

Gastvrij Oost

A Patchwork Reflection on Refugee Reception in Amsterdam



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Introduction

The story of what soon became labelled as 'the refugee crisis' is one of people, their resilience, struggles, efforts, networks, organizations, and experiences. When this wave of migration began in 2015, many people rose to the challenge and came together to organize welcoming spaces, help, and support for the newly arrived.

Yet where do you start to tell this story that quickly becomes a patchwork of different, sometimes overlapping and contrasting, stories? A story that is still being told, acted, and rewritten in multiple spaces, neighborhoods, and cities all over the Netherlands. How do you tell a story that is remembered so vividly by many, yet experienced so differently? Perhaps the best way is to tell several stories: re-creating this mosaic of experiences from the perspective of people who, at some point, found themselves together in a network; acting within the larger story of this oft-called refugee crisis.

The Network of Gastvrij Oost

This particular story is about a networked initiative in East Amsterdam that was dubbed Gastvrij Oost: Hospitable East. This initiative could perhaps best be described as a network of networks, in which all involved acted from a sense of urgency. Based on this urgency, people with different stories, different backgrounds, different views and working styles joined forces to create a community housing project for refugees.

The voices in this story are based on the research we did with network organizers. Using both our own voices, and recreating the voices of the organisers, we reflect on what we heard in the course of the research. Y., a Syrian refugee living in the Netherlands since 2015, tells the story of his arrival and of becoming involved in the network and as a researcher in this research project. L., a Dutch woman working for a broadcaster, decides to throw herself into a new adventure and invests body and soul in the Gastvrij Oost project, which eventually leads her to setting up her own initiative. Another point of view comes from F., a community organizer who had been active in civil society and politics most of his adult life. F. had also come to the Netherlands as a refugee decades earlier and decided to start focusing on the reception and inclusion of refugees in Amsterdam. The third voice is R., who also worked as a community organizer in Amsterdam and in 2015 decided to shift her attention to the reception and inclusion of newcomers within her neighborhood. One other voice is that of E., one of the researchers of the team trying to give meaning to the mechanisms at play, while at the same time being





confronted with the mirror of her own position. And finally, there is our collective voice: a team of engaged researchers coming to the project as evaluators and observers. By telling these stories, we hope to provide an image of where we – we, as in all those involved in this story – come from and where we are going; to better our understanding of the roles we all play and the, often different, struggles we all face. Additionally, by mirroring different stories, we hope to identify opportunities and challenges for the durable contribution of civil society initiatives to refugee inclusion.

I. When it all began

Y's Journey to Amsterdam

That Tuesday was different than other days as I made my way to the Netherlands. I felt a kind of excitement about making it all the way from Greece mixed with the uncertainty of where to go after arriving at the big gray station platform.

I was one of many thousands of Syrians arriving at Amsterdam's central station that September of 2015. We were part of a group that grew as we passed from Greece through Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, and Germany, finally arriving in the Netherlands.

In the station in Frankfurt, I left my backpack with my jacket and some other clothes with other Syrians who shared the route with me. When the police stopped them, I had to leave the bag behind or face my arrest. Instead, I got on the train which arrived ten minutes later. I had nothing but a couple of hundred euros in my pocket.

Having some money meant that my friend and I could find a hotel when we arrived. Then we would follow the well-known plan to go to a police station and say we are asylum seekers. We knew that meant they should take care of us, and we would not have to sleep in the street.

All along that long road, I had the feeling that wherever you go you will find Syrians and you will be guided somehow about what to do. This gave me a sense of safety.

From the moment the train pulled up to central station in Amsterdam, and we stepped out I saw Dutch people standing on the platforms. They asked me: are you Syrian? I replied yes I am. They said: we are here to help you if you want to come with us and we will try to find a place for you to sleep.





L. Gets Involved

'If there is something that you actually can do, you just do it'. This was the attitude with which L. got engaged. When dozens, even hundreds of people arrived to Amsterdam's Central Station, L. was there to witness. People came from countries with names she was familiar with, but didn't really know much about. L. had heard the reports of war and conflict.

