

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



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## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### SUMMARY

This report contains evidence-based policy recommendations concerning unaccompanied young refugees. Recommendations are based on the evaluation of the CURANT program (2016-2019), a social policy intervention supporting the social and structural integration and self-reliance of unaccompanied young adult refugees in Antwerp, Belgium.

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## INTRODUCTION

This report is part of an extensive scientific evaluation study of the CURANT project. CURANT was a social policy experiment running from November 2016 to October 2019 in Antwerp, Belgium. It was led by the City of Antwerp's Social Services and supported by an ERDF *Urban Innovative Action* (UIA) Grant. The aims of the project were to explore how communal living with a local volunteer, on the one hand, and coordinated professional guidance, on the other, would make unaccompanied young adult refugees more resilient and independent. The goals, design, implementation, and outcomes of the project have been discussed extensively in different consecutive evaluation reports<sup>1</sup>.

This report aims to inspire policymakers who want to improve policies and services for unaccompanied minors and young adult refugees, groups with specific needs but also with a lot of potential.

The report contributes to the UIA's aim to not only provide a "testbed" for innovative approaches to contemporary social problems in European cities, but also to boost evidence-based innovative policies. While CURANT was a local project, designed and executed by city authorities and local NGOs in Antwerp (Belgium), most recommendations are relevant to other policy levels and other urban and national contexts.

Since the needs of unaccompanied young adult refugees are multifaceted, and the CURANT intervention was holistic in nature, the evidence-based recommendations in this report touch upon various policy areas such as housing, social services, refugee reception, newcomer integration, education, and social cohesion. Indeed, one of the central findings of CURANT is that proper care and support services imply the integration of these different perspectives.

The report's structure is straightforward. Each section discusses one broad theme. Within each section, first, the main problems related to this theme are introduced under "observations". Then, under the heading "lessons learned", evaluation findings from CURANT about this domain are presented. Next, policy recommendations are listed. Recommendations draw on both strengths and limitations of the CURANT intervention. However, they also connect with existing good practices and evolutions in adjacent policy fields. If relevant, additional text boxes are used to point out how good practices and evolutions in other domains underpin the recommendations.

Recommendations focus on four issues:

1. Continuation of care & support for unaccompanied minors after the age of 18.
2. Coordination of care after the age of 18: holistic service delivery for young adult refugees
3. Reducing social vulnerability created by the local housing market structure
4. Facilitating small-scale, socially mixed communal living

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<sup>1</sup> (1) Mahieu, R. & Ravn, S. (2017) (2) Ravn et al. (2018), (3) Mahieu, Van Raemdonck & Clycq (2019)

# 1

## CONTINUATION OF CARE AND SUPPORT FOR UNACCOMPANIED MINORS AFTER THE AGE OF 18

Relevant policy domains: Newcomer Integration, Youth, Youth Care, Social Services, Education, Employment, Health Care, Reception of Asylum Seekers

### OBSERVATIONS

- When unaccompanied minor refugees in Belgium turn 18, they lose various types of support, security and protection, such as assistance by a guardian, the right to shelter or access to specialized youth care. Schooling is also no longer compulsory.
- However, many unaccompanied young adults lack the resources, skills, and knowledge to live wholly independently at that age while maintaining a proper standard of well-being.
- In Belgium, 18-year olds rarely leave the “parental nest” to live fully independently. For socially vulnerable youth, who lack a supportive network, the expectation to be capable to live fully independently at the age of 18 is unrealistic.
- The adult care and support services young adult refugees are being referred to tend to be organized in a rigid, inaccessible, and bureaucratic manner. This creates a barrier for young adults, especially for those who are socially vulnerable. In addition, negative experiences with service providers may lead to an aversion to institutional care and support.
- Young adult refugees face many different issues, and due to negative past experiences, it may take a long time to build trust with caregivers and institutions. Trust is, however, a basic condition to be fulfilled before socially vulnerable youth feel safe to talk about difficulties, ask for help and accept help<sup>2</sup>.
- As a result, the potential of this group remains un(der)realized, and this group risks protracted social vulnerability.

