

A photograph of two young men standing in front of a brick building. The man on the left is wearing a blue denim jacket over a grey t-shirt and has a black bag slung over his shoulder. The man on the right is wearing a white t-shirt and has his arm around the other man's shoulder. They are both smiling and looking towards the left. A third person's head and shoulder are visible in the foreground on the left, facing away from the camera.

CURANT

**Cohousing and case management
for Unaccompanied young adult Refugees
in ANTwerp**





What is CURANT?

CURANT supports unaccompanied young adults between the ages of 17 and 22 years, who arrived in Belgium without their parents and who have been granted refugee status or subsidiary protection.

When unaccompanied minors reach legal adulthood, they no longer are eligible for housing in reception centres, enrolment in reception classes in schools, customised training courses for minors and support from a legal guardian.

Due to their precarious situation, they risk leaving school without qualifications and continuing to depend on public social welfare services.

Innovative aspects

- 1 Focus on young adults aged 18+
- 2 Individual and integrated case management approach
- 3 Cohousing in innovative housing units
- 4 Theory-driven evaluation



Bridge the gap

CURANT aims to bridge this service gap for young people by providing a holistic support programme that prepares refugees for independent living and boosts their participation in Belgian society.

This programme includes:

- professional individual psychological support
- communal training programmes focussing on activation, housing and integration
- tailored guidance through case management

Innovative aspects

One of the innovative aspects of CURANT concerns the involvement of young, Dutch-speaking locals, called 'buddies', in a cohousing setting. Buddies are volunteers between the ages of 20 and 31 years. After a screening and intake procedure, the refugees and buddies are matched and become flatmates. Both the buddies and the refugees receive substantial support in the framework of CURANT and pay an affordable rent (€250).

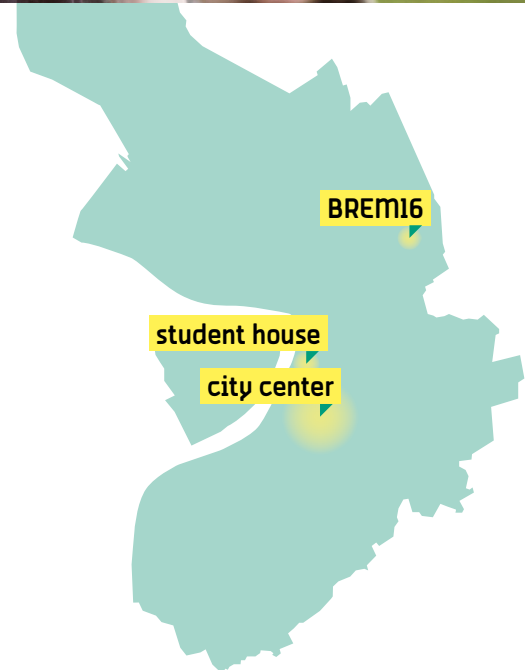
With the buddying system, CURANT aims to develop informal learning processes, to make the social networks of the refugees and buddies more diverse and improve the Dutch language competencies of the refugees.



Housing

The housing provides accommodation for 63 refugee-buddy duos simultaneously. CURANT renovated, built, rented or bought various units throughout the city of Antwerp.

- 23 two-bedroom flats
- 9 four-bedroom houses
- 1 student house with 12 individual studios (= 6 duos)
- 1 cohousing site (BREM16) with 16 two-bedroom flats



Who are the participants?



