situation as young adult unaccompanied refugees (e.g., their older age when entering mainstream secondary education, responsibilities towards family back home, etc.). While refugees stress the importance of schooling, many of them would like to work sooner if not straight away. This sometimes clashes with the project's aspirations for refugees' future, as the partners generally orient refugees more towards education rather than directly to work. Over the course of the project so far, some adaptations have been made in order to respond more to refugees' aspiration to work. The project

partners are increasingly taking these dynamics into account by focussing more on orienting refugees to short educational trajectories outside of mainstream education as well as employment within the Public Centre for Social Welfare itself.

After discussing refugees' aspirations for their future, the next section will focus on refugees' expectations for, and first experiences in, CURANT. First, we will discuss refugees' motivational reasons to enter the project, which also reflects their aspirations about how their participation might benefit them. Second, refugees' perceptions about the role of CURANT's professional caregivers, with a focus on the social workers, is examined. A third section focuses on refugees' perceptions regarding the trainings and activities that CURANT organizes for the participating refugees.

b) Expectations for, and first experiences in, CURANT

Most refugees found out about, and were referred to, CURANT through social workers from the Public Centre of Social Welfare, legal guardians, social workers from reception centres, schools or other organizations working with these youngsters. The procedure for candidate-refugees to participate in CURANT has been adapted and extended over the course of the project. Procedural changes of CURANT will be discussed in the second evaluation report. At the time of writing this report, the procedure goes as follows: after a background check of general eligibility criteria (e.g., age, criminal record, etc.), candidate-participants are screened by a social worker of the Public Centre for Social Welfare (the project coordinator) via an in-depth interview. At this interview, the person who has registered the refugee for enrolment in CURANT (e.g., a legal guardian, reception education teacher, etc.) is also present. If needed, an interpreter is provided. During this interview the project is explained to the refugee. Other criteria that are being addressed during screenings include motivations to participate and Dutch verbal proficiency. A second interview is held with one of the psychologists of the project team, and if needed an interpreter, in order to assess possible psychic vulnerabilities of the participant. Other topics addressed during these two interviews are the young refugee's social life, current housing situation, preferences with regard to a flatmate, and the refugee's qualities as a potential flat mate (e.g., clean vs. messy, often home vs. away most weekends). After the interviews, refugees are asked to attend a group session to discuss the cohousing aspect of CURANT. If at this stage, the candidate is considered suitable for the project, the information obtained during the interviews and the groups session is used to match the refugee with a suitable buddy at a later stage. Finally, refugees meet their matched buddy during a matching activity before moving in together.

Motivations to enter the project/aspirations about how the project will help them

The main motivations for the youngsters to participate in CURANT vary, but mainly include the following reasons. First, for various refugees, the fact that CURANT provides housing was an important, if not the most important, reason to enter the project. Several refugees mention that the

houses provided by CURANT are better than their previous living conditions and cheaper than other apartments on the private rental housing market. Some refugees had lived alone or were planning on living alone before entering CURANT and testify about the difficulties they encountered during the search for an apartment. Many of them were confronted with discrimination from landlords. Some refugees talked about how landlords refused to rent their apartment or studio out to them because they are social welfare recipients or because of their different cultural-ethnic background, their name or their different skin colour. Before CURANT, the majority of the participating refugees were first residing in large collective reception centres and later on in smaller scaled local reception facilities, called Local Reception Initiatives (Lokaal Opvang Initiatief – LOI). Many participants speak negatively about their experiences in the large collective centres. Negative aspects that were mentioned were: the fact that they had to reside in these centres together with sometimes up to 1.000 refugees, that they had to share a room with usually four or more people, that there was a lot of noise and that there were often tensions and fights between groups of different ethnic backgrounds.

The smaller scaled local reception centres are usually perceived as better than the large ones, but still many refugees did not like their stay there. Usually the youngsters each had their separate room and the kitchen was shared amongst a larger group of about 10 to 15 people. Some refugees did not like the living conditions in these smaller local reception initiatives either, as illustrated in the quote below:

“R: Yes, I had to cook there for myself [as opposed to the large centres where meals are provided], but yes, we were thirteen boys, in a big house. Each boy had his own room, but the kitchen was together. Yes, it was always dirty, really, not normal. I: Yes? R: they never clean. Yes, that’s why I never cook there.”

The fact that refugees had to share a house with that many people in these reception structures was perceived as difficult for some of them as this led to situations such as the one described above. Other reasons for refugees’ dislike of these centres include: the fact that some people stole their food from the kitchen or that it was too loud and too busy. Many of them seemed to long for a more quiet and calm place to live, which they aspire to find in CURANT.

Second, the cohousing aspect was a motivation to join the project for two reasons. Another very important incentive that was brought up by many refugees, is that they expect that their participation in CURANT will enhance their Dutch language proficiency. Several participants highlight that cohousing with Belgians is important since they are more forced to practice their Dutch language skills, as the quote below illustrates:

"I: how do you think that the project CURANT will help you? R: there are, yes, uhm, living together with someone from Belgium, having a lot of contact with him, if he wants to help, he can help. If I want to help too, I can tell him. It's uhm, It's beautiful CURANT. I: Uhu, and do you think that's the most important thing, living together with someone from Belgium? And having contact with him? R: yes, we are Arabic. Yes it is good because I'm sitting with him [his roommate], or eating with him and I can only speak Dutch with him, not my mother tongue. Yes, if I speak everyday a little bit of Dutch with him, without Arabic, Dutch is good, is good."