L. spoke with the men and women coming off the trains on that dreary day. One person, perhaps from Syria, told her about a not so distant past in which he was a doctor, or an architect. Now he was in a faraway land: a person who had recently lost his home. His new home turned out to be this damp train station. Later he and the others would be placed in isolated shelters with names like Havenstraat and Heumensoord. Like many others, the man she spoke with was stuck in-between. Home – the place where his past, with all its grief and joy, and his future, with all its dreams and fears once existed – no longer mattered. Now he was expected to make a new home in a country that expected candor while demanding gratitude; a country where people made painfully clear that he, a refugee, wasn't welcome. It was a place where integration was expected somewhere in the margins of society, detached from the warmth and community that made up L.'s society.

L. had never had to worry or even think about questions of home. Home was just there. She had a well-paid, highly regarded, and genuinely exciting job at a television broadcaster. There, she was expected to act quickly and pragmatically in a volatile and demanding environment, dealing with the thrill of the unexpected on a daily basis. Perhaps it were these qualities that would later serve her well within the Gastvrij Oost community: her pragmatism – the ability to act, to disrupt – and her readiness to accept, or even embrace, the unexpected. When standing on that train platform, she decided to convert these qualities into direct action. Global injustices can make one feel powerless as an individual, but when those global problems become so concrete, so close-by, as the man standing in front of you, then one can actually act. With these thoughts in mind L. felt the certainty that she would do something. She would just start somewhere and do something to help the people she had been meeting that day.

But what? And how?

Y. – From shelter to shelter

From the train station, volunteers brought us to a place close to Central Station where we slept. The next day we were brought to a sports hall in Amsterdam East. It was a big organized mess for around 200 persons, with families on the second floor and guys on the ground floor, bed against bed. All very cramped.

The hall was managed by the Red Cross and was accessible for volunteers from the neighborhood who were trying to communicate with us in English. Not that many





refugees spoke good English at the time. So, there I was, standing outside in the light rain when two Syrian guys I knew asked me to translate for them and a Dutch man who had stepped out of a luxury car. I started translating. Many other Syrians in the sports hall standing outside asked me to translate for them as well.

After I was finished, a Dutch woman came to me and asked if I knew for whom I was translating. I didn't. She told me, "He is the minister of internal affairs, and you did very well. Would you join us in the group of volunteers?"

That was my first introduction to L..

I began volunteering in translating and organizing. However, our accommodation didn't last for long. Soon we were on the move again. This time to a second location in South Amsterdam that had once been a jail.

Just a few weeks later we were on the move again. This time to Nijmegen in the eastern part of the Netherlands, and this time we found ourselves in a huge camp with big tents and a capacity of 3000.

Through all of this, I stayed in contact with L. and built up more connections in Nijmegen.

L. and I tried to find a way back to Amsterdam. She said: "I'm in discussion with an organization in Amsterdam East and we will see if we can have an empty building, and you can stay there."

That's how we got involved organizing the group who would live in the new housing project at Mauritskade which was called HOOST.

F. - The neighborhood activist

Being a refugee wasn't the same when F. first came to the Netherlands around 30 years earlier. Yes, he was a refugee, but he wasn't seen as part of a crisis. Now, all over Europe, the term refugee crisis had become the norm. F. doesn't see a crisis of numbers. He sees a failure of a system and communities that don't get involved.

"Not on my watch, not in my neighborhood." If there was anything F. could be sure of it was that his neighborhood would get involved in welcoming newcomers. F. was involved and had been for years.

He had made a home in Amsterdam East. Amsterdam East was where he connected people, empowered them. For years, he had prepared himself and his community to address something like a refugee crisis. F. was ready to jump in and catch people in the nest he'd made in the neighborhood.

F. came to the Netherlands in the 1980s and had made the country his home. He is outspoken, with seemingly endless energy, and rock-steady convictions. In the





decades F. has lived in the Netherlands he built an impressive network through the many projects he worked on. Today, he would describe himself first and foremost as a neighborhood activist. Yet he'd also been busy in the municipality in the 1990s, published academic papers, and been active in local politics as a member of the Green Party.

In short, F. had all the necessary contacts to take initiative on his own. Who else was better at persuading and seducing the bureaucrats so used to following their own rulebooks? "You see, I have a name, a reputation, which is not what I like to have, but it is what it is," F. explains.

F. couldn't help but admire the energy of Dutch folks tirelessly seeking to create initiatives for a parade of refugees that they had met at shelters or train stations. It was hard not to appreciate the momentum of this surprising surge of solidarity.

