

November 2019

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The Urban Lab of Europe !

The CURANT project Journal N° 5

Project led by the City of Antwerp



**INTEGRATION OF
MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES**



The CURANT project

The **CURANT** project seeks to provide integrated services for unaccompanied young refugees once they reach adulthood and are no longer entitled to benefit from social protection as an unaccompanied minor. It will combine co-housing and social integration schemes with volunteer buddies (young local residents aged 20-30 years old) for 1-1 integration and circular integrated individual trajectories. 75 affordable co-housing units for both unaccompanied young adults and buddies will be made available in the city. The trajectories of the young refugees involved will be treated in all their complexity instead of focusing separately on different components. A guaranteed, safe, affordable and quality place to live will pivot around a circular set of social services including language courses, training and health care. Different city departments, regional and local agencies for health services and education as well as NGOs will be actively involved in the implementation of the project.

Partnership:

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

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1. Executive Summary

CURANT is wrapping up the last activities as this Journal is being written. After three years, the project is coming to an end, and it is time to celebrate its results and reflect on this experience. This Journal is just about that, and as the CURANT team is still busy tidying up the loose ties and prepare for the future beyond the project, it will attempt to illustrate some of the findings of the project and to put on paper some lessons learned, in the spirit of the capitalisation and dissemination aim that the role of the experts in the UIA programme should pursue.

CURANT'S brave and integrated approach has generated a positive outcome, it has demonstrated that it is possible to offer an effective path to integration in society to the most fragile people of all: unaccompanied young refugees.

So what can we learn from CURANT? First of all, that we are dealing with complex issues, and that interventions on human beings are

far from the possibility to be objectivised and replicated in a standard way, as the outcome of the intervention depends as much from the internal condition of the beneficiary. Second, the evaluation of results of such an intervention will have to wait some time in order to assess in a more complete way if the changes in both target groups will be permanent or transitory. Third, notwithstanding the limitations above, CURANT represents a successful experimentation, as it has not just proved right some of the underlying assumptions, but it has generated a wealth of experience and understanding about the topic of integration of migrants and refugees into our communities that can be shared with other cities in Europe.

One important understanding emerges from this great experiment: that integration is essentially a two-way process, and that single interventions, no matter how powerful, are limited in their effectiveness if they are not part of a larger supportive ecosystem.

2. Introduction: closing party

On 25th of September this year, CURANT organised a closing conference for a wide range of people and of course buddies and refugees. The deputy mayor, the project management team, the university of Antwerp, all the partners and of course some buddies and newcomers

shared their experiences of the project and its results to a wide audience. The beauty of it was that two refugees Hussain and Abdiio (see pictures 1 and 2) hosted the conference like professionals and made the audience even more enthusiastic.



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During the life span of the project, as a shift in the scale of activities was taking place, the project team's approach and implementation practices have shifted too, as various types of challenges along the road have led to fine tunings and turns and changes. We have tried to tell the story of those necessary adjustments in the previous Journals about CURANT, and now it is time to start looking at what is about to be left behind, the results and the legacy of the project, so to inform future initiatives in other parts of Europe that can gain a valuable start in approaching the same challenge of integration of migrants and refugees drawing inspiration and practical insights from CURANT.

Lets' then start from the end: "statistics on all participating refugees show that at the end of their CURANT trajectories, the majority (79%) are active either on the labour market (18% in employment) or in different types of education and training (61%). Only 21% fall under the NEET group (Not in Education, Employment, and Training). Refugees report how their social skills have developed and how their understanding of Belgian society, habits and institutions has improved"¹. These great results, notably yet not entirely complete as they

refer to a point in time 4 months away from the official end of the project at the end of October this year, have to be acknowledged and celebrated, before entering into a more detailed analysis of them. CURANT'S brave and integrated approach has generated a positive outcome, it has demonstrated that it is possible to offer an effective path to integration in society to the most fragile people of all: unaccompanied young refugees, that it is possible to support their personal and professional development by respecting their individual preferences and attitudes, that it makes a difference to offer them a place to live and a social net to connect to, and that it pays back the investment to give them access to a wide range of customised services, from education to language and professional training passing through psychological assistance, because it provides them the foundations to build on their position in society.