Age

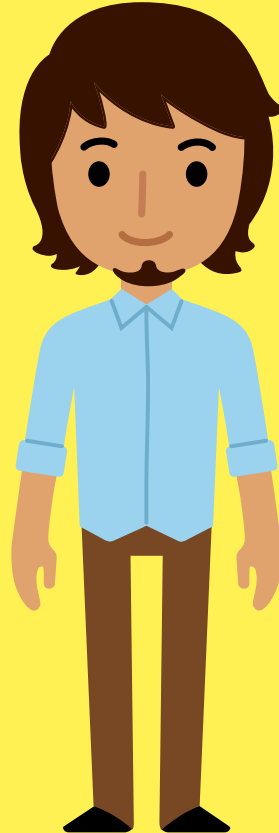
Mean: 19 years old
(min 17, max 25)

Sex
♂ 95% ♀ 5%



Country of birth

- Afghanistan 62%
- Eritrea 19%
- Syria 9%
- Somalia 6%



81 refugees



Years of schooling in country of origin

Mean = 5.37 years



Residence before entering in CURANT

More than half of the refugees in CURANT came from Local Reception Initiatives of the City or Province of Antwerp.



Highest diploma

- Master's degree 41%
- Bachelor's degree 28%
- Secondary school qualification 28%
- Higher vocational education qualification 3%



Interesting facts: before participating in CURANT, ...

- 55% of the buddies spent three months or longer abroad
- 86% of the buddies did volunteer work



Age

Mean: 25 years old
(min 20, max 31)

Sex

♂ 52% ♀ 48%



Socio-economic status upon entering CURANT

- 69% of the buddies were employed (some of them part-time)
- 17% fulltime students
- 9% jobseekers
- 5% combining their studies with a (part-time) job or are doing an unpaid internship



Buddies want to participate because...

- They wanted to contribute to a better world (89%)
- They found it meaningful to help people that need support (89%)
- They were worried about the fate of young refugees in our society (85%)



77 buddies

How does CURANT contribute to refugee integration?

Well-being

Nearly all the survey respondents reported enhanced levels of well-being. This may be related to several factors, including:

- the improvement of their housing situation
- improved social and language skills
- access to psychotherapy and psychoeducation
- the availability of someone to chat with
- ...

Enhanced well-being and a supportive network are fundamental to other domains, such as the motivation to study or work.

When I enrolled in CURANT, I was really happy that I found a place to live. I was a minor at the time, which meant that nobody would rent a house to me. They would always reply: 'You are too young, you need someone to live with you.' This really stressed me out. I had been looking for accommodation for quite some time, about 6 to 7 months. And then I found some information about CURANT online. (Somali refugee)

For most refugees, the cohousing with local buddies and/or the personalised case management seems to enhance their ability to participate in Belgian society.

Accessibility of support structures

Refugees have easy access to both professional and informal support through CURANT.

The professional support structure consists of:

- follow-up meetings with a social worker
- psychotherapy
- specific training programmes
- intercultural mediation during conflicts

In the early days of CURANT, many of these elements were required for all refugees. After a while, CURANT decided to move towards a more individualised, client-centred approach. This holistic approach is widely appreciated. In addition, refugees report that their understanding of institutions in Belgium has improved.

The informal support offered by the buddy consists of:

- practical support on various levels (e.g., usage of cooking and other equipment)
- informative support (e.g., giving directions to the nearest hospital)
- companionship (e.g., watching TV together)

In general though, the refugees still tend to rely a lot on their family and friends for emotional support.

CURANT helps us a lot because it takes care of many different aspects in our lives. It helps to get a good student job and to get to know Belgian people. It organises activities to bring people together. So I would say CURANT helps you to get to know a lot of people. Also, it shows you what the lives of Belgians are like, what they do in their free time. They also give us advice about living independently after we leave CURANT. (Syrian refugee)

Housing

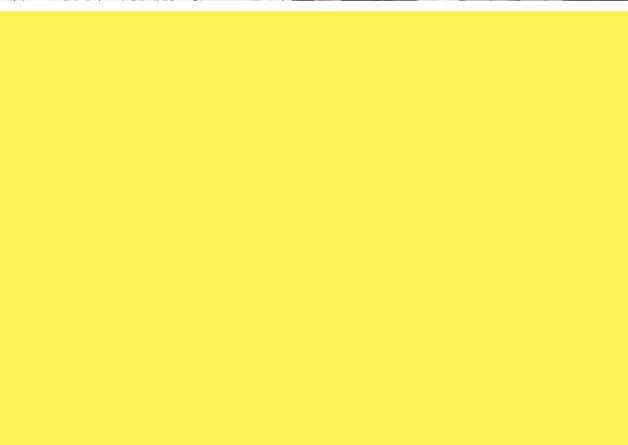
The young refugees primarily enter CURANT to fulfill their urgent housing needs. During the programme all the refugees have direct access to decent, affordable housing.

