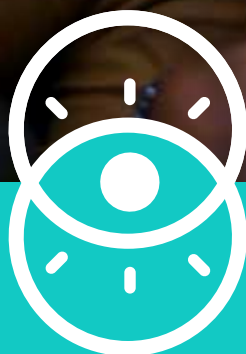
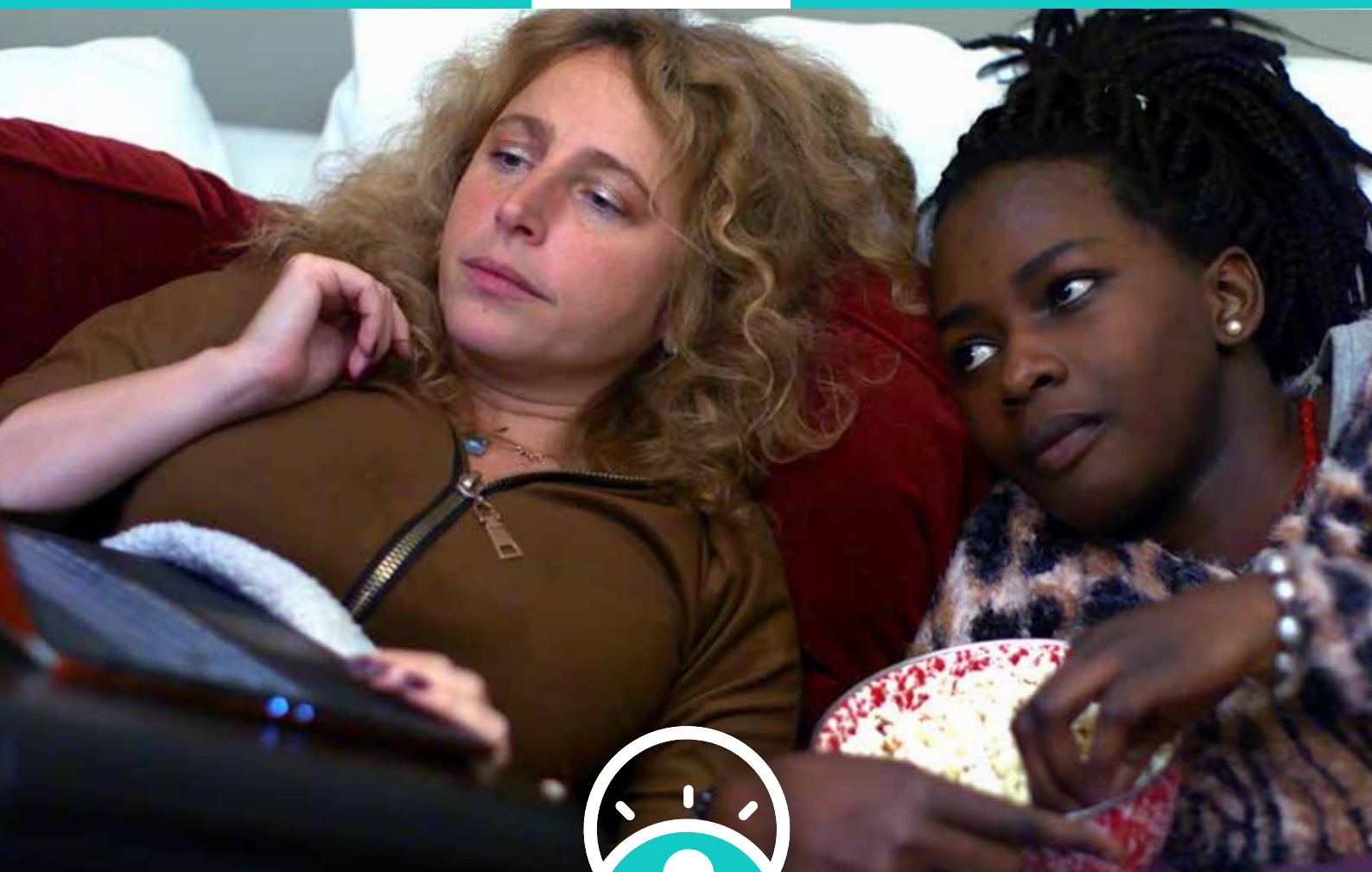


BELGIUM



**I GET
YOU**

Promoting best practices to prevent racism
and xenophobia towards forced migrants
through community building

Promoting best practices to prevent racism and xenophobia towards forced migrants through community building



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Cover photo
Brigitte from Brussels (L) and Flavia, a forced migrant from East Africa, watch Netflix together in Brigitte's apartment. Brigitte hosts Flavia as part of the Up Together project run by JRS Belgium. (Still taken from the Belgian *I Get You* video: Denis Bosnic / JRS Europe)



I GET YOU BELGIUM

National chapter no.1 of the European *I Get You* report

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Introduction

Since its beginnings in the 1990s, Jesuit Refugee Service Belgium (JRS Belgium) has been committed to working with and accompanying forced migrants. For many years, JRS Belgium has visited immigrant detention centres and assisted the detainees while they await the outcome of their immigration procedures. Over the last years, JRS Belgium has widened its activities with the project Up Together that creates networks of volunteers who host forced migrants in their homes.