Beside these impressive achievements, the real test of the effectiveness of the project will be the observation of the lasting effects of the intervention, and their showing up, in the near future as well as in the medium term, in the lives of those that were its beneficiaries. As for now, it is too early to judge whether there is a need to adopt a long(er)-term perspective on support to unaccompanied young refugees, rather than a short 1 to 2 years one, or whether an intense delivery of support services for a short time is enough to provide that "platform for integration" that can display positive effects in the future. One important understanding emerges from this great experiment though: that integration is essentially a two-way process, and that single interventions, no matter how powerful, are limited in their effectiveness if they are not part of a larger supportive ecosystem. But let's proceed in order.

¹ CURANT Second Evaluation Report, June 2019, you can access the full report here: <https://www.uia-initiative.eu/sites/default/files/2019-07/CURANT%20SECOND%20EVALUATION%20REPORT%20%282019%29.pdf>

3. Project updates

During the writing of this journal, all beneficiaries still involved will need to leave the project, and around 4 buddies and 25 refugees are in search of housing. The CURANT team is busy with helping refugees to find an appropriate house, but this is not an easy task because of the discrimination in the housing market and also because of the high expectations of the refugees. They all had at least one offer from the team for a student flat, and some refugees refused it because it was too small or too crowded. So, even though initially the team believed that refugees would be happy with anything, that is proving not to be the case. It might be because of the standards the project itself made them comfortable with, or because their self-esteem has been growing thanks to the intervention, or else because the intensive “care” that they have been exposed to has paradoxically made them dependent from it or lazy about putting their best effort in. Probably, it is a mix of all of the above.

“The deputy mayor decided to let 13 refugees, who did not had a new place to stay yet, rent their apartment for 6 weeks longer, after that they will have to find an alternative housing solution. But it is hard to see that the hardest thing for our youngsters is now at this point when they have to stand on their own feet”, says Jolien De Crom, project manager of CURANT. It is

indeed both a sign of the challenge ahead for the beneficiaries, and the caring spirit of the CURANT team which has been an integral part of the intervention. It also calls back the question raised in the introduction: are those types of intervention sufficient to provide the necessary inertia for the beneficiaries to take a leap of their own? Or do they need to be followed up with some sort of soft landing into the real life? The answer to this question depends as much from the individual as well as from the community they live in. We know too well that the first will unfold in due course, while the latter suffers from the inevitable complexity of the society we live in.

During the closing conference held on 25th of September in Antwerp, buddy Veerle said: **“I admire my roommate, for the way he rebuilds his life in a new society. For the incredible effort he showed to learn Dutch. For his positivity, his resilience and the kind person that he is, despite all the hard things he experienced”**. It certainly takes two to integrate, and the hope for the future comes from testimonials like Veerle and his comrade, and from interventions like CURANT that seeks to encourage systematically encounters like this. But as we need to move from anecdotal evidence to a more objective one, let’s have a look at the overall findings from the CURANT project.

4. Findings: not so simple

This section comments some of the key findings from the second evaluation report written by CeMIS – Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies of the University of Antwerp. The report is part of an on-going evaluation study conducted during the three-year implementation of CURANT running from November 1, 2016, to October 31, 2019. This Second evaluation report, produced in June 2019, is based on the second and more mature phase of the project implementation. During this phase, CURANT was up-scaled strongly, leading to a total of 81 refugees and 77 buddies in the project (both finished and on-going trajectories) in May 2019.

The report aims at assessing the impact of the CURANT approach on its participants (refugees and buddies) against the project stakeholders' main assumptions, which were primarily:

- A) The setup of communal living facilitates regular, informal, meaningful, spontaneous contact between refugees and Dutch-speaking locals.
CURANT's communal living concept is based on the principle of decent, affordable housing, and that the mere fact of not having to worry about shelter (at least for a while) contributes to an higher sense of well-being for refugees.
- B) Cohabiting with a Dutch-speaking buddy would help refugees to diversify their social network. Enhance diversification in the social networks of refugees means to include more Dutch speaking, native peers as friends in their network.
- C) Case management approach and tailored made trajectories would provide an effective

and complementary integration pattern to the co-housing component.

