

Together we stand stronger

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This is an action research case study investigating social participation roadblocks and opportunities through leisure-related factors for Eritrean refugee status holders in the city of Nijmegen, the Netherlands. The intent of this paper is to report on challenges and opportunities for refugees as “citizens in transition” within a specific northern European urban neighbourhood. The research project has a key focus on urban leisure with a participatory, action-oriented epistemological and activist intent. This multidisciplinary mix was designed for consulting purposes. The paper describes the situation during the period 2015 to 2016, and future challenges triggered by the migration crisis in the last decade in the European context, with specific attention devoted to the impact on the Dutch context. From such continental and national scope, the paper will shift to the outcome of a specific consulting project pertaining to 98 Eritrean refugees, aged 19 to 24 years old, temporarily hosted by the city of Nijmegen. Here, empirical research based on design thinking principles have enabled the identification of potential solutions and strategies aimed at achieving a more effective process for the inclusion of those residence holders with refugee status into the social and cultural life of their neighbourhood, with the final ambition of future integration into the city. Being a case study grounded in constructivism, the paper will firstly provide an overview of facts, figures and findings to detail the research performed, and then conclude with reflexive considerations based on bibliographic references and methodological reflections.

Keywords: design thinking, inclusion, participatory action research, refugee crisis, social innovation, urban futures, urban leisure

Introduction

The methods of social science are akin to literary criticism, deciphering codes and translating languages (Jacobsen, 2013, p. 4).

In the context of contemporary European cities, the city and its local communities through acts of civility might welcome refugees who have survived violence, war and life-threatening experiences. These acts range from institutional support, delegated by the municipality to not-for-profit organizations, to charity or volunteering initiatives by civic engagement groups or individual local citizens. At the same time, these “legal aliens” might be perceived by specific groups, or described by extremist political parties or economic agents, as dystonic, dysfunctional and ultimately distressing the prior socio-symbolic balance within the city. One might say, refugees remain “silent voices” being granted or denied access to urban spaces, places and activities.

This paper¹ proposes that the temporary status of refugees from non-EU countries in European cities is de facto that of “citizens in transition”. This during the time they spend as “asylum seekers” as well as the time of any temporary residence permit, e.g. in their first five years in the Netherlands for some specific nationalities. The term “transition” pertains to both the spatial dimension of their accommodation as well as the timing of their integration in the new social context. Consideration must be given to their inclusion as active members in society, equal rights and duties as locals. Even before being accepted

as “refugees with status” they are much less “temporary” and much more “citizens” than commercial tourists or business destination travellers. However, in the shared “semiosphere” (Fry, 2011) of European cities hosting them, refugees suffer from less care and attention than tourists or expats. Their midterm condition might be that of being “lost in translation”. In their integration process, they are excluded (by law) from the means of production within financial, commercial and socio-economic systems. As well as being isolated from most of those cultural co-creation processes of meaning that require proficiency in the interpretation and production of signs and symbols.

The researcher, Anique Gerrits, had the goal to consult on leisure opportunities for further integration of a group of these “citizens in transition”, namely 98 refugees, originally from Eritrea, in Nijmegen North. During such a transition, political refugees and asylum seekers are formal beneficiaries of the 1961 Geneva Convention. Ultimately, the underlying intent of the researcher was that of giving a voice to refugees, and therefore enabling them to express themselves beyond their alienating condition of silence. This resulted in a specifically designed framework, capturing insights into the integration and participation process of Eritrean refugee status holders with temporary residence permits from an insider’s point of view. A completely different culture, one from another continent, is temporarily concentrated in a small neighbourhood in the Netherlands. Participatory action research based on design thinking has been the selected approach to tackle such challenges and ambitions. The consulting goal was to achieve short-term results.

Context of research

To contextualise the factors that influence this leisure consulting project, a structure of macro, meso and micro levels is adopted. The macro level explains the global reason for the incoming stream of Eritrean refugees. The meso level addresses the situation in the Netherlands. Finally, the micro level focuses on the Eritrean status holders with temporary residence permits and inhabitants of Nijmegen North. Partly elaborated in retrospect, these combined levels structure the specific framework for this paper.