### LESSONS LEARNED FROM CURANT

#### *Good practices*

- CURANT has addressed several gaps in the care supply in a comprehensive manner, by offering individualized, intensive, integrated, tailored services to unaccompanied young adult refugees in the age group of 18-25 for around one year, including accommodation in a communal living setting.
- For most CURANT participants, the continuation of intensive professional support, and the resulting tailored trajectories focusing on different needs turned out to be beneficial and helped them to gain more skills (e.g. improved Dutch language skills, administrative skills; job-related skills) and knowledge (e.g. improved understanding of Belgian society).

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<sup>2</sup> Van Audenhove (2015)

- The case managers, who were supporting individual youth and coordinating their trajectories, spend more time with their clients than social workers in regular social services. This helped to establish a relationship of trust and to offer the necessary support in a flexible manner.
- An outreaching, committed approach enhances the quality and effectiveness of services for young adult refugees. The flexible combination of house visits and consultations at the social center was considered a beneficial strategy.
- CURANT assessed this group's needs and aspirations in an early stage of their lives in Belgium. A proactive service approach is likely to diminish or prevent future problems.

### *Limitations & challenges*

- For many of the unaccompanied young adult refugees, the CURANT trajectory of one year was too short. This is because the integration processes they are involved in take (much) more time (e.g. those related to language acquisition, restoring resilience (including psychic recovery), social network building, accomplishing education, finding employment, finding housing). In addition, structural inequalities in education, employment, housing, and health care further delay these processes.
- Overall, the CURANT concept was top-down-oriented, leaving limited space for participant agency. For instance, in the CURANT concept, care and support were conditional on participation in a wider program including communal living (with local youth) and a range of compulsory project activities (e.g. training, psychotherapy sessions). This had two undesirable effects. On the one hand, certain unaccompanied young refugees declined participation or dropped out early, thereby losing access to other types of support they might have benefited from. On the other hand, for those who did participate, certain types of care and support were compulsory, without taking into account young refugees' aspirations.
- Case managers in CURANT were not only supportive mentors, but also had controlling functions (controlling to what extent participating refugees were respecting regulation for benefits receivers, controlling whether they were respecting house rules, etc.). If the participants did not comply with these rules, sanctions could be imposed. Case managers experienced inherent tensions between these different roles. As a result of these tensions, the participants perceived the outreaching approach sometimes more as "extra control" rather than "extra care", which was detrimental for building a relationship of trust.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Based on the social vulnerabilities of unaccompanied young adult refugees **a legal right to "continued care" for young adult refugees in the age group of 18 to 25** should be installed,
- b. This implies the **development of a policy framework** defining how this entitlement will be implemented (what actors are involved, what types of care and support are provided, what strategies will be used, how to define the target group, etc.).
- c. Care and support services for young adults should embrace a **long-term perspective**. This implies that all forms of care and support should be characterized by **continuity** and **stability**.

These recommendations follow tendencies in other youth-related policy domains, which state that the age of legal adulthood<sup>3</sup> should not be the criterion to define whether the state needs to offer particular social services or not. As a result, increasing attention is paid to young adult “care leavers” in the early years of adulthood<sup>4</sup>. However, the extension of care and support for this target group of “young adults” does not imply a continuation of their infancy. Rather, a delicate balance needs to be struck between recognizing these young adults’ agency and aspirations, on the one hand, and their needs and vulnerabilities on the other. As such, the category of ‘young adults’ marks a transition phase during which youth are empowered to become more resilient and independent in different life domains.

The following principles should take priority in the organization of specialized care and support for unaccompanied refugees between 18-25:

- a. Extended care should acknowledge the young adults’ **agency and aspirations**, and should be offered on a **voluntary basis**. Only in exceptional circumstances, and under specific conditions, should compulsory care or guidance be considered.
- b. Similar to service provision for minor refugees; extended care and support for young adults should prioritize **accessibility**. To guarantee the accessibility of the adequate care and support offer, it is recommendable:
  - To include **outreach methods**, such as house and neighbourhood visits, to reach those who do not find their own way to the regular services.
  - To promote a non-bureaucratic, **youth-friendly working modus** (e.g., incorporating youth-oriented communication styles and channels) and attitude (a focus on building trust; a pedagogical approach towards making mistakes that allows youth to learn from them; a focus on stimulating progress rather than sanctioning).
- c. Care and support services should be **flexible**, client-centred, and rights-based. Services need to be designed and organized in such a way that they can meet individual needs in a customized manner. There should be the possibility to receive multiple years of care and support if this is needed.
- d. As the continuation of care is key to achieve results, **ruptures in care and support trajectories should be avoided**. This includes different aspects:
  - PREPARATION BEFORE THE AGE OF 18: If care and support trajectories are about to end, it is necessary to assist the care leaver in preparing his/her after-care trajectory.
  - SUPPORT AT TRANSITION POINTS: In case continuity of care and support cannot be guaranteed, it is required to induce a ‘warm transfer’ to other (regular) services, not just a referral. This also includes raising the care leaver’s awareness about the (different) working modus of the future care provider.
  - CONTINUATION AFTER THE AGE OF 18: Care and support *after* the age of 18 should consider a continuation of the support and care received *before* the age of 18. This may