The intense, multidisciplinary consultation would result in a more in-depth insight into the individual needs of young refugees and therefore would improve the ability to provide adequate support.

In total, 81 refugees participated in CURANT. Their average age is 19 (minimum 17, maximum 25). Most refugees are male, only 4 out of 81 participants are female. This gender imbalance reflects the general figures for the target group in Belgium. Most refugees come from Afghanistan. Other refugees' countries of birth are Eritrea (15,19%); Syria (7,9%); Somalia (5,6%); Iraq (2,2%); Iran (1,1%) and Mauritania (1,1%). These figures, and in particular the high number of Afghans, are in line with general figures for the target group in Belgium.

The research methodology adopted was mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, a baseline survey was conducted with refugees as well as a series of interviews during the period of involvement in the project. Most importantly, the project evaluation was based on TDE – Theory Driven Evaluation. TDE is a contextual or holistic assessment of a program based on the conceptual framework of program theory. Theory-driven evaluation is particularly useful when stakeholders want an evaluation to serve both accountability and program improvement needs. As an evaluation approach, TDE is therefore not only results-oriented, but also process-oriented. More than other evaluation methods, it looks at the transformation processes between intervention and outcomes.

4.1 Effects of co-housing

Co-housing between buddies and refugees was one of the most innovative features of the CURANT project. The notion that integration can happen faster if young refugees can both experience living on their own and together with a local that can support their understanding of the cultural context is a simple yet powerful concept. Refugees and buddies had been living in four distinct types of housing, spread over the city of Antwerp: 23 two-bedroom flats, 9 four-bedroom houses, 1 student house with 12 studios and 1 cohousing units site (BREM16) with 16 two-bedroom flats. We have already described those living settings, with a particular focus on the newly built co-housing units of BREM 16, in previous journals.

One interesting finding of the evaluation looks at the different motivations in the two target groups for living together. Buddies' expectations of social contact were usually high: the prospect of contact with and support to a refugee was a primary motivation and criterion for buddies to participate. For refugees, their primary motivations were more practical (finding

a decent, affordable house and learning Dutch). This difference can of course have an impact in the relationship dynamics of duos, buddy plus refugee, living together.

Another interesting finding is about the influence of the project interventions on the social interactions between refugees and their buddies. The project team not only defined the participation criteria (screening), but also who would live together (matching) and developed scenarios in case of problems (mediation). "These interventions have prevented potential communal living problems and mitigated (some) actual problems. However, they have also contributed to participants' sense of living in a regulated, somewhat artificial social environment, rather than a spontaneous social community", states the evaluation report. Even though we cannot be sure about this, managing, but mostly animating, communal living was surely a good, and mostly inevitable, choice made by the project team: in journal IV we have discussed how animation activities were an important part of the process of creating a community.

4.2 Effects on social networks

Social networks are an important asset for integration. The relationship with peers, friends and colleagues, is what makes us all feel part of a community and a culture. The ability to create and maintain social bonds in a stranger country depends not just on the capacity to learn a language, but also on the ability to keep a cultural identity while interacting, and bonding, with the one of the hosting countries. This is why CURANT invested time and resources in creating a social infrastructure that could support refugees in gradually accessing the hosting culture while maintaining a strong sense of their culture of

origin. Another objective of CURANT was to educate buddies to accept, and nurture, far distant cultures via the experience of sharing a living with them. The impact on both sides is well documented in the evaluation report, here I want to stress some key aspects.

Even though CURANT seems to represent a temporary phase in the lives of both buddies and refugees, accompanying the transition phases they are in, it seems to have affected both groups' mutual perceptions and social competencies positively. Having someone around

on a daily basis improves access to support not just for daily practices (the post office, the way to school, etc) but also for more immaterial things such as meeting new people, learning the nuances of the language, learning to cook indigenous recipes, etc. Plus, CURANT made sure that social interactions happened by animating the community with social nights, sport events and parties.