Macro level

Throughout their entire history, humans have been migrating, seeking better conditions for life for themselves and a better future outlook for their children. The Field Information and Coordination Section of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reports 65.6 million forcibly displaced people worldwide in 2016 (UNHCR, 2016). Of which, 22.5 million were formally accounted as refugees. Daily, 28 300 people are forced to flee because of conflict. Whereas, in the whole of 2016, only 189 300 refugees were actually resettled. UNHCR also report that displaced people are accommodated, for the most, in Africa (30%) and the Middle East (26%), with Europe, hosting a mere 17%. Ethiopia is included among the top hosting countries, with 791 600 refugees. Turkey is the most engaged with 2.9 million refugees (UNHCR, 2018). At the time of the original research project, 399 165 global refugees entered Europe in the first half of 2015 (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, 2015a). This was an increase of two thirds compared to 2014. EUROSTAT (2015) states that annually the non-EU immigrants into EU countries were mostly hosted in Germany (967 500), the UK (278 600) and Italy (186 500). Whereas, 60 100 non-EU immigrants entered the Netherlands, out of a total amount of immigrants into the kingdom – including EU and stateless citizens – reaching 166 900. This is an equivalent amount to Austria (166 300), and a slightly higher amount than neighbouring Belgium (146 600).

The journey of forcibly displaced migrants travelling to safe harbour in Europe is not easy and not without danger. On the contrary, Amnesty International reported 5 098 dead or missing migrants in 2016 (with a total of 387 739 recorded) and 3 119 dead or missing migrants in 2017 (with a total of 172 301 recorded). The percentage of human life lost has, therefore, been rising year-on-year from 0.013% to 0.018%. Yet conditions in the countries of origin might imply such levels of danger or economic deprivation that masses of millions are still prepared to move.

Acceptance of prospective refugees onto the soil of the European Union is structured by the Dublin Regulation:

The Dublin Regulation establishes the Member State responsible for the examination of the asylum application. The criteria for establishing responsibility run, in hierarchical order, from family considerations, to recent possession of a visa or residence permit in a Member State, to whether the applicant has entered EU irregularly, or regularly (European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, 2018).

Upon arrival in a European country, asylum seekers might, however, face deportation, discrimination or denial of their rights. As such, according to NGO organisations like Open

Migration, the international community has not taken enough responsibility to manage this challenge. Among others, Professor Axel Hagedorn (2015) anticipated that the influx of refugees could increase to 50 million in 2020. This has caused tension and turmoil among European national leaders as there is an ongoing conflict about the number of refugees that should be taken in by each country, including the Netherlands.

Meso level

In the kingdom of the Netherlands, the responsible agency for all discretionary choices regarding immigration is the IND (Immigration and Naturalisation Services), under the Ministry of Justice and Security. Besides the Dublin treaty, the Netherlands recognises the Geneva Convention on Refugees and the European Convention of Human Rights (Government of the Netherlands, 2008a). Asylum procedures start upon arrival, mostly by plane, by applicants reporting to the Royal Dutch Customs Police. The latest 2017 data concerning asylum seekers in the Netherlands indicate the stability of the situation:

The total volume of asylum seekers – consisting of first-time and repeat applications and family reunifications – registered by the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) in 2017 was virtually identical to that of the previous year. This was the conclusion of the 2017 Immigration Services Report. If relocation and resettlement figures are included, the number of applicants increases to 35 030, as compared to 33 570 in 2016. The number of family members joining refugees and asylum seekers rose from 11 810 in 2016 to 14 490 in 2017. The increase in the number of family reunification applicants is the result of the increased influx of asylum seekers, particularly in 2015 (Government of the Netherlands, 2018b).

From all refugees worldwide only 8 695 refugees had entered the Netherlands at the time of the original research presented in this paper in the first half of 2015 (2 810 of them have an Eritrean nationality) (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, 2015b). This is only 2% of the total refugees that entered Europe. In practical terms, the Netherlands did and will experience hardly any direct influx of migrants and prospective refugees. This is because of a specific geopolitical position where borders with the UK and with EU countries naturally prevent access to the national soil, unless regulated and accepted by the Dutch government and authorities, or done illegally; e.g. by smuggling. The Netherlands have, however, been no exception to the rise of populism and recent xenophobic episodes as a sociocultural manifestation of such sentiment. In practical terms, this topic has already raised a lot of media attention and different responses among the locals in the Netherlands. This immigration phenomenon has already triggered demonstrations and protests. At the same time, there are Dutch inhabitants who actively want to volunteer or start initiatives to support refugees. All in all, at the time of data collection for this specific research (2016), extreme groups of xenophobic activists might still be described as a minority compared to the people who are neutral or positive about refugees, including those from Eritrea.