Before CURANT, I was ashamed to speak Dutch, I preferred to remain silent. But thanks to CURANT, I no longer feel ashamed. Because I went to school on the one hand and spoke a lot of Dutch with my buddy on the other. (Afghan refugee)

Dutch language skills

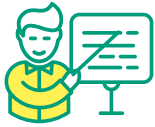
At the end of their stay in CURANT, refugees report that they feel more confident about speaking Dutch. Nearly all the participants indicate that they understand Dutch better, that their Dutch language skills have improved and that they use the Dutch language more often. Language assessments at the start and end of the stay of 22 refugees highlight the improvement of their Dutch oral and written language competencies.







Socio-economic status of the refugees after or during the last months of their stay at CURANT



61 % studying



21 % looking for a job



18 % employed

Education and employment

CURANT's educational and job orientation programs assisted the refugees with their educational and/or labour-related aspirations. Many refugees were able to gain working experience because they did job internships, were enrolled in part-time vocational trajectories or got a student job.

Social network

The refugees' social networks appear to have become somewhat more diverse over the course of CURANT. However, for many refugees, social ties with co-ethnics continue to play a major role in their lives.



How did the buddies benefit from CURANT?

The cultural empathy of all the buddies seems to have increased. Most buddies regarded CURANT as a valuable learning experience. They reported that they learned more about the lives and cultures of refugees, and gained cohabiting skills. About half of the buddies report that CURANT also helped improve their general social skills.



A friend of my 18-year old Eritrean housemate stayed with us for a while because he needed somewhere to stay. I find it very difficult to imagine myself doing such a thing, that is, to open my door to anyone and say: 'Yes, you can stay in my tiny room' because then I would not have any space to myself.
(buddy of an Eritrean refugee)

Major challenges

Living together apart

Sharing a house is no guarantee for in-depth or extensive social contact. The social interaction between refugees and buddies tends to be rather superficial. Only a limited number of the buddy-refugee relationships evolved into long-lasting friendships.



Long-term and durable impact

For many refugees, a trajectory of 1 to 2 years is too short to achieve major change. In addition, the project cannot alter external structural problems such as discrimination on the private housing and labour markets. This may undermine some of CURANT's achievements. Restrictive (co)housing legislation in Belgium also poses an obstacle for the continuation of cohousing of refugees outside of CURANT.

Conflicts over household duties

As is the case in other communal residences, shared household tasks (e.g., cleaning, waste sorting) are a challenge. When housemates fail to respect the house rules, this affects the mutual social relations negatively. This especially occurs in larger residential settings, where communication and social control tend to be more difficult.



A general offering versus individual needs

It proved quite challenging for the project team to develop individualised trajectories based on individual needs and aspirations, while also offering a wide variety of available services. They offered a large number of activities and support structures. The attendance was mandatory. As a result, there is also a risk that the project participants may feel overwhelmed.



Conflicting pressures on young refugees with regard to their aspirations

In the framework of CURANT, young refugees are encouraged to reorient their initial educational or employment objectives. Due to their limited Dutch language skills and (often) limited previous education, their options are limited too. At the same time, unaccompanied refugees often want to provide financial support to their family members in their country of origin or need an income to start the process of family reunification. Refugees' diverging aspirations cause stress and frustration, and often prevents them from achieving their full potential.