This participant, like many others, expects that his Dutch language skills will improve through cohousing with someone (or several people) from Belgium and believes this is a big advantage of joining the project. This expectation is also very much present in the expectations and project objectives as formulated by the project partners. While refugees may sincerely state this as one of their main motivations to enter the project, a critical question one could ask oneself here, is to what extent they may be reproducing the project objectives as they were explained to them when introduced to the project. While the buddies usually find their way to CURANT on their own, refugees are always directed and introduced to CURANT through others (usually professional caregivers). As the quote below from one of the participants illustrates, some of the people who direct the refugees towards CURANT might stress these particular motivations for them to join the project strongly:

"I: And how did you end up in CURANT? R: Uhm... I: Has someone told you about CURANT or how did you get to know the project? R: through my legal guardian, he signed me up for CURANT. I: And did he explain to you what CURANT is then? R: Yes, he explained, you will live with someone from Belgium and you can speak a lot of Dutch, it's good for your Dutch language skills, then you can improve your Dutch."

As this quote illustrates, the person who signed this youngster up for CURANT really emphasized how CURANT will improve his Dutch language skills. So while refugees' testimonies about why they entered CURANT might truly reflect their expectations and motivations, it is also possible that, in some cases, refugees have rather taken over discourse of the people who signed them up for the project or the project partners themselves.

Another advantage of cohousing that was brought up by some of the participants that had lived alone before CURANT and that served as a motivation to enter the project is that refugees' participation would allow them to live together with other people, and not alone. These participants talked about how difficult they found it to live alone, as illustrated in the quote below:

"R: alone is not good. [...] I: what do you find difficult about living alone? R: someone alone, he thinks about everything. [...] R: yes, when I am alone, more stress. Here [in the house provided

by CURANT] good, I talk to people. Do you know [name refugee, one of his roommates]? I: Yes I know [name refugee]. R: He sits sometimes here to watch television. Do a little bit of activities.”

The quote of this participant suggests that the social contact generated through cohousing is a positive aspect of CURANT that is important to him. Living alone is perceived as not good for this refugee, because then his mind starts to worry. Contact with others reduces stress for him. A number of participants said that it is better for them to have lots of social interaction instead of remaining on their own and spending a lot of time alone. Therefore, the idea of living together with one or more roommate(s) was a motivation for them to enter the project. Some refugees mentioned how they had a lot of social interaction and many friends when they lived with their families in their country of origin and how this is a hard contrast with the situation of being new in Belgium and living alone.

After discussing refugees’ motivations to enter the project, the next section will cover participants’ perceptions about the role of CURANT’s professional caregivers.

Perceptions about the role of CURANT’s professional caregivers

Participating refugees are generally in contact with several professional caregivers of the different partners of the CURANT project: a psychologist, youth workers, a social worker and an intercultural mediator. The intercultural mediator was employed after a few months in the project’s implementation. Because he has a migration background himself, he is expected to connect more easily with the refugees. The mediator pays house visits and is supposed to serve as a sort of independent trustworthy point of contact for both refugees and buddies. When certain issues arise in some of the relationships between buddies and refugees, he is the one that will first try to mediate discussions between the two parties.

During the interviews with the researcher, refugees mostly discussed their relationship with their social worker, which will be the focus of this section. In the project design of CURANT, the role of the social workers (working for the city’s Public Centre for Social Welfare, the project coordinator of CURANT) was defined as ‘case managers’. The social workers are supposed to coordinate refugees’ participation in various intervention actions of the project (e.g. training sessions, activities in partner organizations, therapy, etc.), as this ‘trajectory’ should be tailored to the needs of each refugee. During case meetings, all caregivers of a particular youngster meet up and decide upon a common, integrated strategy to help this refugee. In CURANT, social workers pay house visits to their clients every week or every two weeks, depending on the amount of visits they feel is necessary. The research with the refugees showed that the individual relationship and the contact between the social worker and his or her client, the refugee, seems to be primarily focused on practical and administrative matters. Social workers are perceived as sources of support and assistance by refugees. Refugees rely on social workers’ help for issues with their house,

administrative matters in school, finding a student job, subscribing for hobbies, payments, etc. This reality seems to coincide with refugees' expectations about the kind of help they would receive from a social worker, which is probably also based on their previous experiences with social workers, before entering CURANT.

While participants rely on, and sometimes express appreciation for, the support of the social workers and the social welfare benefits they receive from the Public Centre for Social Welfare, for many, their relationship with this institution and its social workers is ambiguous. As mentioned before, several participants have indicated that they dislike the fact that they are dependent on the Public Centre for Social Welfare (and the social workers). This dependent relationship and the power imbalance that comes with it is felt by (some) participants. In the following quote, one of the participants testifies about a situation in which this dependency manifested itself. This particular participant went to visit a house in which he would possibly move in with one other refugee and two buddies. He did not like the house because the two rooms for the refugees were a lot smaller than the rooms that were reserved for the buddies. In addition, the refugee preferred to cohabite with one other roommate rather than with three roommates.²⁴ When he communicated this to his social worker, he felt that she reacted disrespectfully towards him:

“R: I told them, I don’t have a problem with the buddy, or with you, but the room is really not good. There was only one bed, I can’t do anything there. If I want to study, I have to do it on the bed. And also read and writing. There was nothing. And then I said: no, I don’t like it, it is really too small. [...] R: I also told her I don’t want to live with four people together. [...] R: and yes, then she told me; you cannot choose, you receive money from the Public Centre for Social Welfare and then you cannot choose that. Your buddy (...) she pays herself, and you cannot do anything about that. If you want to come to CURANT, welcome, but if you don’t want, yes, we’re not going to search a house for you. I said Ok, no problem, I will look for a house. No problem. But that’s really no respect. I was already waiting for four months to enter the project, and then that. I had to wait for three more months.”