Micro level

In spite of recent support by the European Development Fund and economic collaborations with China, Saudi Arabia

and Italy, the Eritrean economy appears as yet insufficient to offer opportunities for dignity or even survival to its citizens (Government of the Netherlands, 2017). Only 10% of rural Eritrea has electricity (*ibid.*, p. 9, n. 35). Since 1998, migration from Eritrea has existed as a direct consequence of a border war with Ethiopia. Young male citizens flee Eritrea because of the mandatory military service, life-threatening violence and inhumane conditions, resulting in almost half a million Eritreans refugees worldwide (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, 2015b). In particular, the relatively affluent youth and political opposition members have fled the country. This has left no concrete possibility to challenge or simply to monitor the policies and actions of President Afwerki's People's Front for Democracy and Justice, the sole ruling party and absolute power (Government of the Netherlands, 2017). Even at the basic level of fact finding and fact checking, the situation in the country is far from democratic standards:

There is no independent civil society in Eritrea and no free press. Information will continue to be incomplete while no independent observers are allowed into the country. Sources do not always have the latest information, and sometimes have an interest in adding their own bias to the facts (*ibid.*).

Under these conditions in their country of origin, the approval of asylum applications submitted by Eritrean citizens in The Netherlands is "virtually automatic" (*ibid.*).

Eritrean refugees are often traumatised by their past experiences. A lot of them travelled in the worst conditions, such as unsafe refugee boats and through human traffickers. Furthermore, their present existence as members of the "diaspora" (*ibid.*) is uncertain due to the political strategies by the Eritrean government. Their intelligence and secret services seemingly channel a stream of "fake news", stating that this is purely economic migration. For example:

Some supporters of the current regime in the diaspora hold positions on local committees, the Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice (YFPDJ) and associations such as the Eritrean Association in Amsterdam and Environment (EVAO). One of them, the former chairman of the YPFD in the Netherlands, Meseret Bahlbi, initiated legal proceedings against Prof. M.E.H. van Reisen, who had stated that some interpreters of the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) had ties with the intelligence services of the regime in Asmara (*ibid.*, p. 12).

This specific example provides appropriate context to the challenges of everyday translation and communication arising for volunteer organisations, including the consulting client of this project: Tandem, Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

Background: consulting client

Since 1992, the non-profit welfare organisation Tandem has been socially active for the benefit of all neighbourhoods that are part of the municipality of Nijmegen. This means that by creating activities, concepts and products, Tandem aims to bring people closer together and form a community. Tandem is part of a network of organisations that plays an important role in the daily lives of citizens. The links vary from local politics and healthcare providers to resident organisations and sport

clubs, without being motivated by profit. The organisation is supported by the municipality of Nijmegen, which is also their greatest source of income (Tandem, 2015). Their portfolio can be divided into three main areas of competence:

- Parenting support
- Youth work
- Participation and liveability

Tandem organises these activities with the one-liner: "We are and stay in the neighbourhood". Most neighbourhoods have therefore their own district team that executes and implements several activities and projects. Alongside this, there are six physical workplaces. They can be used for activities or meetings between employees of Tandem and local residents. Participation applies to everybody and Tandem stands for stimulating, connecting, supporting, innovating and engaging people. A few examples of services are as follows:

- Ambulatory youth work: Special places and activities for teenagers (± 12 to ± 15 years old);
- Green Games: Project for children between the ages 9 to 12 to learn about nature in their own environment; and
- Parental guidance: Parents can request guidance for the development or education of their children. A Tandem coach can help with advice and information.

With the upsurge of the migrant crisis in Europe, Tandem has been delegated by the Municipality of Nijmegen a fourth task within their portfolio of services:

- Refugee status holders: Social integration and participation of residence permit holders in the area (e.g. sport activities and introduction to the area).

At the end of 2015, Tandem started a new project involving 98 Eritrean status holders with temporary residence permits in Nijmegen North.