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<sup>3</sup> In Belgium, this has been the age of 18 since 1990, before which it was 21.

<sup>4</sup> On the policy level, see the Action Plan for Young Adults (2017) in Flemish General Youth Care ([https://jongerenwelzijn.be/assets/docs/publicaties/andere/actieplan\\_jongvolwassenen\\_aangepast\\_20170511\\_goedgekeurd.pdf](https://jongerenwelzijn.be/assets/docs/publicaties/andere/actieplan_jongvolwassenen_aangepast_20170511_goedgekeurd.pdf)). In addition, in the practitioner-oriented research project *A Way Home Europe* tools and guidelines are developed to reduce the care gap after 18 (<https://www.awayhome.eu/>).

include a prolonged stay in residential care, an extension of support by the legal guardian until the age of 21 or older<sup>5</sup>, an extension of support by the school. Alternatively, a "route counselor" offering long-term mentorship before and after 18 could be appointed.

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<sup>5</sup> In the current system, guardianship is suspended at the age of 18. In practice, some guardians continue their guardian role beyond the age of 18 on a voluntary basis.

## 2

## COORDINATION OF CARE AFTER THE AGE OF 18: HOLISTIC SERVICE DELIVERY FOR YOUNG ADULT REFUGEES

Relevant policy domains: Newcomer Integration, Youth, Youth Care, Social Services, Education, Labour Market, Health Care

### OBSERVATIONS

- In Belgium, care and support services for young adult refugees are fragmented across a range of public agencies and non-governmental institutions. The different types of services and support available for this group are not offered in a coordinated or customized manner.
- Service providing institutions often lack broader knowledge and expertise on this target group's particular background and situation.
- As a result, care and support services are often difficult to access, less effective or end up only partially addressing young adults' needs.
- These issues are largely similar to barriers other groups experience when trying to access care and support services, such as vulnerable youth in general<sup>6</sup>.

### LESSONS LEARNED FROM CURANT

#### *Good practices*

- The service delivery model of CURANT improved access to appropriate care and support, by developing customized trajectories based on individual needs.
- This was realized through intensive, multidisciplinary consultation involving partners with different types of expertise (social workers, youth workers, educational workers, and psychotherapists). This intensive cooperation resulted in in-depth insights into the individual needs of young refugees and therefore improved the ability to deliver adequate, tailored support trajectories. This approach also facilitated cooperation between different government agencies and non-governmental institutions with relevant expertise.
- Refugees generally valued how CURANT empowered them in different life domains.
- The volunteer 'buddies' (who lived with the refugees) considered the broad supportive framework for the refugees as a prerequisite for their engagement, as it helped them to demarcate their supportive role.

#### *Limitations and challenges*

- When professional support in various life domains (training, language learning, psychotherapy, etc.) is readily available during a limited period only, the holistic top-down approach risks becoming supply-driven rather than demand-driven. In CURANT, some young refugees felt overburdened by the number of activities they were expected to attend, leading to a demotivated

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<sup>6</sup> Hauspie, Vettenburg & Roose (2010)



attitude or, sometimes, to drop-out. This problem was directly related to the temporality of the project, leading the project partners to feel pressured to realize as much progress as possible within the limited period available.