This quote exemplifies how refugees are sometimes confronted with their dependent position from the welfare agency and its social workers. Some refugees have expressed how they feel deprived of a certain sense of freedom because of their dependency of the welfare agency and their participation in CURANT. This is illustrated in the extract of a conversation with one of the participants that wanted to visit his family for two months during summer break from school but encountered difficulties when telling this to his social worker:

²⁴ Refugees can express their cohousing preferences (in an apartment with their buddy or in shared houses with other duos) to the project coordinator upon entering the project. They are allowed to refuse a residence one time if they feel the house/apartment is not suitable for them. When they refuse a residence, they are put on the waiting list for other houses.

This summer, [name refugee] wants to go back to Turkey to visit his family. He says his social worker told him he cannot do that. He says: "it's my holiday, it's my life, why can't I go visit my family?" I can notice how he gets agitated when talking to me about this. He says that his social worker told him he has to do a student job for one month during summer break and that she would withdraw his welfare benefits for one month if he would refuse to do so. [Name refugee] says: "I don't care if they take my money." (fieldnotes, 20/12/2017)

The fact that these refugees are dependent of the social welfare agency impacts their lives in different ways. In the example above, the agency's influence is quite drastic as it determines whether or not this refugee will be able to see his family²⁵. The agency might also influence refugees' lives by playing more of a monitoring or controlling role, for instance when it comes to their schooling, as one of the refugees explains in the quote below:

"R: for example, I have to study, if I, yes, study, I have to show my grades to her [his social worker], I have to have good grades, to do the exams. I: and how do you feel about that? That you have to do that in return? R: yes, sure. Nobody gives money to someone else without anything. I: so do you think it's normal? R: Yes, they don't receive a lot from me, I thank them, just like that, yes. They, they take care of my future they tell me, yes, you have to have a good future, and then we want to receive that, that you have a good future. Yes, it's really okay, it's normal, It's not that they gave you money and then ask you to come work for them, to clean or something, no."

In this example, the welfare agency has more of a monitoring/controlling role as the refugee has to show his school grades to his social worker. However, in this case, the role of the welfare agency is perceived as positive. This participant does not necessarily perceive his dependency on the agency as negative because he feels they want him to have a good future. It might be important to note however, that in spite of this positive perception the participant left the project earlier than expected, and stated during a conversation a few months later, after he had exited the project, that he also wanted to become independent of the welfare agency.

Refugees' perceptions regarding the social workers of the Public Centre for Social Welfare is ambiguous. Youngsters rely on the (instrumental and informational) support provided by their social workers and on the welfare benefits they receive from the agency. However, at the same time some of them are very aware of their dependent relationship with this institution and its social

²⁵ It is not the case that this refugees' social assistant or CURANT do not want him to visit his family in Turkey, even though this is how the refugee might experience it. There is federal law saying that all students that receive welfare benefits from any welfare agency in Belgium have to do a student job for one month.

workers and sometimes experience frustration when they feel restricted in their freedom because of this dependency.

Perceptions about CURANT's activities and trainings

The project partners of CURANT organize different types of activities and trainings to guide and support the participating refugees on a number of domains such as education, cohousing, cooking, cleaning, gardening, getting a driver license, etc. These activities are organized to achieve the project's objectives and ultimately empower refugees so that they can live independently and work on their future in Belgium. The activities can consist of short workshops of one to two hours, but there is also a training focused on orienting refugees towards appropriate education and work which lasts for one week and takes place during school holidays. While the workshops are mostly organized for the refugees, buddies are also invited to some of them. However, often only very few or no buddies show up. Certain activities (such as the one week training) are obligatory for the refugees. In general, refugees are stimulated to partake in the project's activities. During intake interviews with candidate-participants it is also stressed that the project expects the refugees to participate in these activities as they are part of CURANT. The project also organizes a number of community events in which refugees, buddies and sometimes also the project partners participate. There was for instance a 'CURANT party' that celebrated the first year existence of the project and a sports team day. The project partners also try to stimulate the creation of a bottom up 'CURANT community'. They created for example a Facebook group where participants can chat. More recently, the buddies also started with 'CURANT café', an initiative in which the buddies and refugees are invited to gather at one of the participants houses.

As stated before, when the interviews with the participants were conducted, the refugees had only been in the project for 1 – 2 months. Therefore, several youngsters had not participated in that many activities yet. Interviews with participants and observations during activities show how youngsters have varying perspectives about, and attitudes towards, the activities. Some refugees were enthusiastic and had no problem in participating in all tasks that were asked of them during activities and trainings. Others clearly showed resistance and were reluctant to participate in everything. In a number of cases, it was apparent that some refugees perceived the approach in some of the trainings and activities of CURANT as too 'childish'. One of the participants for example criticizes the approach that was used during a 'matching activity' organized by CURANT in which the matched refugees and buddies meet each other for the first time and do an activity together. He explains how the refugees were given pictures and were instructed to find the matching picture that was given to the buddy with whom they were matched to cohabitate. He was given a picture of a cat and was approached by his buddy who was holding a picture of a dog. This particular refugee found this method to be childish, as he says in this quote: *"R: it was really, I don't know, for little children. [...] I: you thought it was too childish? R: yes, and my buddy too. We we're looking at each*

other like 'what the fuck is this'. Then we talked for a bit and made something together to put in our house."

