

June 2018

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The Urban Lab of Europe !

The U-RLP Project Journal N°2

Project led by the City of Utrecht



**INTEGRATION OF
MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES**

The Utrecht Refugee Launchpad - U-RLP

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

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

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

Partnership:

- City of Utrecht
- Socius Wonen
- Utrecht Center for Entrepreneurship (University of Utrecht, School of Economics)
- Volksuniversiteit Utrecht
- Social Impact Factory
- Dutch Council for Refugees (Vluchtelingenwerk Midden-Nederland)
- University of Oxford - Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS)
- Roehampton University

Table of Contents

1. Executive summary	4
2. Progress made over the last six months	5
3. Current key challenges	6
3.1. Leadership for implementation	6
3.2. Increasing participation in the project's activities	7
3.3. More opportunities for positive interaction	8
3.4. Continuing and scaling up the model after the closure of the shelter	9
4. Next Steps	11

1. Executive summary

In recent months, the project has been developing its activities as planned, with some adjustments due to its innovative quality and complexity. The fact that the centre's presence in the neighbourhood has become a normality and that the coexistence between the centre's residents and neighbours is free of conflict should be highlighted as an achievement in itself. Resident asylum seekers perceive the shelter to be different from others they have lived in, which are usually more isolated from the host society. While many neighbours are fairly unfamiliar with the centre, their perceptions of it have improved considerably since the start of the project, and now only a negligible number see its presence as problematic.

In addition to continuing the training and the incubator programme, which are at the heart of the project, many other activities have been organised, mainly by the youngsters of SOCIUS. These initiatives have generated new opportunities for spontaneous personal encounters, mutual support and collaboration between asylum seekers and neighbours. There are many individual cases of personal growth and development that have been triggered by the centre and its activities.

The most relevant implementation challenges at present are how to increase the level of participation – particularly as regards neighbours – in the centre's activities, by diversifying and intensifying activities and opportunities for cooperation and meeting; how to manage the closure of the reception centre in November 2018 and its consequences for asylum seekers, young people and neighbours; and how to promote the transfer the U-RLP experience as a new way of understanding and managing refugee reception. While the partnership is awaiting first results of the project evaluation, the fact that it was referred to as a positive example both at the local and national level makes partners feel confident about the project's impact in terms of innovating in refugee reception.

2. Progress made over the last six months

Over the last months, the project's activities have been implemented as foreseen in the initial work plan.

The English and entrepreneurship courses, the incubator space and the coaching programme were attended by both residents and asylum seekers of the centre. In addition, activities initiated by the centre's younger residents have invigorated the space, attracting some neighbours and generating opportunities for encounters with asylum seekers.

As the project has consolidated over the past months, differences between U-RLP at Plan Einstein and other centres for asylum seekers have become apparent. These centres are usually segregated from the urban centre and opportunities for encounter and interaction between asylum seekers and local residents are virtually non-existent. Beyond the number and strength of the links that have been created between people, U-RLP has also generated an environment in which coexistence and sharing spaces between different groups have become a normality. Apart from organised activities, there are many day-to-day situations where young people, asylum seekers and neighbours interact, get to know each other and in some cases support each other or collaborate. These situations can occur spontaneously, for instance when a young person found out that a refugee neighbour was a bit anxious about taking her toddlers on her bike, or about finding her way to the school for the first time, and volunteered to accompany her on his bike, showing her the way for the first few days. Significantly, these relationships do not always place the natives in the role of 'supporter', as has been seen during English lessons where some Dutch natives struggle to follow and their asylum seeker classmates encourage them to keep trying.

Another example of the capacity of U-RLP to facilitate inclusion from the first day has to do with the use of the bicycle. While in other asylum shelters it is not common to see residents cycling in a fluent way, in Plan Einstein, children and adults are seen cycling naturally, and are almost as carefree as their Dutch counterparts who use their bikes as if they were an extension of their own body. This illustrates how the asylum seekers are quick to learn and adopt some Dutch "habits".

Two important events for the project took place in the past months. Firstly, various European city representatives from the Eurocities Social Affairs Forum came to Utrecht in March to visit the centre and speak with U-RLP participants about the impact the project is having on their lives. It was the young people, asylum seekers and neighbourhood residents themselves who were responsible for explaining the project in a very personal way through their own experiences.