- The holistic approach and individual case management approach require other competencies and more commitment of the case managers compared to social workers in mainstream social services available to adult refugees.
- Case management and multidisciplinary counseling involve the sharing of information on individual cases between professionals, which can lead to ethical challenges. While the youth's consent is requested at the beginning of the project, we can doubt whether vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied youth fully grasp its implications when offered the opportunity to participate in such a comprehensive support program. Also for team members, it is challenging to uphold deontological codes (confidentiality, protection of privacy) and agreements throughout the program.
- Due to constraints in time and space, multi-disciplinary consultations were not always implemented with the intended frequency.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. **Care and support services should integrate a holistic perspective** on the lives of refugees, including attention to the following aspects:
  - **Personal needs and capabilities.** (a) the detection of mental and physical health needs, as well as relational and sexual development needs, and appropriate treatment/counselling; (b) support to the development of long-term future perspectives and to the realization of aspirations, by referral to appropriate (formal and informal) education or training, and support throughout learning trajectories; and (c) support to the development of financial and administrative competencies and broader independent living competencies in order to strengthen self-reliance.
  - **Social needs and capabilities.** (a) support to the development of a supportive informal and formal social network in Belgium; (b) the assistance of needs related to family relations (such as contact with family members abroad and support for the realization of family reunification (preparation before and assistance after uniting with family members)).
  - **Structural capabilities:** the defence of rights and the enhancement of access to services, housing, resources and commodities.
- b. The creation and maintenance of **strong multi-disciplinary, cross-sectoral partnerships** are essential for realizing integrated care and support. Partnerships should involve professional expertise related to the above-mentioned elements. Partnerships should be characterized by a shared vision, a common goal, a clear division of tasks, coordinated and regular consultation, and efficient mutual communication channels.
- c. Care and support services should be offered in a **centralized, coordinated manner**.
  - CURANT has proved how the **case management approach** is beneficial for both caregivers (as it improves their competency and efficiency) as well as for care receivers (as it



improves access to adequate care and support). However, it is essential to develop transparent common guidelines about what information on individuals will be shared, and what information cannot be shared. Case management should maintain a client-centred approach, where the client defines the goals and maintains control over his/her trajectory and on the information in his case file.

- In addition, a **low-threshold one-stop shop** for unaccompanied minor and young adult refugees can be installed<sup>7</sup>, where social contact with peers would be fostered and different types of primary and specialized care and support for young adult refugees would be concentrated in one location. This approach has different advantages: First, care and support services are more visible and accessible for those who need them. Second, its centralization in one location would facilitate expertise exchange, communication and referrals between different partners. Third, this site can host particular social and training activities for its target group.
- d. The accessibility, quality, and effectiveness of care and support can be further improved by **the inclusion of experienced experts within the care and support system**. Experience experts are individuals having similar socio-economic, ethno-cultural or linguistic and religious backgrounds as the unaccompanied refugees, who may or may not have professional expertise.

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<sup>7</sup> In other areas, there are various examples of this approach. E.g. in Flanders, the JAC ('Youth Advice Centres') of CAW ('Centre for General Wellbeing') are accessible to all youth between the ages of 12 and 25. They offer psychosocial, judicial, administrative and other types of support. In Antwerp, there is also one specialized CAW centre offering help to young adult refugees (ACM Adviescentrum Migratie – Jongerenwerking), however, it is currently understaffed.

# 3

## REDUCING SOCIAL VULNERABILITY CREATED BY THE LOCAL HOUSING MARKET STRUCTURE

Relevant policy domains: Housing, Social Housing, Social Services

### OBSERVATIONS

- The social vulnerability of young adult refugees is to an important part created and perpetuated by structural characteristics of the Belgian society and its institutions<sup>8</sup>, such as the housing market<sup>9</sup>.
- Previous research by academics<sup>10</sup> and NGOs<sup>11</sup> has indicated that the structure of the private Belgian housing market is strongly disadvantageous for people of foreign background and people with a low income. Especially in cities, it is nearly impossible for recently-arrived refugees to find decent, affordable housing due to financial (lack of means) and social (discrimination by private landlords)<sup>12</sup> barriers. As 75% of the Belgian housing stock is owned by private owners, the effect of these selection mechanisms on the housing situation of refugees is huge.
- In addition, there is a structural and steadily growing shortage of social housing, especially in larger Belgian cities. In Antwerp, the average waiting time for social housing currently exceeds three years.
- As a result, it has become more the rule than the exception that unaccompanied refugees – as most other refugees – in Belgium end up in precarious housing situations.
- Appropriate and stable housing is central to refugee integration and the lack of decent housing puts a strain on inhabitants' wellbeing in many ways, for instance by aggravating financial worries, (mental) health issues and social isolation<sup>13</sup>. More broadly, housing is a crucial factor in preventing precarity and promoting the rehabilitation of vulnerable people (see Box 1). In addition, having a domicile address is essential for gaining access to various types of support and becoming eligible for certain rights (e.g., right to residence, financial support of the Public Centre for Social Welfare, health insurance, and application for social housing).
- The deficiencies in the local housing market have been confirmed by the stories of young adult refugees in CURANT, who fell prey to slumlords or homelessness before entering CURANT housing or struggled to secure decent accommodation (again) when they left CURANT. A specific form of homeless young adults are so-called 'couch surfers': those who have no domicile address and move around among the homes of people in their social network.