Reason for research and background information

In early 2016, the municipality of Nijmegen decided to house 98 male Eritrean status holders in one large residence (a disused student building). This community is in Nijmegen North, which are the districts Lent, Ressen and Oosterhout. According to the city index, Oozo (2016), Nijmegen North consists of 13 795 registered inhabitants. The largest population group, at 35%, is aged between 25 to 44 years. Followed by children aged between 0 to 14 years (29%), and people aged between 45 and 64 years (20%) (Oozo, 2016). Only 9% of all inhabitants are aged between 15 to 24 (Oozo, 2016). These 98 male Eritrean refugee status holders were granted temporary refugee status from the Dutch IND for five years. After those five years, the status can be extended to a permanent residence, if the country of origin is still not safe enough to return, converting this group of refugee status holders with temporary residence permits into "refugees with status" with permanent residence permits for an undefined time. Such a conversion appears practically automatic for Eritreans, according to immigration expert and journalist, Massimiliano Sfregola (digital communication, May 2018).

Refugees in any Dutch city differ in the extreme to local inhabitants. Tandem and Vluchtelingenwerk researched the background of this group before the housing process started and they concluded that all 98 are men between the ages of 18 to 24 have possible traumatic experiences. It was assessed that around half of the Eritrean status holders

are moderately educated, while the other half are poorly educated. The self-reliance of this group is very limited because they barely speak English and have limited access to Dutch language classes. They are unfamiliar with their surroundings in Nijmegen North and Nijmegen. They are also unfamiliar with Dutch culture. Several Eritrean status holders requested to be placed with other family members or friends. However, this was not feasible. This means that most Eritrean refugees are alone and need to get to know new people (Reuling, 2015). Each and every refugee status holder among these 98 Eritreans receives approximately 50 euros per week from the Dutch welfare agencies to freely spend on food or other consumables. Furthermore, they have no financial reserves, and sometimes even debts with human traffickers.

Starting from this difficult situation, in order to achieve mission-critical progress towards social integration, the Municipality of Nijmegen identified three strategic pillars:

- Adequate housing and management;
- Integration and inclusion; and
- Participation in the neighbourhood and chances for the neighbourhood.

Tandem plays an important role with the last pillar. The goal of Tandem is to empower all inhabitants, including the Eritrean refugee status holders, in terms of social participation in the neighbourhoods (Reuling, 2015). The goal is to:

- create activities focused on connecting the refugee status holders with temporary residence permits with initiatives and activities of the district, and vice versa;
- stimulate and support new neighbourhood initiatives;
- communicate activities and initiatives to status holders and local inhabitants; and
- organise meetings between stakeholders and inhabitants related to signalling and monitoring integration and safety.

Ultimately, Eritrean status holders should be enabled to develop their self-reliance and independence in the Netherlands. This is a necessity for the dual motivation of improving their quality of life in this transition phase, as well as working towards their individual 24th birthday. At that point, each of them will be automatically transferred to individual support programmes run by the city welfare agencies. They leave their temporary housing to seek permanent accommodation if their five-year residence permit is converted into a permanent one. If this is not the case, then the refugee will lose their "temporary" resident status and must leave the European Union.

Overall, it can be stated that the whole integration and participation process is an extreme challenge with limited resources. Leisure activities might be seen as a natural enabler of inclusion. In terms of leisure interests, soccer and especially cycling are among the preferences of Eritrean refugees. The reason for the latter is that an Eritrean man named Teklehaimanot captured the dot jersey as the first man with an African background during the Tour de France in 2015. Tandem decided to investigate new leisure strategies to enhance social participation within the community. During this process there had to be continuous evaluation on what kind of new input would be feasible and useful. Simultaneously, any outcome had to be feasible and meaningful in the long term, as well as remembering that most of the status holders will live in these conditions for three years or longer. It was also noted that other ethnic groups will be housed in the same way.

Ultimately, the resulting strategy should be easily applicable to the 98 Eritreans in real time, as well as to future refugees.

Management problem and research objectives

Tandem commissioned a consulting project on leisure programming with the specific consulting goal of addressing the following management problem: the support from the neighbourhood to the Eritrean refugee status holders with temporary residence permits as well as the social participation of such Eritrean status holders in neighbourhood civic life needs to be researched, according to Tandem. There is a need for connections that can support the community as a whole. Ultimately, the Eritrean refugee status holders need to be self-reliant and participate independently in the community of Nijmegen North.