One important finding of the evaluation is that the CURANT experience has managed to lower the threshold for future contacts with people with different backgrounds. Beyond the immediate experience, it seems then that the project managed to change perceptions and attitudes in both target groups by bridging social capital (creating networks across cultures) but

mostly by creating bonding social capital, which represents the real investment for the future.

Buddies' cultural empathy has increased, notices the report, meaning that, "they are now able to more quickly to grasp which feelings, thoughts and behaviours are important to people with other cultural backgrounds", as the report states. This represents an important result which confirms that the change theory behind the CURANT project relies on solid hypothesis. The most important result though, it is the one confirmed by the findings and that concerns the refugees involved in the project: building an ability to develop social networks has allowed them to become more self confident in keep doing that, a solid base for building their way into society.

4.3 Effects of individual case management and support services

As well as co-housing, the other crucial component of CURANT was the attention put into individual, customised case management support. Mainstream social assistance services cannot afford to provide a similar level of attention to each individual, and this has proven to be one of the biggest shortcomings of the current system put in place for integration. Beside questions about the sustainability of such an intense support service delivery, there is no doubt that CURANT proved the underlying assumption that more intense care and attention to individual and customised trajectories result into best effectiveness in impacting the individual.

The report though stresses an important point on this: as intensive professional support in various domains (training, language learning, psychotherapy, etc.) is readily available, this approach risks becoming overambitious. As

a result, some young refugees have felt overburdened by the high number of activities they were expected to attend, plus, questions raise about what happens when project ends: the social supportive infrastructure created by the project will not be there anymore, and refugees run the risk of finding themselves in a situation where they miss important points of reference in their lives. Probably one important lesson out of CURANT is that there must be a balance between the range of available support services potentially available, and the freedom for refugees to activate some and not all of them. Perhaps, the best approach could be a menu of available services and a combination of mandatory and discretionary services. This also was one of the lessons emerging from the UIA capitalisation workshop on the topic of integration of migrants and refugees held in 2019 in Antwerp².

² Access the workshop's report here: <https://www.uia-initiative.eu/en/news-events/uia-workshop-integration-migrants-and-refugees>

Another important point raised by the report refers to the sustainability of the project impact in the lives of the beneficiaries: due to their limited Dutch language skills and limited previous education, their options are limited and educational and professional trajectories tend to take long. This seems to go against the structure of the project intervention which foresees a one year track for beneficiaries. Indeed, no one would want to stay into a programmed track for a long period of time, but there are questions raised

here about the impact of the intervention relating to its duration taking into account the starting conditions of the beneficiaries. Again, perhaps a balance could be the best choice forward, but I am personally convinced that the full spectrum of benefits gained by the beneficiaries will take longer to display, and therefore it is probably wise to wait at least another year to observe the longer lasting effects of such an intense intervention in the lives of the refugees.

5. Challenges – final assessment?

According to the UIA framework for challenges in implementation of complex innovative projects in cities, there are seven dimensions that cities must take into account when planning and

delivering change. In this Journal, we look back at the past three years of the CURANT project and try an honest assessment on how the team dealt with these seven dimensions.

Leadership

Leadership is key to drive change and innovation. This is true for any organisation, as well as for any community. Albeit difficult to define, leadership is an essential quality people must possess in order to guide teams through difficulties to reach the planned objectives. We have explored this challenge in depth in the first Zoom In of the CURANT project, when we interviewed the two key people of the project: Marianne De Canne and Jolien De Crom, respectively Project Coordinator and Project Manager of the CURANT project.

The success of CURANT lies for a big part in the leadership qualities of these two female leaders of the project. Both have contributed significantly in driving the team and managing complexity, complementing each other by taking up different roles, one more geared towards managing the political landscape, the other more dedicated to managing the project implementation. Both aligned in the understanding of what it takes to overcome obstacles and solve problems in an environment full of interdependent variables.

