

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

Working Paper May 2018

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Introduction

This working paper concerns the social policy intervention *Cohousing and case management for Unaccompanied young adult Refugees in ANTwerp* (CURANT). CURANT is an ‘innovative urban project’ funded by the European Union’s European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The project is led by the City of Antwerp and implemented in collaboration with a consortium of five other institutions. The central target group of CURANT are unaccompanied minors with refugee status or subsidiary protection, who have recently turned 18 and thus entered adulthood, or are about to do so. CURANT combines two types of support for these young refugees: first, it provides intensive guidance by a team of social workers, psychotherapists and educational workers; second, it offers low-priced housing in shared accommodation with young local flatmate ‘buddies’.

This working paper is based on findings discussed in the project report *CURANT: a first evaluation report* (Ravn et al., 2018), which focuses on the first impressions and experiences of the young refugees and their local buddies, who entered the project during its first year of implementation. This first evaluation is part of a theory-driven evaluation study (Chen 2015) examining CURANT (see *CURANT: groundwork for evaluation and literature study*, Mahieu & Ravn, 2017). The data for this evaluation report was gathered using a mixed-method approach, including both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews and observations) methods, with both the refugees and the buddies. In this working paper, we start from the perceptions and experiences of the refugees and the buddies, and highlight a number of relevant insights, challenges and bottlenecks that might arise when setting up and implementing a project such as CURANT.

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It is important to note that CURANT is an ongoing project to which the project partners are constantly prepared to make adjustments when a need for this becomes apparent. This means that the CURANT project team have already addressed certain issues highlighted in this working paper. The continuous adjustments that characterize CURANT and the implications this has for evaluating such a project are not the focus of this working paper, but will be discussed in subsequent project reports.¹ The aim of this working paper is to point out some challenges and possible pitfalls that might arise during the initial stage of the implementation of a project such as CURANT, and which may be particularly relevant when designing and creating similar projects. The issues highlighted in this document are discussed thematically and focus on social networks, participation in CURANT, and the effect of cohousing. Each theme includes a discussion of one or more subthemes which concludes with some insights into how these initial issues, challenges and difficulties can be better addressed or adjusted in current or future cohousing projects. Finally, we present some general concluding remarks.

Social networks

Refugees' existing social networks and sources of social support

Through various intervention actions (e.g. interaction with the flatmate, learning and training activities), the project partners expect/aspire to have a significant impact on refugees' social networks. More specifically, the project partners aim to broaden refugees' social networks and support them in developing ethnically diverse, informal networks with peers. A first qualitative measurement and analysis of refugees' social networks upon entering the project showed that these networks are indeed not ethnically diverse. However, while refugees' networks are rather homogenous in terms of gender, mother tongue, religion and country of origin, they often consist of a significant number of people who can be broadly categorized under family, friends and caregivers (e.g. teachers, legal guardians, social assistants, etc.). The number of people who refugees include in their social network varies greatly. More importantly, our research showed that many refugees are able to rely on their existing network for different types of social support, including: instrumental support, informational support, social companionship and to a lesser extent emotional support. While the project partners and the project's objectives focus on the importance and the creation of bridging capital,² our research highlight the importance of bonding capital.

While it might be beneficial to stimulate the creation of more ethnically diverse social networks to allow for more bridging capital, the importance of existing social networks and resources of social support should not be underestimated. It is important for both stakeholders and flatmates to be aware of and recognize the strengths of existing sources of support and include them in the project's effort to support and empower refugees when setting up a cohousing project.

¹ A second and third evaluation report will be produced in the course of 2019.

² When constructing social networks during resettlement processes, refugees may build ties with individuals from the same ethnic group, leading to the development of 'bonding' social capital. 'Bridging' social capital, in contrast, involves ties between individuals from different ethnic groups (Putnam, 2007).

The importance of the refugees' family

When organizing a project such as CURANT for the specific target group of young adult unaccompanied refugees, it is important to take into account the essential role that families play in the lives and minds of these young adults. However, our analysis showed that apart from psychological counselling, refugees' family situations are not very present in CURANT. While this is not surprising, as the refugees' family is a factor that the project is unable to have a direct impact on, our data revealed that the family is the most important priority for most of the participating refugees, causing high levels of stress, worry and concern due to different family situations. While some refugees are involved in an administrative procedure leading to family reunification, others are in the process of having to come to terms with the fact that they will not be reunified with their family in Belgium. Also, in the case of successful family reunification and the family arriving or about to arrive in Belgium, young refugees face another source of stress – they suddenly become the family member responsible for handling the administrative tasks of registering the family at the municipality, arranging welfare benefits for them, finding housing, etc.