In other activities as well, it was clear that some participants did not appreciate certain methods in which learning was stimulated through playing. Next to discontent with the more 'playful' learning methods applied in some trainings, a number of refugees perceived some activities as being useless and a waste of time for them. One of the refugees for example participated in an obligatory 10-day training focused on orientation towards education and work. But this particular refugee already had a very clear future perspective concerning what he wanted to study and the kind of work he wanted to do later. Therefore, he perceived the training as not being relevant for him. Another refugee criticized the integration course that every newcomer in Belgium has to follow as he claims he, and according to him more than 50% of the participants, already know everything that is being taught in these courses. As stated before, it is important to note that refugees' perspectives concerning the CURANT activities differ a lot and that many of the refugees had no complaints and found the activities fun and/or useful. Some activities were well appreciated by its participants, such as Mindspring, a psycho-educative course for Afghans, given in their native language. This also indicates the importance of offering activities in the youngsters' native languages and considering these languages as skills that can be used in the refugees' trajectories in CURANT.

One recurring frustration amongst the participating refugees is how time consuming the project feels for them. Many refugees point this out as a negative aspect of CURANT. Participants criticize the fact that they have to attend many appointments with different people from the distinct partner organizations of CURANT (e.g., social worker, psychologist, youth worker, etc.) as well as people from organizations outside of CURANT. The fact that participants are obliged to follow training courses of multiple days during their school holidays is not appreciated by many of them, as illustrated in the fieldnote extract below:

[Name refugee] tells me that he has so many worries on his mind here. He says that the people of CURANT call him almost every day for activities. [...] I ask him whether he thinks CURANT has helped him yet. He says: "CURANT not always good." He starts talking about how they always call him about activities they organize and how they tell him he has to come. He says he doesn't want to go and that he doesn't have the time [Note: at this time, this participant was enrolled in a full time education in another city and had to commute every day]. He says: "if I tell them I don't want to go, they have to respect me." (fieldnotes, 20/12/2017)

This quote shows how the amount of activities and the fact that they are (sometimes) obligatory is frustrating for this particular refugee. He feels that CURANT should respect his decision if he does not want to participate in the activities.

The project partners are well aware of the fact that the programme is too overburdening for some participants. Over the course of the project so far, the partner have made changes to deal with this issue. During the first year of the project, evolutions were noticeable. The project partners have put more focus on tailored and flexible trajectories for refugees. They also started organizing workshops that were more bottom-up inspired and handled subjects that were brought up by the refugees themselves. Some trainings were shortened and put in a different format in an attempt to align them more to refugees' wishes and preferences. Evolutions that were made will be discussed in the second evaluation report.

The refugees that participate in CURANT are a very diverse group concerning years of schooling, family situations (safety, mandate to send remittances), refugees' future aspirations, social networks, their current day time activities, etc. All of these factors might have an impact on refugees' perspectives towards the obligations they have within CURANT. In this stage of the research, it is too soon to identify for what types of individuals the activities and obligations of CURANT are perceived as helpful and beneficial and for what types of youngsters they are perceived as less relevant and/or too overburdening. It is clear however, that for a significant amount of refugees, the obligations they feel in CURANT are perceived as too much.

Another important intervention of CURANT besides the trainings and activities that are organized for them is the cohousing aspect. The next section will discuss refugees' first experiences with cohousing in CURANT and their relationship with their buddies.

Cohousing & the relationship with the buddies

As mentioned before, when the interviews were conducted, refugees and buddies had only been living together for generally one to two months. This is a short period of time to reflect upon how the cohousing is going and the type of relationship and interaction that exists between refugees and their buddies. The following section is thus based on refugees' narratives about their first experiences in cohousing with their buddy. We will first discuss perceptions about housing and living arrangements. Second, we will discuss refugees' relationship and type of interaction with the buddies. Third, we will explore to what extent refugees experience inequalities in their position in relation to the participating buddies.

Housing/living arrangements

As mentioned already, the refugees and their matched buddies live in different cohousing arrangements. There are six houses where two pairs live together, so four people that are cohabiting together. There is one large house, which is kind of a 'student house', where six pairs live together. The rest of the pairs live in two-bedroom apartments. During this stage of the research, it is not yet possible to determine the influence of the different living arrangements (per four, six or

two) on the social dynamics in the house, the relationship with the buddies (and other flatmates) or the refugees' trajectory in the project. During intake conversations, refugees were asked whether they prefer to live in a house with multiple people or in a two-bedroom apartment with only their buddy. The majority of the refugees prefer to live in a two-bedroom apartment. Many refugees stress the fact that they want to live in a 'calm' place. Some refugees have referred to the fact that living in a house with multiple people reminds them too much of their living situation in reception centres.

In CURANT, there are duos of different gender living together. As mentioned in the quantitative analyses, all refugees that are currently participating in the project are male. The gender division for the buddies is close to 50% - 50%. Mixed gendered duos are mostly living in houses shared with another duo, but there are also mixed gender duos that are living together in a two-bedroom apartment. During intake conversations prior to participating in CURANT, refugees are asked whether they prefer to live with a male or female. A large majority of the refugees indicated not having a preference for a male or female flatmate. While at first sight, in general (except for two cases), it might seem as if the gender aspect does not appear to have a major impact or pose a problem, even though participants do not really discuss it, chances are that for some it is not evident to live with a female buddy. This can be due to a variety of reasons. The following quote of one of the participants living with a female buddy in a two-bedroom apartment illustrates how religion might for example play a role here:

He says that according to his religion, it is forbidden to live together with a woman when you're not married to her. He says that they discussed it in the beginning of CURANT and that they asked him what he thinks about living together with a girl as a Muslim. It is obvious that it was not so evident for [name refugee] to decide whether he would be willing to live with a girl. He decided to do it because the house has two bathrooms. He told me that if they had to share a bathroom, he would not have gone through with it. [Name refugee] tells me that his aunt (who is living in Antwerp) finds it weird that he is living together with a girl. He says she calls him often to ask what he's doing. By the way he tells me this, I have the feeling that he perceives this as he aunt controlling him or keeping an eye on him. (fieldnotes, 08/11/2017)

The narrative of this refugee suggests that from his frame of reference it is not so evident to live together with a woman who he is not married to, due to his religious beliefs. During group sessions prior to moving in, the project partners do discuss with refugees what it means to live with a female roommate who is not your girlfriend or wife and what behaviour is acceptable and what not. By doing so, the project does to some extent take the gender aspect into consideration.