Public procurement

Public procurement is often perceived as an administrative procedure, but also increasingly considered as a powerful leverage to promote innovation, achieve socio-economic and environmental policy objectives and address societal challenges. The CURANT project had a significant portion of the budget allocated to procurement for the building of co-housing units, which showed a twofold challenge of building

those in time and in an innovative way that would also respect the environment.

In this regard, the project successfully overcome this challenge by building a unique set of modular co-housing units that can be easily moved and re-utilised and that are built on environmentally friendly criteria. We have dedicated some parts on Journals 2 and 3 to these modular co-housing units.

Organisational arrangements

UIA projects are complex because they test innovative solutions in a real urban context but also because they touch on different interconnected dimensions in an integrated approach which combines the social, economic and environmental dimensions.

The main challenge here is represented by the tension between the functional specialisation of departments and offices within municipalities versus the cross-department cooperation and coordination needed for these projects' implementation.

The CURANT team has managed to work across the organisational silos by establishing cooperative relationships with the key people needed from each department. This was also possible because of the cooperative nature of the

culture in the Antwerp's municipality, which again is the result of the combined attitudes of the civil servants involved in it. We have touched upon this dimension in the project Journal 3.

Participatory approach for co-implementation

The UIA programme encourages urban authorities to set up local partnerships that involve a diverse set of stakeholders. Delivery Partners have a key role in the project's implementation and they share with the urban authorities both risks and responsibilities.

In the case of CURANT, the municipality has managed to pull into the delivery partnership a wide range of organisations possessing complementary competences for the delivery of

a very rich spectrum of tailor-made services to the project beneficiaries. Moreover, this has proven to be a solid partnership thanks to two main reasons: 1) all partners were involved from the beginning in the phase of project design and application; 2) a great effort has been put in organising regular meetings to keep the partnership aligned on common goals and a shared sense of responsibility for the success of the project implementation.

Monitoring and evaluation

An essential aspect of sustainable urban development is the ability to focus on the actual changes achieved locally: the results and impact of the project activities, rather than on the delivered outputs. This is also important because only with evidence of the results urban authorities will be able to secure additional funds for upscaling the innovative solution tested. This depends largely on the ability to monitor and evaluate to what extent projects are contributing to the achievement of expected objectives and consequent impact.

In this respect, CURANT has put a particular effort in defining an original methodology for the evaluation of the project's impact on beneficiaries, the most difficult impact to measure of all, the one on human beings. Led by the University of Antwerp, the project evaluation has been carried out throughout the project life time and has managed to measure and show important results that can also help with an overall reflection on the effectiveness of such interventions on such a complex topic. We analyse extensively project results in this journal.

Communication with target beneficiaries and users

UIA projects need to establish an inclusive communication process able to engage target groups to increase their ownership of the project. Moreover, it is the essence of this kind of projects to be able to collect and take into account feedback, suggestions and proposals from target users. Most importantly, when dealing with

sensitive topics like the one CURANT deals with, it is crucial to engage citizens in the proposed solution as the acceptance of the project's mission is key to maintain political support.

CURANT has managed to keep visibility and interest high on the project through the ability to

portray it in the media, and to engage the neighbourhood communities where the housing

units of the duos where located by organising events and meet ups.

Upscaling

This dimension is about ensuring the sustainability, and possibly the adoption at a larger scale, of the tested solution to the challenge addressed by the project. Without this, an experiment risks of being just an interesting experiment, with limited results against the scale of the challenge.

CURANT has managed to work on its continuation notwithstanding the complexity and sensitivity of

the topic in a controversial political context all over Europe on the necessity and ability of the old continent to integrate the massive waves of immigration it receives. We deal with what happens after the end of the project and the plans for,, if not upscaling at least sustaining the effort and the project scheme of intervention, in the next paragraph.