The family of young adult unaccompanied refugees is an important factor which must be considered. It is vital to be aware that the situation of their family might have a significant influence on a young refugee's experience of and wellbeing in the project, or their aspirations for the future. We argue that the family situation of the refugee should be monitored carefully; it should be regularly discussed with the participant if s/he expresses a need to talk about it and it should be taken into consideration throughout the whole trajectory of the refugee in the project.

The buddies' search for more heterogeneous social networks

As already pointed out, one of the main goals of CURANT is to broaden and diversify the social networks of the participating refugees to include, in particular, Dutch-speaking locals. The buddies are expected to play a crucial role in this. With respect to the buddies, the aspiration of the stakeholders mainly revolves around them developing stronger intercultural competences, while their social networks are not a point of attention. In other words, broadening and diversifying the social networks is believed to be necessary for the refugees, but not for the buddies. By assuming this one-way impact, the project seems to consider the existing networks of the buddies to be 'normal' and not in need of change, as opposed to those of the refugees. Our data led to two important insights in this regard. Firstly, when entering CURANT, the social networks of the buddies are generally just as homogeneous – if not more – than the social networks of the refugees, and few buddies (most of whom are native Belgians) have friends with an immigration background. Secondly, in some cases, the buddies critically reflect on the homogeneity of their existing networks and explicitly seek to diversify them by participating in CURANT. This search for more heterogeneous networks by the buddies indicates a 'blind spot' in the initial assumptions of the project and points to the need to be cautious in aspiring to make the social networks of a particular group more 'diverse', while being uncritical about the networks of others.



If stakeholders aspire to make young people's social networks more diverse, it is important to sufficiently reflect on what is meant by this and for whom this 'diversification' is desirable. If only the refugees' social networks are considered to require diversification, this implies either an erroneous assumption that the networks of young local citizens are by definition diverse, or a somewhat problematic notion that equates 'diversification' with 'including more Dutch-speaking locals', thereby making the need for contacts across one's social group the responsibility of some but not of others.

Participating in CURANT

Refugees' aspirations

From the project partners' perspective, young refugees either lack or have unrealistic aspirations that are not suitable for their new life in Belgium. Therefore, an important project objective is to (re)shape refugees' aspirations in order to increase their participation in the Belgian labour market and society, while taking into account their personal wishes and capacities, and their disadvantaged position in the labour market. Our research showed that, in relation to (re)shaping refugees' aspirations in a project such as CURANT, finding a balance between the above-mentioned elements is important, especially taking into account refugees' personal wishes and aspirations. When asked about their aspirations, the refugees generally emphasized the importance of education (mostly in the sense of obtaining a qualification that allows them to enter the labour market) and working. For many refugees, having a job is considered the first step in their general life plan, which includes getting a car, a house and later on finding a partner and/or having a family. Because of the limited number of years of schooling that a large majority of refugees had before fleeing from their home country (average years of schooling was 5.7, with about 20% of the refugees only having two years of schooling), obtaining even a basic vocational secondary education qualification will still entail many more years of schooling. Our data showed that refugees dislike this and that it causes frustration because they feel they will be too old when they complete their secondary education. They do not want to rely on welfare benefits, and hope to send money to their families in their home countries, and sometimes they want to generally fulfil the role of providing for, and supporting, the family. The frustration that stems from their eagerness to start working, rather than first studying for several years, is strongly linked with the refugees' specific family situations. The initial focus of the project on (long-term) education for refugees was more strongly pursued at the beginning of its implementation. Now, after one year, the project stakeholders are paying more attention to guiding participants towards more tailor-made and shorter educational trajectories, outside regular education, which focus on more direct labour market entry.

It is vital to always take into account refugees' own aspirations and to consider these as an opportunity to build on. The fact that their aspirations can be very specific and may diverge from aspirations of other groups of young people does not necessarily imply a 'lack of aspirations', but rather that due to their specific situation and family expectations their priorities might be different. Communicating clearly why a certain educational trajectory is considered necessary and listening to the needs and wishes of the refugees is crucial to avoid additional frustrations.