The ambition was to define a research-based set of opportunities to reframe the mutual perception of citizens and refugees, for the specific benefit of improving the integration dynamics of refugees, with the problem definition formulated as follows: What are leisure-related factors that improve the social participation of Eritrean refugee status holders with temporary residence permits within the community of Nijmegen North?

Research objective

Our research goal was to obtain insight into the social network of Eritrean refugee status holders with temporary residence permits in Nijmegen North, in order to understand how the social structure affects participation of Eritrean refugee status holders with temporary residence permits through detailed research that results in recommendations that enhance the social participation of Eritrean status holders through leisure-related factors.

The problem definition and research objective generated four research questions to articulate the research into a logical structure:

1. What are the relations among social actors?
2. How do the relationships among social actors support the Eritrean refugee status holders with temporary residence permits?
3. How do social actors affect the participation of Eritrean refugee status holders with temporary residence permits within the community?
4. What are the interests of Eritrean status holders with regard to leisure activities?

This consulting and research project presented multiple challenges at the levels of feasibility, validity and ethics. The next paragraphs of this paper will document all such challenges and select key findings from the process, with the ultimate objective of contributing to reflexive methodological reflection.

Research approach

Research activities focused on social cooperation, without any economic perspective. Therefore, the term "social actors" was adopted rather than the term "stakeholders". This was because a social structure had to be revealed at the deeper level of emotions and perceptions, reaching beyond the transactional nature of business networks and similar variations of societal

interactions. The identified social actors could be categorised and their relationships described. This resulted in insights and provided an overview of the dynamics of the network of the Eritrean status holders. Both the perceptions of citizens of Nijmegen North and the leisure interests of Eritrean refugee status holders were investigated in order to identify any demand that could potentially stimulate their social participation.

These are the project details, including an overview of research activities as planned and executed:

- Project start: February 2016
- Project end: June 2016
- Data collection touch points: Griftdijk, Jan Lindens, selected nightclub venues in Nijmegen, NL
- Epistemological approach: constructivism
- Methodological approach: participatory action research
- Processing data method: individual analysis until verified saturation
- Consulting approach: design thinking

The method entailed a multidisciplinary mix of research and consulting tools. For the purpose of this paper, the sole tool selection pertaining to action research will be further specified as adopted and experienced by the researcher in operationalisation terms. Additional consulting tools and methods beyond action research exceed the scope and purpose of this paper.

This research was designed to investigate the support and participation dynamics between Dutch citizens and residence permit holders in the specific neighbourhood of Nijmegen North, where status holders live in a shared building. Participant observation was adopted as the primary technique of operationalisation for data collection, therefore enabling both immersion in the field as well as direct exposure to micro-interactions and dynamics in the everyday. The main goal was to achieve “saturation” in data collection (Creswell, 2013) by means of a general approach (participant observation) and two specific design thinking tools (graffiti wall and picture cards).

Participant observation

This method was chosen to ensure that every interaction of the researcher within the formal or informal context of this research was tracked, analysed and converted into verified data. The social actors were observed during their activities and meetings. The observations were organised according to the AEIOU method (Martin & Hanington, 2012). Each letter represents an item to be observed:

- Activities: Specific actions;
- Environments: Entire area in which activity takes place;
- Interactions: Between a person and someone or something else;
- Objects: What objects and devices do people have and use?; and
- Users: Who is present and what are their roles and relationships?

The results of the AEIOU-based observation provided detailed qualitative data. The most striking results were used to complement the collected data of the other methods, as based on the observations of the researcher.