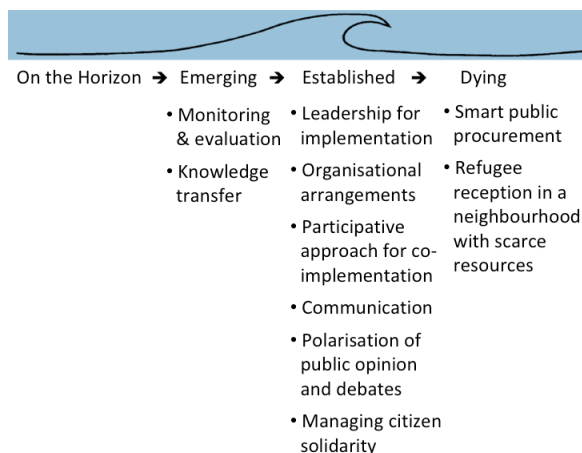
Photo by Henni Bunnik

Secondly, on March 21, local elections took place in the Netherlands. At present, a new city government is negotiated which will mean new political leadership for the project.

U-RLP was conceived from the outset as a pilot project to test a new and innovative approach to asylum seeker reception. Naturally, during its implementation different challenges arise. It is important that they are identified and addressed. In this journal we will focus on the most relevant challenges to the current phase.

3. Current key challenges

During the partnership meeting, the project team proposed to review and update the challenges identified in the first journal. To do this, the following “wave-model” was used to gauge the evolution and relevance of the different challenges.



The Eurocities Social Affairs Forum in Utrecht also presented an opportunity to discuss solutions to some of the challenges with the participation of actors linked to the project. The young people, who live in the building together with asylum seekers and the neighbours

discussed some challenges and proposed strategies to address them. This discussion also benefited from the participation of municipal staff, project partners and representatives of other UIA-projects dealing with the reception of refugees.

Finally, during the partnership meeting, the partners responsible for the project’s evaluation shared some first results of their research, based on the questionnaires and interviews carried out with young people living in the building, asylum seekers and neighbours. These provisional results, which have to be consolidated for the first interim evaluation, report due at the end of June, also contributed to enriching the debate and the analysis of the project’s challenges.

The remainder of this journal will focus on the challenges that we consider critical to the good development of the project in the current phase. Some of them have emerged now, while others were already identified in the previous phase.

3.1. Leadership for implementation

The municipality’s leadership of the project is strong and consolidated.



Photo by Henni Bunnik

Additionally, over the past few months, coordination and cooperation between partners

have improved, as new spaces and channels for coordination have been established, including regular meetings with practitioners.

The main leadership challenge stems from the local elections that took place on March 21. Currently it is still unknown who will be the new political leader responsible for the project, as this person is expected to be identified in the coming weeks. While this situation does not affect the day-to-day work of the project, it does postpone decisions of a more strategic nature, especially those related to the future, and the situation after the closure of the centre.

3.2. Increasing participation in the project's activities

The training and incubator activities play a key role in the U-RLP model for several reasons. First of all, they offer new opportunities for the future, both for asylum seekers and neighbours. One of the Plan Einstein participants from the neighbourhood even became a local politician. For him, U-RLP provided a unique opportunity to engage in conversations with other neighbourhood members, to become a protagonist in his community and contribute to improving it.



Photo by Henni Bunnik

Secondly, it became clear that asylum seekers value very positively the fact that they obtain a formal certificate at the end of the courses. Having lived through a period of total instability where making life plans was impossible, this symbolises the start of a new life, new opportunities and new expectations. As one refugee explains:

“I have experienced a lot since I fled my country. Plan Einstein gives me a chance to work on my future. Last week I received a certificate for participating in the entrepreneurship course. I would like to thank everyone for making this plan possible. I do not have to sit still anymore. I can work actively on my future.”

But beyond the training, the activities of U-RLP also provide opportunities for human

relationships that have a beneficial impact on mental wellbeing.



Photo by Henni Bunnik

While the activities work as planned, overall participation was lower than expected during the last months, especially in the entrepreneurship courses and in the incubator programme. Taking into account the benefits of these activities for the participants, the decision was taken to make extra efforts to attract more participants by overcoming the obstacles for participation that were identified.