<sup>8</sup> For a conceptual discussion on the roots of 'social vulnerability', see Van de Walle, Bradt & Bouverne-De Bie (2013).

<sup>9</sup> The Belgian housing market is liberal-economic, as the basic principle guiding it is that access to a dwelling is the individual responsibility of a household to amass sufficient financial means to purchase or rent a dwelling (Meert & Bourgeois, 2005). As Heylen & Van Den Broeck (2016) note, the Belgian housing market is characterized by the absence of a broad system of subject subsidies or extensive rental regulation, as well as by long waiting lists for social housing. As a result, vulnerable social groups are forced to enter the private rental market, leading in turn to affordability problems. In contrast, private property is promoted and protected (Verstraete & De Decker, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Winters et al. 2013; Heylen & Van Den Broeck, 2016; Verstraete & De Decker, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Orbit vzw and Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen

<sup>12</sup> A study among house owners in Flanders found that almost four out of ten would not rent out their property to a benefits recipient, and almost three out of ten would not rent out their property to someone with a foreign background (Winters et al. 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Phillips (2006) notes that refugees' housing conditions and experiences clearly play an important role in shaping their sense of security and belonging, while they also have a bearing on refugees' access to healthcare, education, and employment.

- Unaccompanied young adult refugees (similar to their local contemporaries) often lack skills and knowledge to exercise their rights and fulfill their duties as tenants (e.g. maintenance duties). On the private housing market, this may have severe consequences (such as foreclosure, confiscation of the warrant).

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM CURANT

### *Good practices*

- CURANT has offered a (temporary) solution for the lack of access to appropriate housing by interfering directly in the private as well as in the social housing market.
- On the private housing market, CURANT has rented accommodations from private house owners and has sublet them to unaccompanied young adult refugees (and their local buddies) at a lower price (€250 rental price + €85 utilities). As such, CURANT alleviates both financial and social barriers to private housing, while also protecting the house owners in case of non-compliance with the rent contract by tenants (e.g. guaranteed payment of rent, mediation in case of conflict).
- The Public Centre for Social Welfare made several accommodations from its social housing estate directly available for the communal living of refugees and locals in CURANT, thereby circumventing the long waiting lists for social housing (where single refugees do not receive priority over other categories of people with a low income). This type of accommodation was let under the same conditions as the private houses (see above). Besides, several houses were bought and renovated, and at one site, a cohousing accommodation was built.

### *Limitations and challenges*

- The major limitation of the CURANT approach is the temporary nature of this intervention. It has not resulted in a structural improvement in the housing situation for the project's target group, since all participants leave the project after around one year.
- In CURANT, young adult refugees' (and some of their buddies') lack of skills or knowledge about their rights and duties as tenants were dealt with in several ways. First, a contact person was appointed to mediate between tenants and house owners. Second, the project offered training and guidance to participants to familiarize them with (some of) their rights and duties as tenants. Finally, buddies were assumed to assist in certain issues, such as waste sorting. However, there were still doubts as to whether the project's concept was suitable in terms of preparing young adult refugees for independent living. For instance, as energy costs were fixed, inhabitants did not face any consequences regarding energy and water waste.
- Unaccompanied refugees' housing needs may change dramatically over a short period since many applied for family reunification before turning 18. If their request for family reunification is granted, and one or two parents and/or siblings come over to reunite with the unaccompanied young adult refugee, this means that in a short period a larger house needs to be found. This need for flexibility (to change from a single accommodation to a family accommodation in a short time span) is met neither by the private housing market, which has more rigid legislation (to protect the private house owner and tenants), nor by the social housing market<sup>14</sup>. CURANT was also

