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**INTEGRATION OF
MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES**



The Utrecht Refugee Launchpad - U-RLP

The Utrecht Refugee Launchpad, locally known as Plan Einstein, seeks to develop a new way to deal with neighbourhood refugee reception facilities. The City of Utrecht is looking to apply an inclusive approach, in order to facilitate integration from day one by introducing a shared living concept in which local youth and asylum seekers can cohabitate. It aims to create an innovative reception facility, which is built upon social networks within the neighbourhood, developing resilient skill sets alongside asylum seekers. It will offer asylum seekers and neighbourhood (youth) alike an active and entrepreneurial environment. Although the core target group remains the refugee community, by mixing them with neighbourhood participants, or even potentially opposing groups, the thought is to build connections and experience mutual support, rather than increasing alienation. Neighbourhood residents are invited to follow international entrepreneurship or English classes together with the asylum seekers, followed by peer-to-peer coaching and introductions to local businesses.

A group of carefully selected young people with a strong connection to the neighbourhood and its improvement will create trendy living quarters in the same building where the refugee shelter is located. These youth are of mixed levels of education, occupation, gender, age, ethnicity, and background.

The lessons learned in the U-RLP project could be both used within the Netherlands or elsewhere. This way the approach ensures a strong investment in the participants' lives, which could be built further in Utrecht or elsewhere, if the asylum request is denied or when refugees may want to rebuild their home country.

Partnership:

- City of Utrecht
- Socius Wonen- SME
- Universiteit Utrecht - School of Economics (U.S.E.) and Centre for Entrepreneurship (UtrechtCE).
- Stichting Volksuniversiteit Utrecht- Division of English courses
- Social Impact Factory – NGO
- Vluchtelingenwerk Midden-Nederland – NGO
- University of Oxford- Centre on Migration, Policy and Society
- Roehampton University

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1. Executive summary

The last six months have been a very intense period for the U-RLP project. Before summer the activities continued normally, and thanks to the promotion of various initiatives, there was an increase in participation. In June, a meeting of the project partners took place, a very stimulating academic seminar was also held in Utrecht with the presence of the Oxford Advisory Board of the project, chaired by dr Sarah Spencer, Director of the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society.

The local team was preparing to face the closure of the centre scheduled for November 1st. as planned from the beginning of the project. The reasons for the closure of the center are due to the fact that the rental contract of the building ended in November, and also because the local government committed to the neighbours that the emergency center would only open for two years. However, the COA (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands)

made the decision to accelerate the transfer of asylum seekers that began on August, and advanced the final closure of the centre in the month of September. This decision produced a complex situation when the planned activities had to be terminated suddenly. The impact of the closure was important, also from an emotional perspective of the actors involved. On the other hand, the fact that COA decided to implement the project in another centre of asylum-seekers of the city was received as great news, as it implies the starting of a new stage that is planned for the next five years. This news allows continuing deepening an innovative model, and confirms the positive impact of the pilot project.

The adaptation of the project in the new centre presents several challenges since the context of the building and the neighbourhood, as well as the profiles of the asylum seekers living there, are different than those of the Overvecht centre.



However, this transfer will allow the capitalisation of the project in the new setting. This will enable the project partners to already test the scalability of the project during the funding period, continuing the activities planned in the project funded by the UIA program until March 2019, as planned. Currently, some spaces of the “new” centre are being enabled, which has been in operation for 15 years and which is owned and run by COA.

There has already been a pilot running in Entrepreneurship, while most of the other activities are scheduled to begin in January 2019, and currently the municipal team is negotiating with COA all the details of how this new stage of the project will be managed. These negotiations, as well as the need to adapt to a very different context, represent the main challenges that the project will have to face in the coming months.

2. Progress made over the last months

The six-month period between May and October of this year is very influenced by the closure of the centre in September, in addition to the confirmation of the project model's implementation in another centre for asylum seekers of the city.

However, before entering into these two issues and assessing the challenges of the new stage, it is important to start by highlighting some aspects of the evolution of the activities developed in the centre in Overvecht before its closure.