Graffiti wall (local citizens/local inhabitants input)

In order to collect free opinions from respondents, the Graffiti

Wall tool (Martin & Hanington, 2012) was selected because it enables non-attributed, anonymous input. This appeared particularly desirable in the light of the social and cultural sensitivity of the subject at hand. Such a technique entails a big sheet of paper with one question on it, e.g. regarding the housing of Eritrean status holders in the community. Participants were allowed to give a direct answer without peer influence or social pressure. The sheet was placed in the local supermarket (“Jan Linders” retail brand) to collect anonymous opinions and to record citizenship initiatives in Nijmegen North. This location was chosen since most inhabitants of Nijmegen North do their grocery shopping there. In order to ensure that the people who write something down are solely inhabitants from Nijmegen North, their place of residence was explicitly requested and confirmed. No additional filter was applied, enabling anyone entering the supermarket and living in Nijmegen North to contribute, with the aim of including as many and as diverse opinions as possible, with a minimum target set at 15 participants. A simple question was written on the sheet of paper: “Describe in one word or sentence how you feel about the new inhabitants on the Griftdijk?”. The specific expression: “new inhabitants on the Griftdijk” locally refers to the Eritrean status holders as this is the identifier local citizens use to refer to them. The same sheet was placed at the same location for two hours on two different days, which were randomly selected. Because of the socially and politically sensitive nature of this subject, the researcher stood near the sheet of paper to support participants while writing down their thoughts, without looking at what they wrote down, hence guaranteeing privacy and mitigating any bias or impact derived from her presence in person. Participants were given two markers, red and green, where green stands for a more hospitable perception, and red for a less hospitable perception. Overall, the thoughts of locals regarding the status holders were collected by analysing the answers to the question. These answers were analysed by clustering them into the categories “welcoming” and “less welcoming”. These results were processed, analysed and leveraged to understand the perception of inhabitants towards the Eritrean status holders.

Picture cards (citizens in transition/new inhabitants: status holders input)

The leisure interests of Eritrean status holders required research validation. However, as anticipated above, oral communication was difficult, if not impossible, for most of the Eritrean status holders. Most of them do not or hardly speak Dutch or English. There are a few authorised interpreters in the Netherlands, however, they are extremely busy with the formal aspects of the integration process of Eritrean refugees and status holders. Therefore, it was decided to conduct short interviews through pictures. This technique entails a sheet of paper with several selected pictures. Participants were requested to point out certain pictures through simplified questions. Hence, the technique was great to use for this research and it could be executed without any interpreter (Martin & Hanington, 2012). This was done during weekly activities regularly on Sundays for the duration of the research project. Approximately 20 participants were invited to give input, which was sufficient to reach the point of observed saturation. Different leisure activities were offered and chosen. The activities were visualised on a sheet of paper in order to enable the Eritrean

status holders to easily point out their interests. A maximum of three interests were offered for possible selection to each participant. The leisure activities were chosen according to the possibilities of Eritrean status holders, based on their existing circumstances, in order to keep the research within the tracks of feasible, future consulting advice. Activities that are relatively expensive or were likely to be unknown to Eritrean status holders were not taken into consideration. Unusual leisure categories like adult entertainment or drug consumption were edited out of the portfolio of possible choices. The leisure activity categories that raised the most interest among participants determined the research findings and then the consulting recommendations.

Selected key findings

The following conclusions of the original primary research project structured according to the order of the original questions were defined and reported on:

Finding 1: What are the relations among social actors?

- The research field was described as being based on the existence of diverse groups of social actors in terms of voluntary and professional social actors, mutually related.

Finding 2: How do the relationships among social actors support the Eritrean refugee status holders with temporary residence permits?

- Communication between such social actors was assessed as inefficient, which influenced the quality of support of social actors towards Eritrean status holders.

Finding 3: How do social actors affect the participation of Eritrean refugee status holders with temporary residence permits within the community?

- Many inhabitants of Nijmegen North displayed a hospitable attitude towards Eritrean status holders.
- However, a small group did not, and expressed such disagreement both vocally as well as by means of ancillary practices that might go unnoticed.
- Social actors were assessed as having a limited ability to trigger, stimulate or act on any social participation of Eritrean status holders.
- Eritrean status holders were assessed as being excluded from leisure activities because of their budget, sometimes because of the post-traumatic symptoms or past experiences, and because of ethnic diversity and cultural differences with the lifestyle of inhabitants in Nijmegen North.

Finding 4: What are the interests of Eritrean refugee status holders with temporary residence permits with regard to leisure activities?

- The leisure activities of soccer, fitness, and clubbing were identified as mostly preferred by the Eritrean status holders.
- Social actors did organise sports activities for Eritrean status holders.
- Eritrean status holders were denied entry, and therefore discriminated against, at bars and clubs, preventing them from leveraging night-time leisure opportunities towards integration.