One measure taken was to strengthen the dissemination of information, so that more people are reached, in particular among the neighbourhood residents. In this sense, a greater use of social networks has proven effective, although it is important to coordinate this PR-work between partners.

A second measure has been to extend the opening hours of the incubator, which is now open every day during office hours and in the afternoon and, whenever there are activities planned, also on weekends. The additional costs incurred were deemed necessary given the demand expressed by the participants and partners.

For those asylum seekers who do not master English or Dutch, language is another obstacle to participation. English courses and ‘language-

cafes' - where volunteers support asylum seekers in their language acquisition – are there to help overcome this barrier. Additionally, the lack of a day care service has been highlighted

as an obstacle to the participation of some women. The Main Urban Authority enabled a day Care Service in response to this challenge.

3.3. More opportunities for positive interaction

One of the project's fundamental objectives is to avoid the segregation of asylum seekers and connect them from the outset to their local environment. Not only is this considered beneficial for their inclusion process and for their life perspectives, but also as a means to counteract negative perceptions and narratives about refugees and diversity in general. For this, it is important that opportunities for contact, knowledge sharing and positive interaction are created.

Apart from the training activities and the incubator, the young residents have promoted various social and cultural activities providing spaces for meeting and interaction between asylum seekers and neighbours. Thanks to these activities, some of which were spontaneous initiatives, different situations of encounter between asylum seekers and neighbours have been generated. This was demonstrated during the opening day of Radio Einstein (a neighbourhood initiative), which showcased a mix of cultures and music styles. The event saw the spontaneous formation of a band between a Syrian and an Ethiopian boy playing the guitar, a Dutch girl playing the drums and, after that, a Surinamese gentleman from the neighbourhood joining in with a rap performance. It is this kind of experience that really helps build a community which is aware and proud of its diversity.

Sharing a space and creating activities in the centre that address the whole neighbourhood does not mean that it is easy to create intense relationships between people, as individual circumstances, aspirations and prospects can

vary a lot. But independently of the level of participation in the various activities and the quantity of strong links across groups, the simple "normality" of coexistence, the absence of conflict, and the improving perception of the centre among its neighbours are already very important achievements worth underlining: although many neighbours do not have much knowledge about the Centre, only 6% of the neighbours surveyed have shown a negative attitude about it, while the majority shows a neutral or moderately positive attitude (according to the first results of the research carried out by the project evaluation team). As one neighbour pointed out:

"I was curious to meet asylum seekers. Who are these people who come from Syria, Iraq or Yemen? You read and hear so much about what they have gone through. Now that we have become neighbours, we have an opportunity to get to know one another."



Photo by Henni Bunnik

Asylum seekers also perceive the centre to be more welcoming than other centres, and that it is more connected to the host society. The following statement of a refugee illustrates this:

“I have been in asylum centres where we had little to no contact with Dutch people. Now I live among them! For me personally, it goes beyond cooking and eating together. You build up a network. My network provides me with social opportunities and enables me to think of my future.”

It is these personal experiences resulting from contact and interaction that should be strengthened further by creating more opportunities for meeting, and keeping the motivation of young people from the neighbourhood high by supporting them and helping them to overcome obstacles for the organisation of activities while also managing their expectations. So what can be done in the coming months to generate greater opportunities for sharing knowledge, positive interaction and increasing mutual acceptance among neighbours and asylum seekers?



Photo by Henni Bunnik

An interesting experience to build on here is the creation of mixed work groups of young people, asylum seekers and neighbours to prepare the visit of a group of politicians from different cities to the centre during the Social Affairs Forum of Eurocities last March.

Inspired by this, the idea emerged to design more activities focusing on creativity and cultural exchange (as is already done with the radio project and others), empowerment and raise awareness (possibly through anti-rumours training). Such activities could convey a more authentic image of reality and help to break down prejudices and stereotypes that are often disseminated by the media.

Another idea that emerged is to propose an initiative requiring mixed teams of young residents, asylum seekers and neighbours to work together, for instance to generate concrete proposals for the improvement of the neighbourhood, the city or to address certain social challenges such as housing and also the reception of refugees. Presenting the results of these groups' work to the City Council could showcase U-RLP and the contributions of all participants. This type of hands-on initiative tends to motivate participants and can reinforce a sense of belonging and pride in being part of the "Plan Einstein" community while at the same time generating social capital and improving the conditions for living together.