2.1. Activities before the closure

The increase in participation

In the previous journal, the challenge and the willingness of the local team to increase the participation of the different actors in the activities of the project was raised. In order to achieve this goal, a series of actions were promoted to reinforce the communication and dissemination of information with the centre's activities, and to open it more to the neighbourhood.

A good example of the actions that were carried out was the "Coffee of the World" challenge. The neighbourhood does not have many places for interaction and encounter, and the incubator space was being under-used. The Social Impact Factory, one of the partner organizations, decided to launch a participatory process to re-think the incubator and meeting place of the



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centre in order to make it better known among neighbours and attract them to the activities. They managed to do this by implementing a 6-week participative process based on the involvement and engagement of a diverse group of people and with the active participation of the SOCIUS youngsters.

This initiative was the theme chosen for the development of the first “zoom-in” of the project, a video that explains in more detail how this participatory process unfolded:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOXYKzQWUPc>

As a result of the different actions promoted, participation increased in the last months, both in the courses and in the meeting spaces of the centre. Apart from organized activities, there have been day-to-day situations where young people, asylum seekers and neighbours have interacted, gotten to know each other, and in some cases, supported each other and collaborated.



The academic support of the International Advisory Board

A very different kind of activity, and one that I think is very important to highlight, has to do with the academic support for the project through the International Advisory Board.

One of the added values of the project partnership is to have a powerful research and evaluation team consisting of: Dr Caroline Oliver, (Roehampton University) Dr Karin Geuijen, (Utrecht University),

and Dr Rianne Dekker (Utrecht University). In addition, and under the leadership of Dr Sarah Spencer (COMPAS, University of Oxford), an International advisory board has been set up consisting of experts from different disciplines in the United Kingdom: Ash Amin (Professor of Geography, University of Cambridge), Alice Bloch (Professor of Sociology, University of Manchester), David Parsons (Specialist in Public

Program Evaluation, Leeds Beckett University), and Peter Scholten (Professor of Public Policy and Politics, Erasmus University Rotterdam)

This board guides the Plan Einstein research and evaluation team, and on June 28th they participated in two different events in Utrecht that contributed to enrich and deepen the focus of the project and its evaluation.

In the morning, an Academic Seminar took place: *Innovation in city-level reception of asylum seekers and refugees: Neighbourhood connections, wellbeing and skills*. This event, organized by the URLP project's research and evaluation team, brought together members of the U-RLP research team and its international advisory board with local academics. Its goals were to reflect on early findings from the project evaluation and gain

knowledge and insight from research on similar interventions in other European and Dutch cities.

In the afternoon, there was a seminar open to the public with the presence of many actors involved in the day to day of the project, where key findings of the evaluation Interim Report by the research team were presented with a reflection by the Advisory Board members.

The reflections of the members of the board served to complement the first partial results of the evaluation, and contributed to inspire on fundamental issues of the project, such as its capacity to generate "meaningful encounters" between different groups. The existence of this space of high level academic reflection linked to the process of evaluation of the project is contributing with additional rigor and inspiration to the project's team.

2.2. The closure of the shelter

The closure of the centre was planned from the beginning for November 1st of this year. This date was determined on the one hand by the end of the rental contract with the private owner of the building, and on the other by the promise that the local government made to the residents of the neighbourhood, ensuring that the centre would close on those dates.

Although the scheduled date was November, the COA began moving asylum seekers to other centres in the region on August. Approximately one third of the total were housed in another centre of the city. The acceleration of the transfer process and closure of the centre caught everyone by surprise. The main argument to defend the advance of the closing was to be able to take advantage of the summer, so that the children could begin the new school period in their new localities.

Although all the actors involved in the project were already aware of the closure of the centre, they could not help but feel a mixture of very intense emotions when they found that the closure was immediate.

As a result of the initial sadness, other emotions, such as satisfaction and hope, were added little by little. Satisfaction due to the simple evidence of the emotional impact many people underwent showed that one of the main objectives of the project had been achieved. This goal was that of building a sense of community through the participation and involvement of various actors and the hope that despite the "physical" closure of the centre, the project would continue. This hope may not have been expected in the same way or in the same place, but the confirmation of its continuity in another centre compensated for the first sense of emptiness left by the closure of the centre in Overvecht.