Closeness of relationship and amount and type of interaction

The closeness of the relationship and the type of interaction between refugees and their buddies differs a lot. There are of course numerous possible variables that might explain this variation between the duos (e.g., language proficiency of the refugees, personality of both flatmates, the type and layout of the house, working/school schedule of both flatmates, etc.). In some cases, flatmates seem to cohabit together without really 'living' together or having a lot of interaction, as exemplified by the following quotes of two different participants:

"I: do you have a lot of contact with [name buddy]? R: yes, yes. I: do you cook together or eat together? R: we together in kitchen, but separate. We cook at the same moment, but separate, because I don't eat meat from pig. I: ok, and are there other things you guys do together? R: nothing, yes, nothing, because he works, not always free like me."

At a certain point I ask [name refugee] about his flatmate [name buddy]. I ask whether they have a lot of contact and whether he thinks she's able to support or help him in any way. He says no. He says that they almost never talk. I ask why he thinks that is. He says that he himself works and she works as well. Therefore, they don't see each other often. He says: "but even if we talk, it's not like you and me are doing now, not like this." (fieldnotes, 19/10/2017)

These quotes suggest that these participants might not be having that close of a relationship or meaningful interaction and are just cohousing, but mostly living their own separate lives, as is often the case in other cohousing situations.

In the first phase of the evaluation study the project partners were asked about the intended and expected impact of cohousing with a local buddy on different aspects of refugees' lives (see Mahieu & Ravn, 2017). The stakeholders expected and aspired that cohousing and the interaction between refugees and buddies would have a significant impact on refugees' attitudes (future aspirations, sense of responsibility), skills (language, social cognitive skills, independency, etc.), feelings (sense of wellbeing, sense of inclusion) and social networks. Based on observations and conversations with refugees in this initial stage, it seems that the actual impact will rarely be that large as expected/aspired by the project partners as there are several 'households' in which flatmates seem to be living together, but separately, without having a strong connection or a lot of social interaction. However, there are also a couple of other testimonies from refugees that show different situations. In some houses, there seems to be a lot more interaction. When asked what he thinks about the cohousing, one of the participants (living in a house with two duos) answers as follows:

"R: I think it's great. I: Yes? R: Uhm... I: What is so great about it? R: living together with other people. I: Hmm. R: with another colour, different religion. I: Yes. R: I think it's really great. Those ladies [the two buddies he's living with] are always talking. Not always, but a lot. In the

evening, they are here. I am here. Then we are always talking. I: Yes. R: then we do things together or we clean the house together, or just watching television together. Yes, I think it's good."

This participant feels very good about the cohousing and the interaction he has with his flatmates, particularly the two buddies. In some households, flatmates do seem to interact a lot and have a closer relationship. This is also the case for a different refugee (also living in a house with two duos) who was invited by his buddy to have dinner at her parent's place with her family. As shown in the following quote, this was very meaningful for the refugee:

"I: and how was that for you to go to [name buddy]'s home and to meet her family? How did you feel about it? R: yes, good. I: Good? What was good about it? R: because uhm.. We sit together, I remember my family. I: do you mean it reminded you of your family? Is that what you mean? R: when I in Eritrea, we are a family, when I go there [to his buddy's home], I will remember for my family. I uhm.., I uhm.., It's like my family. I feel good."

As shown by the quote, the visit to his buddy's family reminded this participant of his own family, which gave him a good feeling. The fact that this buddy invites her flatmate to her home and family, suggests more of a close relationship between the two. However, this example is more of an exceptional situation. It is difficult to say what the average relationship looks like, but it seems there are many houses where flatmates do few activities together and sort of live together separately, having their own (social) lives. A small number of refugees have indicated that they have already learned things from their flatmate(s), such as the participant from the quote below, who lives in a large student house with five other matched duos:

"R: also, I can help people and I understand a lot of rules. I: you understand a lot of rules? R: yes, a lot of rules. I: how come? You understand them better now? R: Yes. I: yes? How come? R: I go to this person or this person [his flatmates]. He talks about Belgium, or about Somalia or about how to take the bus, about address. It's very... I understand. I: Yes, so you mean that they talk about stuff in Belgium and that makes you understand it better? R: yes, and I talk the same way to them."

This quote illustrates how the interaction between the flatmates in this house is informative and helpful for this particular participant. In many cases, refugees seem to rely on their buddies for help for administrative and practical matters such as translating letters that came with the post. One of the refugees (living in a house with two duos) indicated that he can already notice his Dutch language skills improving since he has been cohousing in CURANT, as illustrated in the quote below:

"I: Do you have the feeling that you're practicing your Dutch more now or not really? R: It's quite better than before, because before I lived alone. Now I live with people. Now I feel more confident to ask questions, for example, when we're watching TV together, then I will dare to ask what the programme is about, or what is the meaning of this word."

The quote shows how this participant feels more confident to speak Dutch now that he is cohousing and no longer living alone. The extent to which refugees are learning from their buddies and the cohousing experience is of course dependent on the closeness of the relationship between the flatmates and the amount and type of interaction between them.

How refugees describe their relationship in these first interviews might deviate a lot from how their real living situation and connection with their buddy evolves. This was at least apparent for the following case. When this particular refugee was talking about his buddy during the interview (at the time he had been living with his buddy for two months), he stated the following:

"R: he is like the sim card to my mobile phone, that's how important he is to me. I: Uhu. He's that important to you. And how come he is so important for you? R: because I don't know a lot about things in Belgium and then I ask something to him and then he tells me things."