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The risk of overburdening participating refugees

One recurring frustration among many of the participating refugees concerns how time-consuming the project appears to be for them. Many refugees point this out as a negative aspect of CURANT. They criticized the fact that they have to attend many appointments with different professionals from the distinct partner organizations of CURANT (e.g. social workers, psychologists, youth workers, etc.), as well as people from organizations outside CURANT. The fact that the refugees were obliged to follow training courses over multiple days during a one-week school holiday break was not appreciated by many. The project partners are now well aware of the fact that the programme generally places too much of a burden on young refugees and that it should focus more on tailored and flexible trajectories for individual refugees. They have also attempted to align their workshops more to the needs and interests of the refugees by addressing subjects brought up by the participants themselves. Some training courses have been shortened and given a different format in an attempt to align them more with refugees' wishes and preferences.

In order to avoid frustration and keep refugees motivated to participate in a project such as CURANT, it is crucial to not overburden them and to provide them with the space and time they need. Limiting the number of obligatory activities to a minimum respects refugees' agency, in the sense that the decision to participate in the activities or not remains mostly their own choice. Working with an 'à la carte' list of workshops, seminars and training courses from which refugees can pick and choose, and clearly indicating what the possible work load of each session entails, is also a way of giving refugees more control over their trajectory and the activities in which they participate.

Refugees' agency in integration projects

Generally, in a project aimed at helping and supporting a group of unaccompanied young adult refugees, it is important to consider and work with the refugees' agency. While refugees are often stereotyped as vulnerable victims in need of care, they are also independent individuals who exercise agency. Recognizing and building on this agency might be particularly relevant for the target group of unaccompanied refugees, as these young people have fled from their home country and arrived in Belgium on their own. Refugees develop personal strategies to address their own needs, objectives and priorities. It is crucial to not undermine refugees' sense of agency and independence, especially when the explicit and implicit goals of CURANT are exactly precisely to emancipate refugees.

It is crucial to take refugees' agency into account when designing and implementing an integration/cohousing project such as CURANT. In order to enhance refugees' wellbeing during their participation, it is important to not only have a plan and develop strategies to offer help *to* them, but also to work *with* them, i.e. to recognize, try to feed into, and facilitate the development of their own support-seeking strategies according to their personal priorities.

The role of the buddy

In CURANT, the buddies are expected to take up the role of the refugees' 'local flatmates'. The project partners assume that, contrary to refugees' relationships with professional caregivers, a less hierarchical, more balanced, two-way relationship between a buddy and a refugee could be developed, in which the buddies also have to deal with problems. However, our analysis indicated that, in practice, a certain 'hierarchy' is present in how the project partners and the buddies interpret the role of a buddy. The buddy is considered as having to set a good example, functioning as a kind of 'role model' to the refugees, who are mostly perceived as 'vulnerable' and in need of help. Participating in CURANT implies a certain commitment and sense of responsibility, including, for example, making their refugee flatmate aware of the importance of respecting and showing up for appointments and of reading and responding to official letters they receive, and motivating the refugees to participate in the activities organized by CURANT. In relation to providing support to the refugees, our data indicate that support which goes beyond mere practical support (e.g. helping the refugees with their schoolwork) remains rather rare. The buddies also noted that the refugees do not always need their support and they quickly realize that the refugees often already have a support network or know how to handle things on their own.

It is difficult to aspire to a less hierarchical relationship between buddies and refugees while at the same time expecting a certain sense of responsibility from these buddies towards the refugees. Perceiving the refugees as a predominantly 'needy' group may underestimate their agency, but also overestimate the possible support role of the buddy. The fact that, in reality, these refugees are not necessarily as vulnerable as expected, can be used as an opportunity to deconstruct this initial assumption and start thinking in terms of a more equal relationship between the cohabiting 'flatmates'.

The effect of cohousing

Social interaction: a spontaneous result of cohousing?

The project partners of CURANT aspire to the provision of cohousing for a refugee and a local buddy that will offer a durable setting for them to have regular, informal, meaningful social interaction, and also consider this social interaction to be a spontaneous process. That is, by providing the conditions for the refugee and the buddy to cohabit (i.e. a shared living space), it is assumed that regular, informal and meaningful social interaction will ensue. However, based on the initial observations and interviews with refugees and the buddies in the early to mid-stages of the project, it appears that this social interaction may not always be as intensive as expected. The closeness of the relationship and the level and type of interaction between refugees and their buddies varies greatly. There are, of course, numerous factors that might explain this variation between the duos (e.g. language proficiency of the refugees, personality of each flatmate, the type and layout of the accommodation, working/school schedule of the flatmates, etc.). In some cases, flatmates interact a lot and engage in activities together. However, in several 'households', while the flatmates are living together in one house or apartment, they still live rather separate lives. This might be because some refugees already have quite extensive social networks on which they can

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rely for different types of social support, or because one or both flatmates have busy schedules (school, work, internships, CURANT activities, social life, etc.). It is important to note that the buddies especially referred to the issue of time, and expected that as their own and the refugees' participation in the project progresses, their social interaction might increase.