Perhaps that's why F. decided to participate in a joint network. He imagined that they could combine forces into a "networked fist" to punch up towards the system. Perhaps that fist could gently open up in a welcoming gesture signaling to newcomers: here, find your home in our neighborhood.

He started making connections, bringing networks together, and planning meetings. Together they formulated a plan, an identity, a name. *Gastvrij Oost*, they called themselves: Hospitable East. The name fit. The group aimed to be welcoming and hospitable and was located in East Amsterdam. Together they believed they could unsettle the cold bureaucracy of refugee reception in the Netherlands. Instead, what F. and others witnessed were rigid institutions clinging to a restrictive approach to refugee reception, detached from the needs and life world of those they were supposed to be designed for.

F. warned the group to not get too excited; too anxious to start their own projects. He felt that they should first decide on what their own position was. F. meant they must distance themselves from the government and that the newly sprung movement should, first and foremost, facilitate and support grassroots initiatives but remain cautious in becoming too immersed in starting such projects themselves, for this could, in F.'s mind, too quickly lead to a situation in which the newly formed movement lost its independency and flexibility.

"I am an activist after all," F. stressed. "Give me my freedom to support, tell off, rage against anything or anyone I want, but do not shackle me to a project where I become dependent on whatever subsidizing party there might be."

But of course, the group did not listen. And perhaps F. didn't either. Honestly, he also wanted to do *something*, just *something*. And when the opportunity to take over an old empty office building on *Mauritskade* he couldn't say no.





II. When things got going

Y. - Living at Mauritskade

With all the uncertainty and excitement of leaving the camp in Heumensoord, L. and I and two other Syrians asked a few people to join us in a new project. It was not an easy task to select 30 refugees out of the 3000 who lived in that camp. But in the end we had a list of 30 people, including families, that made up a mosaic of Syrian society.

In March 2016, the 30 of us moved to Mauritskade. The building was three floors. On the first was a big kitchen next to a garden. On the second the families lived. The third floor was set aside for young people and single inhabitants. My own roommate was a Syrian Palestinian from Damascus. He was a painter.

We divided ourselves into teams, responsible for cleaning, groceries, cooking, and finance. I was on the finance team and was helping to coordinate the project with L. and Gastvrij Oost. Every day the teams had to cooperate to make the project work.

The HOOST project was like a laboratory for creating new types of social interactions. Inside we had nice vibes living together, enjoying a sort of normal life with volunteers, neighbors, and language lessons. I felt a shift inside me from no plan to full resident in the metropolitan city of Amsterdam.

Day by day, week by week, we became used to the schedule. As a group, we had our ups and downs together. Group self-management and taking decisions together was sometimes good and sometimes a mess. By the end of the project, all of us had begun painting a nice picture in our minds about being independent from this project. Living in a crowd and not having the space to make our own decisions, I dreamed of having my own space that didn't overlap with other spaces. We longed to be alone.

In the end, we stayed at HOOST for nearly six months. Through the daily dynamics inside the house, I had figured out how challenging it could be to be independent and how different people can be. After several difficult arguments among the inhabitants, we discovered that our Syrian community is really heterogeneous

After six short months, we were assigned to more permanent homes. We were all excited about starting this new stage of life in the neighborhood: fully independent in our own house with our own space. I didn't imagine how hard it would be to be alone with tons of posts from the municipality, universities, energy companies, and integration schools, all in Dutch. We didn't imagine what it would be like to deal with our own problems. Alone.





HOOST was a big deal for me, and I think it was for others as well. Every day I compared our new surroundings with the days I had spent sleeping rough, in different camps, or in other official refugee reception locations. HOOST introduced us to Amsterdam East. Personally, at the beginning, I probed to comprehend Dutch directness, Dutch manners, and fitting in.

When we started getting our social houses in East Amsterdam, HOOST came to an end. That was July 2016. The residents took different paths. Some got a small house of their own, others went to housing projects or campuses such as Riekerhaven, some started internships, some concentrated more on language or started working. We had grown in experience and in being familiar with life in Amsterdam.

Chance meetings with HOOST mates in the market always sparked good conversations. We would talk about how nice the experience was. This was especially true as we began to compare it with our more challenging daily lives on our own.