This quote suggests quite a strong relationship between this refugee and his buddy. The refugee feels strongly about his buddy and how important he is to him, comparing him with 'a sim card to a mobile phone'. This quote probably reflects his first experiences in the interaction with his buddy, maybe in combination with aspirations about the kind of relationship he would like them to establish. However, in the next few months following the interview, information about this refugee's trajectory in CURANT, passed on to the researchers by the project partners, suggested rather the opposite. This participant was more and more absent from the house, staying and sleeping in other places. He isolated himself from the house and his CURANT flatmates and there was very little interaction between the refugee and his buddy. This participant's first experiences with, and/or aspirations about, the relationship with his buddy have thus changed remarkably since he first entered the project.

We can conclude that our first data suggests that the impact of cohousing on refugees' lives will in many cases be a lot smaller and different than originally expected and aspired by the project partners. Many flatmates seem to be living together without doing many activities together, having a lot of social interaction or having a close relationship with their buddy. However, buddies are important sources of support for refugees when it comes to practical or administrative matters. Cohousing with buddies is also well appreciated as it allows refugees to practice their Dutch language skills. Further research will examine how these cohousing situations and relationships between refugees and buddies evolve throughout their participation in the project.

Positioning of refugees and buddies in the project

During the interviews with all the project partners in the initial phase of the evaluation study (see also Mahieu & Ravn, 2017), the importance of having an egalitarian relationship between refugees and buddies was often stressed. The stakeholders felt that in relationships between refugees and professional caregivers, there is always a power imbalance. Therefore, they argued that it is important that the refugees and buddies are on equal terms. Notwithstanding, stakeholders also indicated that there probably will be a large gap between the buddy flatmate and the refugee in terms of their socio-economic status, their cultural frameworks and the size, composition and resources available in their respective social networks. Apart from these personal background characteristics mentioned by the stakeholders, the extent to which refugees would perceive themselves to be equal to their buddies also depends on how equally they feel the two groups are positioned and treated within CURANT. In this initial stage of our research with the refugees, this was generally not brought up by the participants themselves (except for one case that will be discussed next). However, because of refugees' dependent position in the project (welfare benefits, providence of housing, etc.) it is possible that they do not feel comfortable talking about these kinds of sensitive topics as they might fear jeopardizing their position in the project.

The issue of (in)equality between the two groups of participants did come up during an interview with a refugee who explained how he was shown a house where he would possibly live together with another refugee and two buddy flatmates (this case has already been brought up elsewhere in the report, but with regard to a different issue). The participant did not want to move into the house because the two bedrooms reserved for the refugees were a lot smaller than those of the buddies. This refugee felt this was not fair. Only one refugee directly referred to the fact that he feels that buddies and refugees are not treated equally in the project. This refugee represents a very exceptional case within the project as he had to exit the project earlier than foreseen because of an incident between him and his buddy flatmate. After the incident occurred, the project held several team meetings to discuss what the next steps should be. Conversations were held with the buddy and the refugee both together and separately. There were conversations with the refugee and the social workers as well as with the psychologist of the project team. After several conversations and careful consideration, the project team had made the decision that this particular refugee should be excluded from the project. The refugee was moved into a "crisis" residence where he was able to live up to almost one year after he left the project. The participant is still included in the qualitative study and is followed up by one of the researchers. Even months after he left the project, this refugee still feels very frustrated towards the project because he felt he was treated unequally in the incident, as illustrated in the fieldnote below:

He says that his buddy's side of the story about the incident is being taken seriously, but that they don't listen to his side. [...] He says that refugees and buddies are not treated equally in

the project. He tells me how he felt the same in his country of origin where there was a lot of inequality between Africans and Arabs and he feels it in CURANT too. He says that's one of the reasons why he didn't want to participate anymore in CURANT anyway [even before he was forced to leave the project]. (fieldnotes, 18/10/2017)

The extract shows how this refugee felt treated unequally because in his perception, the project partners only really listened to the buddy's side of the story and not his. He felt discriminated against and treated in an inferior way than the buddy, and compares this to the discrimination he experienced in his country of origin. The frustration this refugee has towards the project goes beyond the incident for which he had to leave CURANT. The following extract (from a visit about eight months after he exited the project) shows how this participant feels that the project reinforces the stereotype image of "the refugees":

[Name refugee] says that CURANT emphasizes the fact that they are 'the refugees' who are different and who have to adjust and who are in an inferior position. He says that CURANT highlights the fact that they are not in their own country. He says: "CURANT, they will show us that we are 'the refugees'. They will show you that you are the refugee and that you have to stay in your position."

He says: "they want us to take care of the buddies." I ask what he means by that or what makes him think that. He says: "we have to follow courses on how to clean our house and the buddies don't."²⁶ What the fuck? Do we have to clean for them?" He continues by telling that the buddies just come from their parents' house, from their mother's, and that CURANT is the first time they have lived alone²⁷. He tells me that his buddy was messy and did not clean. He feels indignant at the fact that only 'the refugees' have to follow a course on cleaning their house. (fieldnotes, 27/03/2018)

The perceptions and opinions of this specific participant are very pronounced and exceptionally critical compared to others. Given the particular circumstances and the refugee's negative ending with the project, his critiques should be put in perspective as the actual facts sometimes diverge from his perceptions. Nonetheless, even if an exceptional case, the issues he raises are worth reflecting on. In addition, the fact that this refugee left the project might give him more of a sense of freedom to be critical about the project on the contrary to the others involved in our qualitative study.

²⁶ As mentioned in a previous section, buddies are also invited to workshops about cohousing, cleaning, gardening, cooking, etc., however, usually, not many buddies show up for these activities.