The launch of *I Get You* at the close of 2015 and beginning of 2016 happened at a timely moment. The increased numbers of forced migrants arriving in Belgium at that time motivated many citizens to take action and help them. Although the numbers were not comparable to other European countries, the public authorities failed to react in a timely manner to the situation. While the Aliens Office registered only 250 asylum registrations per day,

hundreds of asylum seekers stayed in tents in a park at Brussels North Station, waiting to register their asylum request. Over the course of a few weeks, the local population witnessed the formation of a refugee camp in the centre of Brussels.

After a few months, the sight of a refugee camp in the centre of the capital created the feeling among many Belgians that the government was not sufficiently reacting to a humanitarian crisis on their own territory. This prompted a strong desire among many citizens to become active, to do something, and to take the welcoming of refugees into their own hands.

During these months, JRS Belgium received hundreds of phone calls and emails from local citizens who wanted to help refugees arriving in Belgium. The amount of help offered was remarkable, and JRS Belgium, along with many

📷 Mamadou and Chantal collaborating in the CBI 'Duo for a Job'. (Duo for a Job)





“During the first 18 months of my stay in Belgium I had only contacts with Arabs. Thanks to Xavier, I was able to establish contacts with Belgians. Thanks to him, I have discovered a new side of Belgium. Now when someone treats me in a way I do not like, I don't care. Before I would have said to myself “oh the Belgians are not good”.

Now, thanks to Xavier, I know that this is not true. It is sometimes difficult to know the codes of their culture. Xavier walked with me, step by step. He always has time for a phone call. He became like a father to me. His family became my family. His friendship and his help allowed me to find my way in Belgium.

I volunteered in a care home. The old woman looked at me in a way a grandmother looks at her grandson. I learned so much from her. Xavier had found this work for me. I had already several work contracts. At this moment, I need to look for work again. It is important to stay active.”

other refugee organisations, was overwhelmed by the generosity of support offered by local citizens willing to help. Since then, many locals have become active in assisting refugees in the steps needed to start a life in Belgium. *I Get You* aims at identifying and evaluating Community Building Initiatives (CBIs) active in facilitating the social inclusion of forced migrants in Belgium. The aim of the project is to determine how these initiatives operate, what role they play in community building and what makes them sustainable.

In Belgium, the debate over which factors influence successful inclusion of forced migrants and refugees has become a key item on the political agenda. The governments of Flanders and Wallonia are putting in place policies and courses to prepare citizenship exams, offer language classes and specific work contracts that facilitate the employment of recognised refugees. *I Get You* emphasises the invaluable contribution citizen's initiatives play for social cohesion and a harmonious living together by highlighting best practice initiatives taking place in Belgium. *I Get You* also addresses the support the public

authorities must provide at structural levels by providing recommendations for policymakers.

1.1 CONTEXT: RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA TOWARDS FORCED MIGRANTS IN BELGIUM

The fight against racism has a long tradition in Belgium with the first actions going back to the years following the Second World War. However, the groups of people whose rights needed protection has changed over time. The first initiative, the Mouvement contre le Racisme, l'Antisémitisme et pour la Paix, aimed at eradicating persisting elements of Nazi ideology. Subsequently, the name of the initiative was changed into Mouvement contre le Racisme, l'Antisémitisme et la Xénophobie (MRAX) reflecting the fact that, by then, new immigrant populations had become the main target of racist discrimination.

In 1981, the lobbying of organisations defending immigrant rights prompted the Belgian Government to pass a law prohibiting offences motivated by racism and xenophobia. The criteria protected by the anti-racism law are assumed race, skin colour,

1 Loi du 10 mai 2007 modifiant la loi du 30 juillet 1981 tendant à réprimer certains actes inspirés par le racisme ou la xénophobie (MB 30 mai 2007) (loi antiracisme) Loi du 10 mai 2007 tendant à lutter contre certaines formes de discrimination (MB 30 mai 2007) (loi antidiscrimination)

2 Agence Belga, publié le 29 août 2015.

3 http://unia.be/files/Documenten/Jaarrapport/Rapport_chiffres_2016_def.pdf

nationality, Jewish origin, and ethnicity. In 2007, the Belgian parliament adopted anti-discrimination legislation to achieve conformity with European legislation adding gender, race, ethnic origin, religion, handicap, age and sexual orientation to the criteria protected against discrimination.¹ This means that religious beliefs are not included in the protection criteria of the anti-racism legislation but fall within the scope of anti-discrimination law. In procedural terms, hate crimes and discrimination based on assumed racial criteria are prosecuted under penal law or under civil law, while the criteria covered by anti-discrimination laws, such as religious beliefs, can only be pursued under civil law.