6. Conclusions: beyond CURANT

So what can we learn from CURANT? First of all, that we are dealing with complex issues, and that interventions on human beings are far from the possibility to be objectivised and replicated in a standard way, as the outcome of the intervention depends as much from the internal condition of the beneficiary. Second, that the evaluation of results of such an intervention will have to wait some time in order to assess in a more complete way if the changes in both target groups will be permanent or transitory. Third, that notwithstanding the limitations above, CURANT represents a successful experimentation, as it has not just proved right some of the underlying

assumptions, but it has generated a wealth of experience and understanding about the topic of integration of migrants and refugees into our communities that can be shared with other cities in Europe. In addition to the findings about the impact of the intervention on the target beneficiaries, CURANT has shed some light on the complexity of creating supportive social infrastructures for migrants' integration in the wider context of society, with its layers of political, social, cultural and economic dimensions. In the next paragraph I will attempt to elaborate on this concept.

6.1 Platforms and ecosystems

The term "platform" has been used in many domains out of his original meaning, today it defines marketplace-like-infrastructures moved by intelligence (software and/or human) which accommodates multi-player transactions and resolve asymmetries between a demand and an offer. In this sense, also CURANT, with its networked organisation built on a diversified partnership with complementary competences offering a wide range of support services, can be considered a platform. Platforms display the benefit of being efficient in satisfying their users' demand, and they allow for structured mechanisms to qualify the demand and to elicit feedback from users so to adjust the offer side accordingly. Platforms have another feature which is interesting, they can scale up the volume of services offered more easily than single organisations, as they can integrate more players into the infrastructure. So, we can foresee that CURANT could in theory expand its operations if

that was the aim, and if a different funding model could be imagined to sustain the operations. The challenge of finding a sustainable funding model for the continuation of CURANT with other means has been already discussed about in my journal N. 3.

But CURANT as a platform does not operate in a vacuum: if structural barriers remain unchanged, some of the achievements of this project risk to be undermined. For example, restrictive co-housing legislation in Belgium hinders the continuation of cohousing by refugees, and persistent discrimination of ethnic minorities on the private housing market increases the risk for them of ending up in precarious housing after CURANT. Every platform operates in a larger environment, the characteristics of which are determined by a larger set of interdependences between a larger set of players. Citizens, legislators, politicians, market and third sector

operators, they all interact at different levels to create a set of rules and cultural features that can encourage or undermine the work of a platform. This is the notion of an ecosystem, a living environment where all parts are dependent on one another and contribute to shape it and make it more or less conducive for specific endeavours. Therefore, for CURANT as an experimentation to become mainstream it is necessary to work at the system level and not just at the platform level. Finding the right balance between a working model and what the system can accommodate is something that the CURANT

team has been working on along the way: communicating, advocating, making changes according to political shifts, etc. An interesting recent paper by the University of Antwerp contains recommendations based on the evaluation of the program on a social policy intervention supporting the social and structural integration and self-reliance of unaccompanied young adult refugees in Antwerp³.

But it is the job of politics to try and stir the environment at the system level in order to make it more ready to scale the CURANT model. This is what is starting to happen.

6.2 Beyond CURANT

After the final party on 25th September, the good news is that CURANT will become a regular, mainstream service of the city of Antwerp, albeit in a smaller version: around 7 duos will be able to live together and get some of the support services envisioned by the project. After the evaluation from the university of Antwerp, the team is busy right now redrawing some procedures to make it happen. Details are yet to be disclosed, but political commitment is there, and the City is ready to integrate some of the lessons from the project into their regular services. After three years of hard work and ground breaking experimentation, the impact of the project on the target beneficiaries has proven that more can be done to make integration a real possibility.

“CURANT was an emotional rollercoaster. Many brainstorm meetings, intensive cooperation and a flexible team have put CURANT on the map in Antwerp. I’m so proud of what CURANT meant for many young refugees”, said Jolien De Crom, project manager, during the final party. Now the challenge becomes to turn the lessons learned from the project into a knowledge capital available for other cities in Europe. The next and final journal on CURANT, due in 2020, will cover the story on how the City of Antwerp will have managed to organise the continuation of the project as a regular service, and how the refugees involved in the project are continuing in their path to integration into the local community.

³ The paper will be available online on the UIA project’s webpage soon: <https://www.uia-initiative.eu/en/uia-cities/antwerp>

Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) is an Initiative of the European Union that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges. Based on article 8 of ERDF, the Initiative has a total ERDF budget of EUR 372 million for 2014-2020.

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



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