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<sup>14</sup> For an overview of problems related to family reunification and housing in Belgium, see 'Beleidsnota Gezinshereniging en Wonen' (2019)

unable to offer a solution for this issue, as those to whom family reunification was granted were obliged to leave the project.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the central role of appropriate, stable accommodation in refugees' integration processes, it is recommended

- a. To enhance **access to social housing** for unaccompanied young adult refugees, primarily by increasing the available social housing stock and reducing the waiting time for social housing to a reasonable period for all categories of applicants.
- b. To **fight discrimination** based on ethnicity and based on income (and in particular, on being a benefits receiver) on the private housing market in Belgium.
- c. To **reduce the barrier for private landlords** to rent out their houses to benefits recipients or others with a limited income (e.g., by creating a Warranty Fund, invest in mediating organizations, counter negative perceptions).
- d. To invest in training and individual counseling for newcomers about their **rights and duties as tenants**. For young adults who need it, training may also include more practical skills for independent living, such as basic household skills, energy cost reduction, etc.
- e. To expand the offer of **temporary 'transit houses'** for this group, avoiding precarious housing situations (e.g., homelessness, overcharging landlords) after refugees have to leave their Local Reception Initiative<sup>15</sup> at the age of 18. In addition, temporary structures such as transit houses can be a suitable option for those awaiting the results of their family reunification procedure.
- f. To make **alternative, affordable (temporary) types of housing** (renting a room in students accommodation, 'anti-squatting'<sup>16</sup> initiatives, subletting a single room in a private house, etc.) more accessible as an alternative to renting on the private market
- g. To offer **assistance to refugees who are searching for appropriate housing**.
- h. To support and facilitate **NGOs and citizen organizations** that focus on bridging the gap between refugees and the private housing market.<sup>17</sup>

### BOX1: HOUSING FIRST AS A GOOD PRACTICE

The 'Housing First' approach to homelessness considers access to housing as the first step in rehabilitation. It is an innovative model that ultimately aims at the social reintegration of vulnerable homeless people (i.e. those suffering from mental/physical health problems and/or substance addictions on top of the usual financial problems). Access to housing is unconditional, except for respecting the rental contract and paying the rent. To not lose his/her house again, the formerly homeless person is offered holistic guidance by a multidisciplinary team.

<sup>15</sup> In Belgium, asylum seekers are offered shelter during their asylum application, among others in 'Local Reception Initiatives' (LOI).

<sup>16</sup> These are initiatives taken by house owners to prevent squatting of large empty buildings, by renting them at a low price to someone taking up a janitor role.

<sup>17</sup> Examples of these initiatives can be found via the project <http://www.woninggezocht.be/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Woning-Gezocht-Buren-Gevonden-2017-Digitaal.pdf>



## FACILITATING SMALL-SCALE, SOCIALLY MIXED COMMUNAL LIVING

Relevant Policy Domains: Housing, Spatial Planning, Social Services, Social Cohesion

### OBSERVATIONS

- Traditionally, communal living<sup>18</sup> has been considered as a potential solution for a wide array of societal issues, such as the withering away of intergenerational solidarity, difficult work-life balance (especially for women), suburban alienation, social isolation and environmental issues<sup>19</sup>.
- Proponents of communal living describe relationships between inhabitants as ‘ties between villagers’, with the village representing the ideal setting where solidarity, cooperation and all types of support flourish<sup>20</sup>. ‘Supportive’ and ‘nurturing’ cohousing communities, where more privileged groups and socially vulnerable groups share housing, are thought to promote social inclusion and the development of social capital<sup>21</sup>. However, very little is known about the dynamics and outcomes of mixed communal living including (vulnerable) newcomers and locals.
- Characteristic for most bottom-up-organized collective housing is the homogeneity of its inhabitant community in terms of socio-economic class, ethno-cultural background, education, and attitudes<sup>22</sup>. This homogeneity results directly from both practical constraints (a high financial threshold, precluding participation in collective housing for lower socio-economic classes) as social preferences (cohousing communities are commonly composed of people sharing a similar living standard and common priorities, such as environmental concerns). As a result, recently arrived refugees are underrepresented among inhabitants of such types of accommodation.