²⁷ We should note here that the participant's idea that the buddies are living alone for the first time when entering CURANT is a reflection of his experience with his particular buddy. In reality, the majority of the buddies have in fact been living independently (mostly in other cohousing-settings) before joining CURANT

While the partners have designed and are implementing the project in such a way that is in their opinion in the best interest of the refugee, the whole project does emphasize the distinct categories of “the refugees” and “the (Belgian) buddies”. The “otherness” of the refugee, framed as vulnerable and in need of care, realistic aspirations, guidance, broader social networks, etc., is in that sense pointed out (again). As stated earlier, CURANT does try to involve the buddies more by inviting them to participate in some of the workshops and trainings that are more focused on general subjects that are considered relevant for both groups such as cohousing, gardening, cooking, etc. Still, the project’s main objectives are directed towards empowering the refugees. Consequently, while the buddies also have some obligations in the project, more engagement is expected from the refugees (in terms of attending more appointments and activities). While it has only been explicitly mentioned by the one exceptional case discussed above, it is relevant to note that in buddy projects such as CURANT categories are created based on underlying assumptions about these two groups of people. These assumptions are in turn the base for developing the objectives and action interventions of the project. As such, the project stakeholders risk to feed into a more general stereotyped image of the refugee as a vulnerable individual in need of care and guidance. This is important to take into account when discussing how both groups (refugees and buddies) are positioned within the project and its objectives. More recently, the project partners are trying to counter the distinctions and blur the boundaries between the two categories by stimulating the creation of one ‘CURANT community’. Further data collection and analyses will tell how this ‘CURANT community’ takes form and whether and how this impacts the refugees’ (and buddies’) experiences of the project and their place within it.

Conclusion

This project report is part of a theory-driven evaluation study of the social policy intervention *Cohousing and case management for Unaccompanied young adult Refugees in ANTwerp* (CURANT). It is the first of three evaluation reports that will be produced during the implementation of CURANT. In this first evaluation report we discussed the profiles and explored the perceptions and experiences of the two groups that are central to the project, i.e. the unaccompanied young adult refugees as the central target group of the project on the one hand, and their local flatmate buddies on the other hand. The data for this evaluation report were gathered using a mixed-method approach, including both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews and observations) methods with both the refugees and the buddies. CURANT is an on-going project in which the project partners continuously try to make adjustments to the project when they see a need for this. The data used in this report were gathered primarily during the initial stages of the implementation of the project, consequently our findings do not necessarily always reflect how CURANT is operating at the time of finishing this report. As a *first* evaluation report, it should be read as an initial evaluation that explores the *first* impressions and experiences of the refugees and the buddies, most of whom are still participating in the project.

The first part of the report used survey data to analyse and discuss the profiles of the buddies and the refugees upon entering the project. The survey data not only allowed painting a picture of the socio-demographic profile of the CURANT buddies and refugees, but also of their motivations to enter the project. The analyses showed that most buddies indicated to participate in CURANT for both 'altruistic' reasons (e.g., helping refugees, supporting people in need) as well as 'personal benefit' reasons (e.g., practicing social skills, having professional purposes). The refugees' most important expectations of the project, and aspirations for their future more generally, included getting to know new people, obtaining a diploma, finding a good job, getting a permanent residence permit in Belgium, and finding safety. Regarding the buddies, one of the project's main goals is to have an impact on their social skills, and particularly their intercultural competences. The analysis of the buddies' answers to the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) included in the survey showed how when entering the project, the buddies seemed to consider themselves to be open-minded and empathic towards people with a different cultural background, to have reasonable competencies in coping with discomfort and stress and to react with a reasonable degree of flexibility to new challenges. Regarding the refugees, a major goal of the project is to have an impact on their social networks. More specifically, the project partners hope that the refugees will develop more informal and ethnically diverse networks with peers. The survey data showed how upon entering CURANT the refugees indeed have relatively homogeneous social networks that consist mostly of friends with the same sex (i.e. male), the same mother tongue, religion and origin

as themselves. Similarly, also the buddies have homogenous social networks that include few friends with a different mother tongue, friends with whom they interact in a different language than Dutch, or friends outside Belgium (despite at least half of them having had an international experience). This first evaluation report only included the data from the first measurement, i.e. the survey the refugees and the buddies filled in shortly after entering the project. The data from the second measurement, i.e. the survey the buddies and the refugees will fill in shortly before exiting the project, will allow us to study evolutions. It will enable us to analyse whether and how e.g. the personality traits of the buddies, the social networks of the refugees (and the buddies) and their expectations for the future have changed during the course of their participation in CURANT.

In the second part of the report qualitative data were used to explore the first impressions and experiences of the CURANT participants with the project. Findings were discussed in two separate sections that focused on respectively the buddies and the refugees. In the section that focused on the buddies, we zoomed in on the buddies' motivations to enter the project, their experiences and interpretations of their role as a 'buddy', and their experiences of cohousing with a young refugee. Our analyses showed how the buddies' perceptions generally reflect the project narrative and e.g. expect the CURANT project to be beneficial for the refugees' 'empowerment' and their 'integration' in society. At the same time, the buddies also consider CURANT to be a valuable experience for themselves and expect that participating in it will allow them to grow personally and to develop more heterogeneous networks. While contrary to the social networks of the refugees, the buddies' networks were not a point of attention in the initial goals and assumptions of the project. However, findings revealed how in some cases the buddies do critically reflect on the homogeneity of their existing networks and explicitly seek to diversify them by participating in CURANT. When considering their role as the refugees' 'local flatmates', findings showed how – as intended by the CURANT project (and communicated to the participants) - the buddies place themselves outside of the network of refugees' professional caregivers. However, they do believe that participating in CURANT implies a certain commitment of having to set a good example and function as a sort of 'role model' to the refugees, who are mostly perceived as 'vulnerable' and in need of help. The fact that the refugees are seen as a predominantly 'needy' group may in fact underestimate their agency, but also overestimate the possible support role of the buddy. Indeed, findings showed that support that goes beyond mere practical support (e.g. helping the refugees with their schoolwork) remains rather rare. Moreover, our data also indicated that the buddies notice that the refugees do not always need their support and realize that they often already have a support network or know how to handle things on their own. Finally, findings regarding the buddies' first experiences with cohousing with a young refugee showed that the spontaneity of the development of regular, informal and meaningful social interaction as a result of cohousing should not be taken for granted. Busy work and school schedules, social obligations and obligations towards CURANT (for the buddies as well as the refugees), and different daily rhythms and routines may result in the fact that