Concerning this last point, one might only notice how, in any narrative about post-war Europe, nightlife entertainment is a structural element of popular culture and a pivotal moment in the construction of the "self" as identity, as in the case of "Ravers" (Polhemus, 1994) as just one example. It must be pointed out that nightclubbing, as a leisure pastime, separates the "daily everyday" from the world of symbols and signs that, even beyond café culture in the above examples, embodies the common semiotic level where youth forms their own communities. The relevance of nightclubs for societal integration also emerged from design research explorations conducted in other European countries and at other times by one of the authors, with a strong indication that such dimensions of leisure might help in achieving a more liveable city (Bevolo & Rosenius, 2014). Considering the age bracket of the resident holders, providing them food, shelter and "sustainment" in isolation might be sufficient for them to physically survive, but suboptimal to integrate them. Limiting their access to night-time entertainment (although by legally viable forms of discrimination) might be considered a form of deprivation of a fundamental opportunity for self-expression, co-creation and therefore inclusion.

Selected recommendations

The following consulting recommendations were elaborated on, as based on research findings, and should be considered an integral part of the action research project as an extension of field work into proactive propositions to improve the context, starting from enabling conditions for the *internal settings* of Tandem.

Social actor communication platform

- The essence of this recommendation is to improve communication in meetings.
- Meetings run short of time because social actors are unaware of each other's activities.
- A key benefit: the problem-solving process speeds up, which leaves more time for discussing activities that enhance the social participation of Eritrean status holders.

Professional versus volunteer

- Voluntary social actors need more support from professional social actors to optimise community initiatives.
- There are many initiatives from the neighbourhood, however, an efficient cooperation with relevant professional social actors fails to happen.
- People behind the community initiatives feel supported by professionals, which reinforces the willingness of people to voluntarily organise leisure activities that enhance the social participation of Eritrean status holders.

The recommendations below concentrate on the improvement of *external conditions* that Tandem encompasses:

Sense of community

- The results of the graffiti wall showed that several inhabitants feel uninformed by the authorities about the Eritrean status holders.
- It is therefore recommended to inform inhabitants of Nijmegen North about the developments around the Eritrean status holders through different channels.

- Ultimately, the benefit of informing inhabitants is that they will experience support from an authorised source that might develop a more positive view, resulting in more people who are willing to partake in leisure activities with Eritrean status holders, thus enhancing the social participation of the whole community.

Equal treatment in leisure activities

- The final recommendation is that Eritrean status holders should be able to go clubbing, which is one of their most preferred leisure activities.
- Through participant observations, it became clear that the Eritrean status holders are turned away at the doors of clubs and bars.
- When the Eritrean status holders are informed about clubbing possibilities that are more open-minded in Nijmegen, they might feel more welcome and their participation in leisure activities might be stimulated, which is in line with the objective of this study.

Leveraging the time between the execution of the consulting project (2016) and the writing of this paper (2018), the impact of the above recommendations might be sketched, in order to report on the action research intention of achieving an impact on the field under participatory observation:

The final professional product, as based on a dedicated interpretation of a generic business model canvas, is executed with the apparent improvement of communication among stakeholders. This has been obtained by increasing the transparency of single documents and aligning to a stronger communication process.

Concerning the Eritrean refugees, some of them have started their relocation because they have reached the age of 24, while new ones are coming in. Their general situation has greatly improved, and normalised in some cases. However, the overall sense of community might be described as still weak. In particular, all leisure activities that refugees partake in are especially set up for them and not part of the natural flow of local communities. In spite of concrete efforts, there is therefore space for improving the conditions of inclusion towards integration.

Reflexive considerations

As summarised above, an action research approach was specifically developed to address specific and mission-critical roadblocks of organisational, cultural and linguistic natures, with the intent of improving the real-life conditions of a given group of refugees. In accordance with the semiotic standards of social sciences for academic journals, all the above was described in neutral terms. On the contrary, an “activist” viewpoint is, by its own nature, polarised and polarising. In this view, as articulated by Fusaro (2017), “dissent” is a pre-political notion where activism will find its roots. This might be described as the individual perception that an intervention on any field of reality is needed to restore justice or fairness according to a personal ethical imperative. An activist’s intent will necessarily translate into desired intervention and concrete impact on societal issues.