On September 29 a farewell ceremony was held in the centre, in which many professionals, but also asylum seekers who returned from other centres all over the Netherlands, attended. Additionally, neighbours and youngster from SOCIUS also attended. It was a very important, and a necessary opportunity, not only to say

goodbye, but also to symbolically close a stage and at the same time celebrate what was lived. There have been many experiences, efforts, energies and lessons learnt for this pilot project. Above all, there have been many relationships, more or less intense, but that undoubtedly have marked a significant number of people.

2.3. The transfer of the project to another shelter

In the previous journal we already pointed out the existence of conversations to explore the possibility of adapting the project to another centre of asylum seekers of the city. Finally, these conversations succeeded, resulting in the Plan Einstein model to be implemented in the asylum centre of at the neighbourhood of Haydn. To maintain the identity of the project, it is to be called “Plan Einstein Hayden”.

As planned in the project outline, the activities of the initial project with funding from the UIA program will continue, with some differences,

until the scheduled date of March 2019. From that moment on, they will focus on the dissemination and evaluation of the U-RLP project on one hand, and in the continuation of the activities within the framework of a 5-year project financed entirely by COA and the City of Utrecht on the other.

This centre, owned and run by COA, has been operating for 15 years. However, a Protestant church owns a big attic of the building of about 280m², and the City has rented it to carry out the activities of the project.

In this centre there will be spaces for the trainings, incubator, restaurant and offices for professionals and organizations such as Social Impact Factory. In addition, there is currently a square in front of the centre that functions as a car park, but is planned to be adapted to create a public garden and a playground for children. This is one of the lessons learned by the experience in the centre of Overvecht that will be adapted in the new one in order to facilitate spaces for meetings and relationships.

It is foreseen that initiatives that were promoted, such as the Einstein radio, will also be transferred to the new centre, as well as many of the materials of the offices and the incubator. Also, several of the professionals involved in the project will continue working in this new stage.

The building is currently being adapted to enable activities as soon as possible. Most courses are scheduled to begin in January, except for an English course that has already started in a provisional space of the building.

What is still unclear is when youngsters from SOCIUS will be able to be accommodated in the new building. In principle, it is expected to be in the second quarter of the year, but there are still many issues to be resolved with COA.

Finally, it should be noted that both the centre, the context of the neighbourhood, and the profile of the asylum-seekers living in the building are quite different from those of Overvecht. Undoubtedly, one of the challenges of the new stage will be to adapt the project's approach to this new reality.

3. Current key challenges

In this new stage marked by the closure of the centre in Overvecht, and the implementation of the model in the centre in Hayden, we can

identify various challenges that will mark the development of the project.

3.1. Cooperation between COA and the municipality

The decision of COA to apply the U-RLP model to the new centre in collaboration with the City should no doubt be considered great news and a success of the pilot project. Now it is important to continue with the negotiations on the details of how this adaptation will be, since there are many different elements regarding the previous context.

The centre at the Haydnlaan has been managed for many years according to the criteria of COA, and the change of approach is obviously not a simple or quick matter to manage. There are many issues that must be assessed and agreed upon between COA and the City, starting with who and how decisions are made about the implementation of the model, and who is responsible for managing the different activities.

COA and the municipality, as well as the other actors involved, must understand that the success of the project depends in large part on the fact that each actor is dedicated to the issues that can be carried out more effectively according to their profiles, capacities and experience. Strategies to attract participants to courses or the management of meeting spaces, among others, should be based on the previous experience to ensure good results. Likewise, the most essential aspects of the model should be guaranteed, such

as the provision of training courses for asylum seekers and neighbours, housing some SOCIUS youngsters in the building, and the generation of meeting spaces and relationships between different groups. These aspects are part of the DNA of the project and it is important that they are maintained to ensure the inclusive dimension of the approach, although they can be adapted according to the new context, and above all, of the lessons learned in Overvecht.