Building trust in CURANT

The team members found it difficult to reconcile their supportive role (as a personal coach) with their controlling and sanctioning role (as the landlord and as a civil servant of the social welfare agency). This highlights how important it is to carefully consider the different roles of the caregivers. The buddies also reported that it often took several months before they established a relationship of trust with their refugee housemate, emphasizing the importance of perseverance and patience.

Lessons learned

CURANT demonstrates that socially-mixed cohousing, when combined with intensive holistic, individualised support, has the potential to boost the inclusion of young refugees in various ways.



Cohousing: not a one size fits all

Cohousing is not a suitable approach for each refugee or buddy. Some people are too vulnerable on too many (life) levels and/or may have the wrong idea about cohousing thus becoming an excessive burden on their flatmate.

Making a good start

Developing an extensive intake procedure for both refugees and buddies, including the screening of candidates and information on the basic principles of cohousing, is crucial to the project's success. The refugees and buddies need to be open to the cohousing principles and share basic values and expectations.

Appropriate housing

The housing needs to be suited to communal living, as the housing design has an important impact on social interaction.

Professional support

The presence of a support structure for all the inhabitants, including the “strong” buddies, is essential. The support should especially focus on nurturing intercultural dialogue and facilitating communication. In larger cohousing arrangements, it is also important to foster a constructive group dynamic.

The bigger picture

CURANT demonstrates that unaccompanied refugees benefit from a holistic approach that considers these refugees' individual needs. In addition, it is vital to understand how the situation of the refugees' family affects the well-being and aspirations of these unaccompanied refugees. More generally, it should be stressed that unaccompanied young adult refugees are first and foremost young people with developmental needs.



Multidisciplinary interventions require strong partnerships

The multidisciplinary cooperation of service providers and other expert organisations is necessary to provide effective individualised support to refugees. This cooperation should be embedded in a strong and durable partnership, that includes regular meetings with all the partners, a shared vision and strategy and a clear division of tasks.

Taking time and building trust

Young unaccompanied refugees face many different issues. CURANT shows how improving well-being, acquiring language and other skills and establishing social networks takes time. Consequently, support programmes should adopt a long-term perspective and should not be overambitious.

Recognizing and fostering individual co-ownership

The most sustainable results are achieved by acknowledging the opinion of refugees and encouraging co-ownership.

CURANT was developed and implemented by the City of Antwerp (OCMW public social welfare centre) together with Vormingplus Antwerpen, Jes VZW, Atlas, and Solentra.

The evaluation

The University of Antwerp (CeMIS) is responsible for the evaluation of CURANT. The scientific evaluation draws on a multi-method methodological framework. The findings in this report result from different types of data. These include:

- longitudinal in-depth interviews with 24 refugees, 19 buddies and the project team
- pre- and post-intervention surveys among 33 refugees and 29 buddies
- project data on all participants

An extensive discussion of the research methodology and findings can be found in consecutive project reports written in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

UIA grant

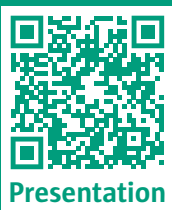
CURANT was organised from 2016 to 2019 and was co-financed by the European Regional and Development Fund through the Urban Innovative Actions Initiative.

UIA is an Initiative of the European Union that provides resources to urban areas throughout Europe to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges (UIA).

CURANT received a grant of €4,894,303.32 or 80% of CURANT's total budget of €6,117,879.15.







More information?

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www.uia-initiative.eu/en/uia-cities/antwerp

www.uantwerpen.be/en/research-groups/cemis/projects-and-publications/specific-project-sites

Thanks to ...

everyone who contributed to achieving our goals with this project: the refugees and buddies in the first place, their friends and family, Eurodesk, UIA-expert Fabio Sgaragli, the official partners, many stakeholders, the full project team, the colleagues at different departments of the city of Antwerp and of course local politics and management.

Special thanks to the UIA secretariat to choose CURANT out of 378 other proposals and guided the City of Antwerp through the guidelines of the European fund.



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