3.4. Continuing and scaling up the model after the closure of the shelter

One of the main challenges of the project is the closure of the centre on November 1 2018, which means that the project has a shorter life cycle than the other UIA projects. Although the

closure date, dependent on the end of the rental contract with the owner has been known and taken into account for a long time, it has an obvious impact on all actors, starting with the

asylum seekers, who express their feeling of insecurity (again) about their future, asking themselves where they will have to go.

The asylum seekers

From the U-RLP logic of starting inclusion from the first day, it makes total sense that people who have started their adaptation process and generated networks with the community continue living in the same territory. Therefore, the assumption of the local team has always been that they can be transferred to another centre in the city, and that those who are recognised as refugees can stay in Utrecht or in the city region. While in the end such a decision falls under the competencies of national state agency responsible for the asylum shelters, the nomination of the new deputy Mayor responsible for the project can have an impact on it, too.

So while the decision on the relocation of asylum seekers is taken elsewhere, the project team is at least talking to the actors that are relevant for planning what will happen to the asylum seekers after the closure. There are conversations about the possibility of transferring the project to another building in another neighbourhood, adapting it based on the lessons learned.

Steps have also been taken in the project design to ensure that those people who are conducting training courses at the time of closure will be able to continue them.

The youngsters and the neighbourhood residents

The team must also manage the impact of closure on the SOCIUS youngsters and the neighbourhood. In general there is a very strong demand from the participants for the project to continue, which is a very positive sign of its impact, but also a significant challenge because it requires managing these expectations.

Although the participation of the neighbours during the first phase has been limited, informal networks have been created, and will be extended with further activities and training until the closure of the centre. Participants really voice their concern about losing the Plan Einstein Community they consider themselves a member of. Even after the formal activities they return to the Incubator Space for the conversations and connections they developed there. Discussions have begun to address the possibility of continuing some activities in the neighbourhood, to take advantage of the momentum created by the project and to reach parts of the neighbourhood that have not been reached so far. At present, on the one hand, the project team finds it difficult to implement activities once the centre is closed, and is aware of the risk of raising false expectations, while on the other, it believes that it is important that the project leaves a tangible "Plan Einstein legacy" to the neighbourhood.

Transfer and roll out of the RLP-model

Beyond its immediate impact on the asylum seekers and the neighbourhood it is situated in, U-RLP also wants to represent a pilot experience for changing the philosophy towards a more inclusive model of refugee reception. Although its evaluation is still underway, the impact of the project in terms of public and political attention is noteworthy. The "Integration from Day 1" approach promoted by U-RLP was included in the governance agreement of the new Dutch government (2017) and, at local level, U-RLP was mentioned in the electoral manifestos of several political parties.

For the project team, it is not easy to dedicate time and effort to the transferability of the model while managing the consequences of the closure and keeping the project going on a day-to-day basis. But the transfer of the U-RLP experience is a necessary effort because the

success of this project will be measured to some degree by its subsequent ability to influence refugee reception policies. While the political impact so far is a positive result, there is a lot of

work to do to scrutinise the lessons learned and the pilot's strengths and weaknesses in order to make it adaptable to other contexts.

4. Next Steps

The next steps to be taken could be described as follows:

- Boost activities in the upcoming months.
- Engage in a dialogue about the transfer of U-RLP and new possibilities to continue the project.
- Continue dialogue between Municipality of Utrecht and several stakeholders, networks and policy advisors to include the lessons learned in the Migration Policy of the City and to facilitate the transfer of lessons learned to other (EU) cities.
- Provide input, inspiration and advice to interested parties who are visiting U-RLP.
- React to the participants' requests to continue the project after its official closure in November 2018.
- Manage expectations of participants and neighbourhood residents.
- Manage enthusiasm inspired by the U-RLP chemistry (see new initiatives such as the Neighbourhood Safari and Radio Einstein).
- Participate in academic symposium meeting around RLP-experience in June.
- Partnership meeting in June.
- Introduce the new deputy mayor to U-RLP and accommodate his/her approach to refugee reception in the city.



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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.