The Gastvrij Oost organizers also had learned something from this project. There were different people with different working styles, brought together by a sudden sense of urgency. When it ended, they began asking themselves questions about what would come next. What do the former inhabitants of HOOST need now? What is the next problem that should be solved? What was useful in that experiment? What's next as organizers and as refugees? They had different answers to these questions.

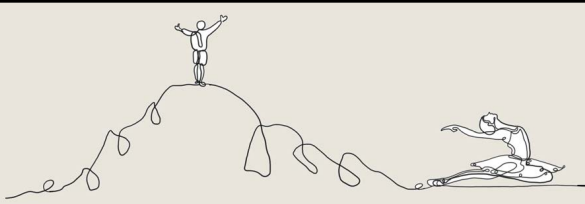
Soon the network or networks separated and took new and different routes..

L. – Creating meeting places in the city

The organisers that had created the HOOST project were all very different from each other. Different stories, different working styles, access to different resources. L. often felt this difference in style during the project. It was not always easy to work together with people that had so quickly and impulsively joined forces.

After that initial feeling of urgency– that wanting to do something – declined, the organisers felt they wanted to go different ways. When her involvement in the HOOST project at Mauritskade came to an end, L. also moved on to new projects. Her earlier experiences with HOOST had thought her a lot: how to move within and with the world of the government system for example, but also, just by observing, how the neighborhood around HOOST reacted to the new refugee residents and vice versa. It was also not always an easy experience. Based on that experience, she had decided on starting her own organization, according to her own ideals that she had developed over the past months: it's not about helping anymore, but it is about connecting, meeting each other in the neighborhood, L. believes, and that takes time, it takes patience.





She started with a small subsidy provided by the municipality which gave her three months to form her own answer to the question of what type of initiative was needed most. The answer she found was IMBY: In My Backyard. The name of her new organization.

The main ingredients were thirteen subgroups spread across different Amsterdam neighborhoods, and most importantly: a vibrant community of both “old and new” residents within these neighborhoods who show a mixture of patience, creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness and a willingness to get to know each other.

The recipe? Bringing both newcomers and native Dutch people living in Amsterdam together, enabling them to meet each other and join in activities together. L. wanted first of all to make it easier for newcomers who live in Amsterdam to get in touch with their Dutch neighbors. Also, she felt it was important to make Dutch people with their busy lives aware of the presence of new neighbors, and to connect them with the statushouders who, after getting their own living places in town, were suddenly becoming anonymous, because they were no longer in an AZC or another shelter where people could find them.

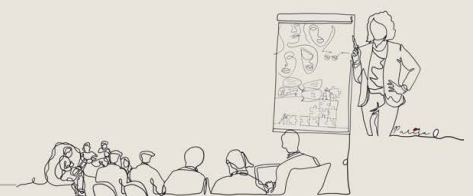
Yet of course, doing this involved many challenges. After all, how to keep Dutch people interested? How to offer them something that is attractive to them, while simultaneously creating an environment where people get along on an equal basis? L. stresses that these questions remain important to keep asking yourself. “I’m still learning every day and I’m still trying to understand every day, what we’re doing, how we could do it better, what exactly are we facing?”

That is one of the reasons that L. believes in the importance of joining forces with other initiatives again; not in a groups similar to that of Gastvrij Oost, but in a way which enables initiatives to learn from each other and discover the similarities, the shared message, in each others work. While all initiatives in her network are doing slightly different things, and all have different backgrounds, in the end cooperating and exchanging experiences is necessary. In this phase, “you start to realize why you need each other – that, in order to survive and be sustainable, we should cooperate”, L. states.

Y. - Working as a researcher

That time spent nesting in Amsterdam East gave me space for imagining my future. Through my involvement at HOOST I came in contact with professor Halleh Ghorashi. I told her about my research plans and that I wanted to continue my career. She offered me the opportunity to become part of her research team. That was a key turning point in my stay in the Netherlands.

From that moment on, I started developing an additional lens for looking at the project. Many questions rose in my mind. I began thinking about what had made us as participants so enthusiastic about HOOST. I realized that the initiative itself offered connection with the neighborhood and different resources. I started





dividing the period of this experience of HOOST into phases: first running away from the forest, second realizing that I was being recognized as a resident in the Netherlands. And the last phase was mediated by the interaction with the other residents.