COA's willingness to adapt the model to another centre already demonstrates a positive impact of this innovative project. As of March 2019, a new stage will begin in the implementation of the activities that will not be subject to the framework of the project financed by the UIA program. This will mean an increase in flexibility to adapt to different contexts and needs, but at the same time it will require the need to redefine the role and responsibilities of the different actors involved. In order to achieve the best results, it will be necessary to have a clear willingness to collaborate among the different actors and keep the previous experience very much in mind. The success of this new stage of the project will depend to a large extent on the attitude, and I would add, "generosity" of each one, as well as on how these negotiations are carried out.

3.2. Adapting the project to a new context

The characteristics of the centre and its surroundings

The neighbourhood in which the Plan Einstein Haydn centre is located is quite well off, although it is very close to three other neighbourhoods with different characteristics. One is a very dynamic and multi-ethnic neighbourhood, another is more like Overvecht but with more services and social fabric, and the fourth is the closest, with little difference in identity and the same social housing reality.

One of the main differences compared to the previous centre is that in this neighbourhood

there are already many entities and very active social and cultural organizations that are eager to get involved in the project. Projects related to theatre, arts and crafts, and sports, among others, will greatly enrich the activities that can be carried out to promote inclusion, participation and relations among asylum seekers, youth and neighbours. Conversations have already been held with several actors (theatre organizations, Catching Cultures Orchestra, central museum, etc.), and there is great enthusiasm to collaborate on this new stage of the project.

The profile of asylum seekers

In the Plan Einstein Haydn centre, the profile of asylum seekers is different from that of Overvecht. There is a group that has been living there for many years and in addition, there is a group of unaccompanied minors.

This means that in this new stage, the professionals who work in the centre will have to adapt to a new scenario in which a bigger number of people might be denied asylum.. In this way, the approach of the model based on facilitating a 'future free' integration process will acquire a greater relevance, as well as the preparation of the personnel to adapt to this reality. It will

take into account more complexity than the Plan Einstein, where, in the end, most were very likely to stay in the country.

Taking into account the emotional tension that this reality supposes, there is a plan to offer guided sessions within the framework of a moral psychology approach for social workers to the different actors involved in the project. Many professionals are also affected emotionally and voiced the need for skills and tools to face this reality and help asylum seekers face a new future in their countries of origin.

3.3. What now in Overvecht?

Although now the focus of attention must be placed on the adaptation of the model in the new centre, it is also important that we ask ourselves what will happen from now on in the Overvecht neighbourhood after the closure of the centre.

It can be said that the philosophy of the U-RLP project transcends the reception of asylum

seekers, since its commitment to inclusion, empowerment and coexistence in diversity, can inspire work in the neighbourhoods regardless of the existence of a reception centre. The need to generate a sense of community and to break down barriers, both physical and mental, between groups that are often separated by ignorance, prejudice and stigmatizing discourses

is a task that must undoubtedly continue in Overvecht after the closure of the centre.

In this sense, it is important to take advantage of the footprint left by the project in the neighbourhood in order to continue promoting initiatives that push forward inclusion and coexistence in a very diverse and socially complex environment.

Some of the neighbours who have participated in some way in the project, such as attending the courses, participating in different activities, or being users of the centre, have shown their will to continue with this work. Some of them even offered their help to set up the new Plan Einstein Haydn and hope to be able to have small reunions in the new place.



It is very positive to note that the local team is already talking about how they can give continuity to some of the activities, taking advantage of the “momentum” that the project has generated. Many of the local actors who have participated in the project have learned many things from this experience, and now want to continue generating new spaces for training and meeting.

Another piece of good news is that there is a municipal program called “the acceleration of the neighbourhood” and the people in charge have analysed the most interesting aspects of the U-RLP project in order to incorporate them into their actions and services. Also, the neighbours’ centre, which is next to the building,

has incorporated some of the professionals who were working in the project, and want to involve neighbours who also participated in the activities in order to take advantage of their activism and experience in continuing to promote new initiatives.

I think this is further proof that the project goes beyond the reception of asylum seekers, and that this experience can and should serve as an incentive to reinforce the policies and initiatives of civil society to build more inclusive neighbourhoods. Support for these initiatives, as is already being done by the city, is another positive impact of the project that should be put into value.

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