While social interaction can indeed be considered a spontaneous process, the act of providing a shared living space which refugees and local buddies cohabit, is not necessarily sufficient for any meaningful interaction to take place. Both the refugees' and the buddies' existing networks, their work and education schedules, their social obligations, as well as their obligations towards CURANT, may mean that in reality either the refugee, the buddy, or both spend limited time at home. Consequently, it is important not to underestimate the importance of the flatmates' daily rhythms and routines in the development of meaningful social interaction.

Concluding remarks

Reconsidering the impact of cohousing and social interaction

In the CURANT project, the social interaction that is assumed to develop between refugees and their flatmate buddies as a result of cohousing, is also expected to have a significant impact on refugees' skills (language, social cognitive skills, independence, etc.), feelings (sense of wellbeing, sense of inclusion) and social networks (broader and more diverse networks). Furthermore, social interaction is also expected to influence the buddies' social skills, and particularly their intercultural sensitivity. While, to date, this interaction may not always have been as intense as expected, this does not necessarily mean that cohousing is not important or meaningful for the refugees or the buddies. While there might not always be a strong emotional bond between the flatmates or a direct impact on refugees' social networks, our data showed that many refugees rely on their buddies for help with administrative and practical matters (e.g. translating official letters). In addition, at the beginning of their participation in the project, the refugees said that they appreciated the fact that they could or would be able to practise Dutch by talking to their buddy or other flatmates. Furthermore, although the impact on the intercultural sensitivity of the buddies is difficult to measure at this stage, the data indicate that the buddies often reconsider their initial idea of the refugees as a 'vulnerable group' without social networks who are in 'need' of their help and instead come to see them as resourceful young adults who know how to go about getting things done. While the impact of cohousing and social interaction might diverge from the original aspirations of the project partners, cohabiting with a local buddy might still positively affect the CURANT participants' lives and perceptions, and could, for example, be beneficial for breaking down stereotypes about refugees, and learning about egalitarian cohousing, among other positive outcomes.

Position of refugees and buddies in the project

Finally, another important issue to consider when organizing a project such as CURANT – which is constructed around the idea of building a relationship between 'refugees' and their local flatmate 'buddies' – is how both groups are positioned within the project and in relation to its objectives.

The buddies are to some extent a target group of the project, in the sense that the project partners expect that cohousing gives them the opportunity to interact with young refugees and to acquire the social, intercultural skills needed to build a relationship with newcomers. However, all of the project's objectives directed towards supporting refugees and enhancing their integration into society. The aim of the interventions with respect to the buddies is to support them socially and strengthen them individually, which is assumed to enable them to build a healthy, supportive but egalitarian relationship with their refugee flatmate. This, in turn, is expected to ultimately enhance the refugees' integration into society. In this sense, the buddy (being a young local citizen) in a way is considered to be an ally of the project partners, whose role is mainly to facilitate and contribute to the ultimate project goal, i.e. enhancing the integration of the refugees into society. The design of the project and the way it is implemented thus emphasizes the distinct categories of 'the refugee' and the 'local buddy'. As a consequence, the 'otherness' of the refugee, who is framed as 'culturally different', vulnerable and in need of help and guidance (e.g. to create 'realistic aspirations', to develop broader social networks, etc.) is emphasized once again. However, by 'othering' the refugees in this way, not only at the discursive level but also in the implementation of the project, the boundaries between the refugees and the buddies tend to be emphasized rather than broken down. It is important to be aware of the categories that are created and some of the assumptions that implicitly underpin the creation of these categories and the intervention actions targeting them. If 'integration' is the main goal of a cohousing project, one needs to frame the project in such a manner that 'the buddy' and 'the refugee' are on equal terms, as they need to be equal partners to achieve integration. CURANT is attempting to involve the buddies more by inviting them to participate in some of the workshops and training courses that are organized for the refugees. By inviting the buddies to these events after working hours, CURANT is also to take into account the buddies' often busy work schedules. Sometimes community events are organized in which both refugees and buddies (and sometimes stakeholders) are invited to participate. Taking this a step further, for example by sometimes also inviting the refugees to activities for the buddies, or providing activities for the cohabiting flatmates specifically, could contribute to breaking down this barrier between 'us' (the buddies) and 'them' (the refugees) and turn the focus more to an overarching 'we': the CURANT participants/young inhabitants of Antwerp.

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