in reality the flatmates spent little time at home, which consequently also limits the social interaction between them. A first exploration of the influence of the type of cohousing arrangement on the buddies' cohousing experience and their social interaction with their flatmate(s) furthermore showed how living in a cohousing setting with many flatmates may be experienced as making 'real' cohabitation with more personal and in-depth social interaction more difficult.

In the section that focused on the refugees, we looked at the refugees' social networks and the social support they derive from these networks, their aspirations and general expectations for their future, and their first experiences with CURANT and with cohousing with a 'local buddy'. Our analyses revealed that while refugees' existing networks upon entering CURANT are rather homogenous, they often do exist of a significant number of people the refugees are relying on for different types of social support. Moreover, even though the refugees' families are not present in their daily lives in Belgium, they continue to play an essential role in refugees' lives and minds. Our data showed that family is the main priority for most of the participating refugees and often causes them high levels of stress, worries and concerns, regardless of whether family reunification is a possibility or not. Regarding the refugees' aspirations and expectations for their future, our analyses revealed certain tensions between what the CURANT project desires for the refugees' future and the refugees' own aspirations and expectations. Generally, CURANT focuses more on orienting participating refugees towards an appropriate education rather than on assisting them in finding a job as soon as possible. Findings showed that this does not coincide with some of the refugees' eagerness to start working as soon as possible to be able to earn a living and be independent from social welfare benefits, which can lead to frustration. However, the project has made adaptations to take this into account by giving more attention to guiding the refugees to more tailor-made and shorter educational trajectories outside of regular education that focus more on direct labour market entry. Another recurring frustration among the refugees seemed to be how time consuming participating in CURANT is for them, as the project includes many appointments with different professionals from the project team as well as compulsory participation in several activities. Also in this case adaptations were made by the project partner and CURANT trajectories are more tailored and flexible with shortened trainings and workshops that are more in line with the needs and interests of the refugees. These frustrations also point to a more general finding regarding the recognition (or lack thereof) of the refugees' agency in the project. Our analyses revealed that the young refugees have often developed personal strategies to cater to their own needs, objectives and priorities. Undermining these young people's agency and need for independency may cause frustration and negatively influence their general feeling of well-being in the project. Regarding the refugees' experiences with cohousing with a 'local buddy', our analysis showed that the refugees have varying experiences when it comes to the closeness of their relationship with their buddy and the level and type of social interaction with them. Nonetheless, generally speaking cohousing is often experienced as living together in one house or apartment

while living rather separate lives. At the same time, findings showed that even though there might not necessarily be a strong emotional bond between the flatmate refugees and buddies, this does not mean that the refugees do not consider it a valuable experience to cohause with a 'local buddy' as many of them rely on their buddies for help with administrative and practical matters and appreciate the fact that by cohousing with them they can (or will) practice Dutch.

Finally, and as a more general concluding remark, the first impressions and experiences of both the buddies and the refugees also revealed the importance of paying attention to how both groups are positioned within the project and in relation to its objectives. As CURANT is constructed around the idea of 'refugees' and their local flatmate 'buddies' it is important to be aware of the categories that are created by the project, and some of the assumptions that are implicitly underpinning the creation of these categories and the intervention actions targeting them. While the buddies are to some extent also a target group of the project and the project partners expect that cohousing gives them the opportunity to interact with young refugees and to acquire the social (intercultural) skills needed to build a relationship with newcomers, all of the project's objectives are directed towards supporting the refugees, empowering them and enhancing their integration into society. As a 'local young citizen', the buddy is in a way considered to be an 'ally' of the project partners, whose role is mainly to facilitate and contribute to the ultimate project goal, i.e. enhancing the integration of the refugees into society. The design of the project and the way it is implemented thus emphasizes the distinct categories of 'the refugees' and 'the local buddies'. The 'otherness' of the refugee, who is framed as 'culturally different', vulnerable and in need of help and guidance (e.g. to create realistic aspirations, to develop broader social networks, etc.,) is in that sense pointed out (again). By 'othering' the refugees, not only at the discursive level but also in the implementation of the project (e.g. by organising separate activities for the buddies and the refugees), boundaries between the refugees and the buddies tend to be emphasised rather than broken down. CURANT does try to involve the buddies in the activities for the refugees by inviting them to participate in some of the workshops and trainings. By inviting the buddies to these events after working hours, CURANT is also to take into account the buddies' often busy work schedules. Sometimes community events are organized in which both refugees and buddies (and sometimes stakeholders) are invited to participate. Taking this a step further, for instance by sometimes also inviting the refugees to activities for the buddies, or providing activities for the co-housing flatmates specifically, could contribute to breaking down this barrier between 'us' (the buddies) and 'them' (the refugees) and turn the focus more to an overarching 'we': the CURANT participants/young inhabitants of Antwerp.

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