Together as HOOST residents, we talked about the meaning of the project for us, what we gained, and what we are now. We had become independent. What next? After HOOST we found ourselves out there, able to start our own life, separate from the group, without people responsible for us. We found ourselves wondering how we should organize our lives in this very regulated Dutch system. The most important question for this third phase was: now what?

For me, doing research helped me to see what I had gained: social capital, a network. It made me reflect on what it means to be treated equally and take care of myself. It gave me space to ask whether or not I still needed help of the people that helped me earlier, and if I did, in which ways? It also helped to look back at the more uneasy aspects of this experience. For instance HOOST was a pilot not only in Amsterdam but in the Netherlands. The intention was that refugees would have full control on their lives. Yet there were some moments where I and the other residents sort of didn't have much freedom to choose. For example, we didn't choose which lessons to take or where, which meetings to attend, or who to meet.

The project initiators were people with strong personalities, and in some moments I felt compelled to follow a model they had in mind. In some aspects the organization inside the building was very Dutch oriented, in its strong ideas on how we should learn the language. I may have had some options to decide on my own, but there were also invisible rules in the minds of the organizers.

Of course, all of us living at Mauritskade also made mistakes, for instance about where the garbage should go. Yes. We needed help with those kinds of mundane things. But there was still an underlying tension. The tension we felt came from the notion that we were supposed to "own" the place and manage it ourselves. Yet everything we did was under scrutiny. The neighborhood watched us. The initiators watched us. Journalists, with or without cameras, wanted to talk to us about the experience in HOOST and what it meant for us as refugees. We were happy with the publicity. It was good for HOOST, and we wanted it to survive. But the strange feeling came from the fact that this happened without consent. I felt, in a sense, like a chess piece in the game of publicity.

At some moments I had the feeling that the residents felt they owed a debt of gratitude to the initiators, and therefore, despite possible ambiguous feelings were participating in events. They had nothing but good things to say about the initiative, perhaps because of the fear of losing social capital or because of the dependency. Nevertheless these reflection points came after living in HOOST and based on observations during that period.

We need initiatives that are able to develop further, to a next level. In order for those 'next edition' initiatives to be successful, it is important that participants are able to discuss experiences openly. As long as you are dependent and afraid of losing access to services, this won't happen.





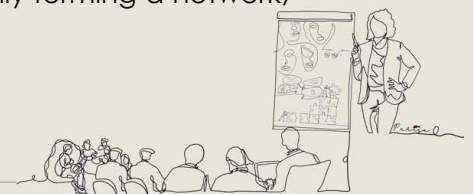
R. - The community organizer

R. returned from a meeting with the municipality quite disappointed. Looking back, she realized that frustration had been seeping into her thoughts for quite some time. Building up a community with neighbors and refugees had really been a success in a very short period of time. From there on, she knew that working together at an institutional level, even for the same purpose, would require more patience and perseverance. But this meeting had been really demotivating. "Were they even taking the initiative seriously at all?"

It hadn't always been like this. When she was working on HOOST at Mauritskade all seemed to be going well. City Hall was happy with the work they did. The municipality had welcomed the small-scale approach that contrasted so much with the detached character of the national debates. So, when the people living at HOOST eventually found new places of their own somewhere in Amsterdam, the Amsterdam municipality allowed the work to go on. R. really felt their support in creating the bottom up community center she was dreaming of. In short time she found herself with the keys to a former school building. They could now make it whatever they wanted it to be. R. had a vision for a place, as someone would later describe it (providing words for R.'s thoughts), where people simply wanted to be. She envisioned a place where people would feel safe to talk to each other, a place that helped people new to the country settle in and develop themselves. And locals being able to participate and contribute as well. R. could already smell the liveliness of it when it was still empty. "This, was to be a place to boost people." And just like that, BOOST was born.

R. worked with a loving passion to make BOOST work. Together with others, she built the place she envisioned. They connected people, organized events, language classes, and all kinds of workshops. BOOST grew, made a difference in the neighborhood and in people's lives. Yet lately it was getting harder and harder to sustain the effort. The more was organized for the integration of refugees in a formal way, the less support there seemed to be for an additional informal approach. After the recent talk with the municipality, R. wasn't sure if they'd ever understand just what the added value of BOOST was, and what it took to make it work.