In such a shift from mirroring reality to future-making, social sciences and social research are challenged in terms of

productivity and impact aiming at “a significant transformation in the conception of knowledge and the practice of social research” (Gergen, 2014, p. 303). As Giddens (1979) noted, “action” and “structure” are often perceived as being positioned at the opposite ends of the epistemological spectrum of social sciences. One might argue that “action research” is intrinsically participatory with the purpose of enabling “emancipation”. This ethical constituent is intrinsic to the definition of action research, as an ontological necessity thereof. Of course, action research tools and methods might be misused for unethical purposes, like any tool might be abused, or any definition of “common good” or “welfare” might be ambiguous, as any constructed concept. However, with full awareness of these limiting conditions, the above expansion in epistemological modalities of research historically enabled

abandoning all theories which explicitly or implicitly treat practice as a mechanical reaction, directly determined by the antecedent conditions and entirely reducible to the mechanical functioning of pre-established...models (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72).

The aim is impacting reality well beyond the impact factor of scientific journal, as per standard positivist practices, to expand the reach of research from theories and models to concrete change in society.

What might be challenging is any reflection on the research design and its operationalisation versus the constructivist ambition of enacting research as a “democratic process”. On the one hand, the researcher took all measures available to enable a culturally neutral data collection, specifically by choosing the Graffiti Wall as a tool and by constantly self-monitoring her own performance as participant observer. On the other hand, it must also be highlighted that the researcher stood by the poster, providing instructions, however, in the careful attempt not to bias the subject contributing to the data collection at that specific moment in time. One might reflect on how the presence of the researcher, however friendly, constituted a form of authority, based on expertise and leadership in the process, and that participants might have been biased in providing their input. The very choice of two different colour markers to provide input might have signified a roadblock to those who wanted to express opinions that were non-conforming to the general social expectation. The colour choice determined an immediately recognisable element at the moment of providing input, however, making the process more efficient and effective by automatically supporting the self-segmentation of participants according to their intuitive sentiment. At every advantage, in terms of activating participants, an equivalent disadvantage might emerge. Therefore, the ethos and trained judgement of the researcher were pivotal in the data set collection.

Similarly, the data collection concerning picture cards stimulated input by the Eritrean refugee status holders with temporary residence permits and it was selected as a procedure in order to cope primarily with the linguistic gap. As such, it made it possible to collect data through an alternative formal procedure rather than qualitative interviews, which were impossible in this part of the project. On the one hand, in the context, this tool enabled input that captured preferences and priorities of otherwise “silent voices”. Hence, it reinforced the democratic nature of the research project. On the other hand, it cannot be guaranteed that any cultural difference pertaining to the interpretation of single images did not bias

any response. In addition, participants were selected for their (minimal) ability to speak English or Dutch. That might have biased the sample but did enable minimal communication and connection at all times during the data collection. By connecting with the respondents, it could be evaluated if they understood English or Dutch and if so they would be asked to participate in an interview. Furthermore, selecting specific images for the Picture Cards already determined a “leisure universe” that Eritrean status holders could relate to, e.g. excluding unusual leisure practices like soft drug use or alcohol consumption, however responsible, as means of socialisation. Of course, from a business consulting point of view and perhaps even from a general civic perspective, it might appear non-ethical to advise against such leisure practices. However, as these activities are legal in the Netherlands, they might be culturally functional (or dysfunctional) to bridge any gap with the culture of origin of status holders. After all, at least at the scholarly and research levels, it might be stated that “leisure itself does not include ethics of any kind” (Blackshaw, 2010, p. 47). The researcher pragmatically chose not to operationalise and investigate this complementary domain of “dark leisure”, that might instead offer data sets, mission-critical insights and perhaps even shed new light on lifestyle priorities and everyday practices of meaning-making among status holders. A future extension of this project appears unlikely at this moment, however, it might be concluded that the inclusion of these additional domains would be necessary in order to construct a more complete research outcome and therefore even more actionable consulting advice.

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Note

- ¹. This article is presented as a spin-off and a reflection on a research project for the purpose of awarding a Bachelor of Arts in Leisure Management at NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences where Marco Bevolo was the supervisor and Anique Gerrits the researcher.

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