### LESSONS FROM CURANT

#### *Good practices*

- In CURANT, in total 81 refugees lived together with 77 local volunteers (‘buddies’) in different types of accommodation: two-bedroom apartments, four-bedroom houses, a 12-bedroom student house and a cohousing site with 16 two-bedroom units. In many of those places, communal living created an atmosphere fostering support to the refugees and mutual (intercultural) learning between all housemates.
- CURANT has demonstrated how communal living can constitute an environment facilitating the accessibility of various types of informal support, such as (1) tangible support (e.g., usage of housemate’s equipment, assistance with making an appointment in Dutch, assistance with homework), (2) informational support (e.g., explaining where to find a hospital, explaining how things work in Belgium), (3) companionship (e.g., doing sports and watching TV together), (4) emotional

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<sup>18</sup> This can be defined as any form of cohabitation where non-family members live share (some parts of) their accommodation.

<sup>19</sup> Williams (2005) Scanzoni (2000) Jonckheere et al. (2010)

<sup>20</sup> Jonckheere et al. (2010)

<sup>21</sup> Franck & Ahrentzen (1989), Fromm (1991), Norwood and Smith (1995)

<sup>22</sup> Williams (2005)

support (e.g., offering a listening ear) (5) esteem support (e.g., wishing each other luck for important exams, praising accomplishments). Besides, CURANT's communal living offered plenty of opportunities for informal mutual learning.

- For most refugees, the communal living with a local constituted a safe space to practice Dutch daily. This is reflected in the overall improvement of the refugees' Dutch oral language skills as well as an increased self-confidence about the usage of Dutch. Besides, refugees report how their social skills have developed and how their understanding of Belgian society, habits, and institutions have improved.
- While support to housemates is usually characterized by small gestures and learning processes are often subtle and informal, their impact on the young refugees' lives should not be underestimated. They help in at least three ways: to reduce the daily stress newcomers experience, to help learn new skills in an informal setting, and to help navigate and find their place in their new society of residence. Importantly, the value of support from housemates lies primarily in its informal, spontaneous nature and its complementarity to *professional* care and support (e.g. by a social worker, psychotherapist, youth worker, etc.), it is not a substitute for professional help.
- Buddies have also learned from this experience. Buddies' cultural empathy has also increased, meaning that they now feel better enabled to more quickly grasp which feelings, thoughts, and behaviours are important to people with other cultural backgrounds. We saw how most buddies felt that at the end of CURANT, they had a more informed, nuanced view on issues related to the position of newcomers.
- Concerning the four different types of accommodation in CURANT, it is remarkable how four-bedroom houses, in particular, appeared to facilitate positive experiences. This is probably because they combine the 'best of two worlds' of smaller (manageable social setting) and larger (diverse social interactions) types of communal living accommodation. In addition to the number of inhabitants, the collective housing's physical design is important in understanding social dynamics between housemates.

### *Limitations and challenges*

- CURANT confirmed how communal living may be challenging, and how meaningful in-depth social contact among housemates is not a given. Among other things, housemates' personalities, differing social lives, diverging daily schedules, different views on gender relations, communication issues and unequal financial situations may explain variations in frequency and nature of the contact between housemates in their CURANT accommodations.
- Communal living with local young adults is not a one-size-fits-all solution appropriate for all unaccompanied young adult refugees.
- The CURANT experience has learned that the set-up of such a communal living project should be done with caution and requires
  - (a) thorough screening of candidates
  - (b) careful matching of candidates
  - (c) training of and support to candidates before and during the project
  - (d) mediation mechanisms and procedures

- (e) outflow and aftercare procedures.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the beneficial effects of mixed communal living between locals and refugees for both groups as well as its challenges, we recommend:

- a. To **include small-scale collective housing**, such as 4-bedroom communal accommodations, **in the regular social housing supply**, or in other types of housing that are affordable and accessible for people with a limited income. This would match wider tendencies towards small-scale collective living as an alternative to large-scale residential care (see Box 2). This approach implies:
  - a. Investment in the **design and building** of social housing<sup>23</sup> suitable for communal living or adaption of existing social housing to the design principles of collective housing;
  - b. **Adjustments of the legislation** related to social housing, to make communal social housing accessible to groups that would otherwise not qualify to enter into social housing (e.g. due to a too high income) but who could fill a supportive role in a socially mixed housing community;
  - c. To **build and share expertise** on community building in communal living, i.e. how to guide and support mixed housing communities including socially vulnerable members to maximize supportive social dynamics while minimizing negative dynamics in communal living
  - d. To install trained **‘communal living-counselors’** in regular social services
- b. To **remove legal and other barriers to communal living** for people with an income substitution benefit (e.g. those with a living wage, unemployment benefits, invalidity benefits, guaranteed income for elderly) on the private housing market. In Belgium, if non-family members live together<sup>24</sup> and are perceived as ‘one household’ by authorities, under current legislation this may have undesirable financial and judicial repercussions<sup>25</sup>.
- c. To **stimulate existing small-scale, bottom-up initiated communal living communities** to welcome (unaccompanied) young adult refugees into their housing community by disseminating practical

### BOX 2: SMALL-SCALE COLLECTIVE HOUSING AS THE FUTURE OF ASSISTED HOUSING?

*In the care sectors aiming at disabled persons and people with psychiatric needs in and homeless people shelters, etc. there is a pursuit for the ‘de-institutionalization’ of the care offer and the housing and residential offer. Large institutions are evolving into small-scale assisted or sheltered living projects. And now we are evolving towards housing forms with a [social] mix of inhabitants and integration into normal neighbourhoods.*

(Samenhuizen vzw, translated from Dutch)

<sup>23</sup> This can happen through private-public partnerships (See e.g. Socius, a Dutch private company building community-oriented social housing for youth).

<sup>24</sup> See Provincie Antwerpen (2015).

<sup>25</sup> For single young adult refugees receiving a living wage, communal living would lead to a significant lowering of their income. However, communal living does not imply that members share their income. For an overview of all financial repercussions, see Samenhuizen vzw (2019).



information, by offering guidance and support throughout the process and providing (financial or other) incentives to these communities to do so. A major advantage of authentic, bottom-up-led communal living initiatives compared to top-down initiatives such as CURANT, is that social dynamics will be more spontaneous and that these are likely to show more resilience in case of challenges.

- d. To **promote a broader range of existing, affordable types of alternative accommodations** that have the potential to generate additional social contact, support and learning opportunities for young adult refugees<sup>26</sup>, by creating incentives for house owners to engage in those initiatives, and by removing legal and other barriers to such initiatives, and by informing and guiding refugees to these initiatives
- e. To **boost innovative housing initiatives**, especially those that focus on supportive collective housing and inclusion. To explore and test specific types of supportive communal living with other target groups as CURANT, for instance, refugees and older locals (Zorgwonen, duo-living with local senior) or other vulnerable groups/families in communal living or cohousing.
- f. To **invest in research** investigating the outcomes of different types of communal living accommodations, especially concerning integration-related effects such as social cohesion between locals and newcomers, language acquisition, intercultural attitudes, social network-building, etc.

The following principles should take priority in the organization of small-scale collective housing, and communal living in particular:

- a. To realize the full potential of communal living as a tool for refugee integration, the following **selection criteria** should be applied for *all inhabitants*:
  - Absence of dominant mental health issues or other issues (e.g. substance addiction) that may complicate social contact
  - Motivation for the concept of communal living (valuing social contact with housemates)
  - A sufficiently flexible attitude towards other lifestyles (e.g., about relations, eating habits, social life) and willingness to take this into account.

Additionally, for the volunteer ‘buddies’, the following characteristics are recommended:

- Capacity to offer support, i.e. buddies should reach a certain level of independence and resilience (e.g., have a supportive social network, proper social skills). However, buddies should have the freedom to define what type of support they want to offer, starting from their capacities (= essential difference with professional caregivers)
  - Willingness to offer (some) support and to dedicate (some) time to housemates.
- b. The **composition of inhabitant groups** should be done with care and consideration. The focus should be on creating communities with common expectations about communal living. In the process of composition, it is important that participants have the chance to get to know each other and have a say in the composition, however, it is also important to protect more vulnerable

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<sup>26</sup> In the Flemish context, this includes for instance. “Hospitawonen” and “Melding Tijdelijk Wonen”, regulations designed to allow house owners to rent one room temporarily to refugees.

individuals from social rejection. As there is little evidence on the best approach, further research and experimentation is recommended.

## FURTHER READING

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