R. had worked in neighborhood development for years, and had learned that government systems operate from a formal logic that does not necessarily fit the kind of work required to develop neighborhoods. "I've been talking to the municipality for a long time about finding ways to organize things differently together", she reminisced, "and it just is not easy." Surely, R. knew that in 2017 the municipality had reserved a serious budget for initiatives to contribute in supporting refugee-integration. At that time they were open to a lot of organizations and initiatives to reach goals together. Later the municipality put "contact officers" in charge of deciding which initiative was responsible for which refugee instead of allowing people themselves to decide, and the contribution of most initiatives seemed not to be necessary anymore. And now, in this latest meeting, they had just told her: "Listen, BOOST is not the only one. There are also other people and other initiatives." And with that, the financial support seemed to come to an end. R. tried to explain that the organizers of different initiatives were actually forming a network,





aiming to work together and support each other. She wondered why there was so little interest in this new social network for integration and perspective, and why there was no ambition to support their new, integral and informal approach. Was sustainable support from the municipality turning out to be an illusion? Or what other ways could be found?

E. - The researcher

The Refugee Academy research team followed the initiatives from Gastvrij Oost closely and from a distance. We observed how the initiators came together when stakes were high and later separated in different paths or projects. With BOOST, one of the initiatives that emerged from the network, we did some more in-depth research.

I remember entering BOOST for the first time and immediately absorbing this relaxed allure of day-to-day togetherness. People were hanging out, working in the kitchen, doing language trainings, and moving up and down in the big building. This is it, I thought, here you really breathe this energy that moved many people to action, creating initiatives to receive and support refugees in the past years. An energy that burst out when the urgency was high, and that now had crystallized into courses, meetings, trainings, cooking and socializing events organized by many initiatives throughout the Netherlands. What can we learn about the prospects and pitfalls of inclusion in a site such as this?

The Refugee Academy research team had been doing research at BOOST for some time at that point. As engaged researchers, we understood our role as that of uncovering mechanisms that are not visible at first glance and to create conditions to learn together. We especially try to make the more silent voices and perspectives heard, because looking from more marginal positions helps identify the things we take for granted. This is the core of inclusive thinking. In the public meetings we organize regularly, we try to make room for controversial perspectives on well-intended efforts to include refugees and to give a podium to refugees' own experiences of these efforts. This often produces messy discussions and exchanges, which still manage to succeed in bringing new questions to light. They also produce mirrors for participants to look at their actions from different positions. In other words, these meetings often succeed in being "daring spaces."

That's why we were enthusiastic when BOOST invited us to organize one of our meetings inside their organization, to reflect on the contribution of initiatives to the "inclusive city" of the future. We had written papers about this initiative. Young researchers had spent hours and days in interviews and observations. We had seen so much interesting tension. One tension concerned the fact that refugees felt that they had to serve as showcases to promote an initiative's success. The effort to create equal relationships in the BOOST community – which was meant as a space that newcomers and Dutch participants would create together – seemed a continuous challenge. The effort made towards creating equal roles seemed to be dissolving back and back again into role divisions between "providing volunteers" and "receiving newcomers."





The meeting didn't go the way we expected at all. What it did, mostly, was create a mirror for us to look at our own role and assumptions. We wanted to create, also here, a daring space, in which tensions could be addressed, but we failed to see how the vulnerability of initiatives like BOOST (for instance their fragile relation with the municipality of Amsterdam mentioned in R. story) makes this untenable. Nearly no one wanted to address any of the issues we brought up in a plenary meeting. The tensions inside an initiative might be clear to a researcher, but the people involved in the initiative, especially refugees, mainly demonstrate strong feelings of gratitude when asked to speak up. On one hand, this might make it difficult to reflect critically within the organization. On the other, it shows how crucial these initiatives are for refugees tackling the much more complex and even hostile outer world. As researchers, we quickly realized that we had failed to create the necessary safety in the meeting, which brought together people from inside and outside BOOST.

Critical self-reflection and daring spaces are not possible without safety. This does not simply refer to feeling safe and rooted in one's own organization or movement. It also refers to the safety and sustainability of the organization itself in the wider society and institutional landscape. Can reflective research tear down walls to make initiatives more inclusive homes when those same walls are also protecting the house from flooding?

Reflecting on our own position of power as researchers means more than examining whose perspectives we reproduce in our research and whose we do not. It means more than becoming aware of the dynamic of being intimate or distant, engaged or detached. It also means realizing that the voice of the researcher is always one that speaks from a safe position. This is not a privilege that is necessarily shared by other voices.

III. Charting a New Course

What started as a sudden burst, an eruption of empathy and solidarity that brought all of the above storylines together into one network of networks, slowly changed, illuminating new paths to follow separately. Yet whatever path was chosen, somewhere along the way it became difficult. That's what happens when you keep your head down, focusing on your own struggles for a while: you forget to look up and see what's ahead. You may miss another path to take. Now, a couple of years down the line, is a good time to look up again, to look around, and see what's out there. We need to ask ourselves: what did we create?

Differences exist between all the actors, initiatives, organizations, and networks. Their ideals, backgrounds, experiences, and methods often varied. As their stories show us, many of those involved felt a need to redirect their energy and start following their own course. After all, some paths suit some better than others. Space, time alone, seems to have been necessary to explore and experiment.





Currently, the network is reconnecting. There is a growing sense that they can help each other stand strong, share knowledge, and create new knowledge together. Forming a new network doesn't mean squeezing all viewpoints under the very same umbrella, since that eventually becomes too crowded, leaving some out in the rain. What it can mean however, is learning to act alongside each other, elevating each other. This might be the right time for initiatives such as the ones that emerged from Gastvrij Oost to start building stronger alliances.

This story about the Gastvrij Oost network shows that it is important to distinguish different stages in the path of these citizen organizations. In 2015, marking the first stage, there was a sense of urgency that created a need to act. Different people started acting quickly and simultaneously and saw their actions converge. After a while, the initial urgency faded, giving rise to a second stage. In the second stage, actors developed their own approaches towards the issue of refugee inclusion and reception and experimented with them. New opportunities and challenges presented themselves. This brought us to the current time, a third stage, which features the different initiatives seeking connections with other initiatives, exploring differences and commonalities, and strategizing together on an approach to dialogue with and funding from the government.

Distinguishing these three stages of development helps us understand and reflect on the nature of the mobilization of citizens after 2015. Acting on a sense of urgency can be a source of mobilization and solidarity. In Europe, this happened on a great scale from 2015 onward, and the citizens' response helped to counterbalance the insufficient response of many states, as shown by different studies.¹

The same studies also raise points of reflection, warning that hasty citizen responses might lead to unreflective action that could reinforce certain structures of exclusion. An example is when the roles of the 'resourceful supporter' and the 'passive receiver of help' become fixed and prevent refugees from regaining control over their lives.² But various researches in European countries also show that post-2015 initiatives have found ways to navigate and overcome these tensions. Sometimes this is done by building reflective networks with each other that challenge assumptions and implicit dichotomies (such as fixed oppositions between 'helper' vs 'receiver').

Regaining control over one's life as a newcomer is a gradual process. It might partly happen within the initiatives themselves (for instance when newcomers feel they can start co-shaping the initiative themselves), or outside (when starting a new phase of life outside) or "on the threshold," with one foot in an initiative and the other outside. We can see this in Y.'s reflection of the participants sharing their eagerness to become more independent and the uncertainty that came with it as the HOOST project came to an end.

1 Feischmidt et al 2019, Vandevoort and Verschraegen 2019, Boersma et al 2019

2 Zakarias 2015, Scheibelhofer 2019, Ghorashi and Rast 2018





For organizers of initiatives, the passage through the three stages that we identified, indicates a growing consciousness about their positioning: From a first sense of urgency, to creating something new, to building new alliances and reflecting on the path they took. Personal connections sometimes led to insight into

different experiences. As the reflections of Y. – who was participant and researcher – show, it is important to have the time to look back and reflect on where the path shared with others led.

How can refugee participant's reflections, like those produced by Y. who looked back on his experience, contribute to make initiatives reflexive spaces and learning spaces that continuously evolve?³ And how can different initiatives that took different paths after keep supporting each other in the future?

It's important to remember that this is just one story, of one network. There are many more, similar and maybe even very different, stories to be told from different contexts. This is why in the future we aim to find other stories and learn about similarities and difference elsewhere which can enlarge our patchwork reflections and enable mutual learning.

3 See also Ponzoni, Ghorashi and Badran 2020





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