In 1993, the Centre pour l'égalité des chances (now known as UNIA) was set up to act as a watchdog for monitoring adherence to anti-racism and anti-discrimination legislation. According to MRAX, racist attacks have increased in recent years.² Furthermore, MRAX reports an increase of discrimination based on religious beliefs, mainly in the form of Islamophobia, and openly expressed anti-Arab attitudes. These profiles make the forced migrant population, many of which are either Muslims or of Arab origin, or both, potential victims of racist assaults.

The situation worsened after Brussels became the target of two terrorist attacks carried out by local young men (suicide bombings at the airport and in the metro on 22 March 2016). The killing of people through bombs in public spaces raised many questions about social cohesion and the social inclusion of immigrants and refugees. Many people started to associate feelings of uncertainty with a generalised fear of the effects of global migration movements. After the attacks, the question how to prevent forms of marginalisation that risk turning young people into extremists was widely discussed in the media. The response put in place by the public authorities' focus on measures to detect radicalisation and the breaking up of terrorist networks.

In its annual report³ for the year 2016 UNIA reports an overall increase of 23% of complaints submitted compared to the year before. While the complaints

on the above-mentioned criteria to protect against acts of racism are rising, discrimination and hate crimes towards the Muslim population have doubled. Among the cases admitted for consideration by UNIA, 33% concerned racial criteria, 23% discrimination of handicapped persons and 19% harassment or discrimination based religious beliefs. 40% of the discrimination and hate crimes are committed via the media, 23% concern discrimination on the labour market or harassment at the work place. The wearing of a headscarf can be an issue at workplaces but the cases reported also included discriminatory licencing practices for Muslim employees based on 'security concerns'.

Today, racism in Belgium persists in the form of Islamophobia, antisemitism, negrophobia, the rejection of Roma and the rejection of people perceived as newly arrived migrants⁴. In response, several media campaigns were launched to raise awareness on racism and stereotypes. In spring 2016, the French language association for refugee action, CIRE⁵ launched a campaign (films, radio ads, posters) with the message « C'est des préjugés qu'il faut avoir peur, pas des réfugiés ni des étrangers. » ["You should be afraid of prejudices, not of refugees nor foreigners"] The campaign successfully used a wordplay on réfugié/préjugé which means refugee/prejudice.

During the month of February 2017, the Government of Wallonia, the public French speaking language Broadcaster RTBF and the Platform against Racism launched a campaign to raise awareness against the discrimination of migrants, which consisted of four TV ads and a wide range of events. In 2016, the Flemish organisation ORBIT active in awareness rising and training about diversity and the fight against racism organised exhibitions, BrusselZwerft, where pictures and texts presenting prejudices were presented and discussed taking into consideration the context of their production. Although anti-discrimination laws and public campaigns are essential elements in the fight against racism, personal encounters are imperative in overcoming the fear of the other. For this purpose, *I Get You* illustrates the role grassroots initiatives play in the fight against racism and xenophobia.

⁴ Faux, Jean-Marie : Le racisme aujourd'hui, in : Les expressions du racisme aujourd'hui, EN QUESTION, no.114, September 2015, pp.14-17.

⁵ Coordination d'Initiatives pour les Réfugiés et Exilés.

Methodology

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I Get You identified 130 CBIs in Belgium, but it is clear that far more exist. Projects such as the Hospitality campaign launched by the Flemish Refugee Action⁶, which received more than 400 nominations in 2017, and informal encounters by JRS Belgium suggest the presence of at least 1,000 initiatives all over Belgium.

Over the two years of project implementation, the research was divided into two complementary phases, a mapping phase and a qualitative research phase. The intention of these two phases was to first provide a broad picture of existing initiatives in terms of numbers and statistics and then to learn more about specific initiatives.

The *I Get You* website served as the main point of data collection as people who worked with CBIs or the general public could “nominate an initiative” by filling in the electronic questionnaire in the language of their choice. The results of this phase were published in the Belgian Mapping report available on the *I Get You* website in electronic versions and available in both French and Dutch. The second phase of the research evaluated the quality of the CBIs mapped through selecting a representative sample of 13 of the 37 mapped CBIs. In individual, semi-structured interviews, organiser, volunteers and beneficiaries of the CBI were asked to describe the workings of the initiatives, the scope of their involvement and participation and what impact this experience has had for them. All interviews were either transcribed or summarised. Interviews were carried out in either French, Dutch or English.

The information received during the interviews was evaluated against qualitative and quantitative indicators developed in a four-phased collaboration among experts on racism and practitioners from JRS offices. Eight indicators were chosen to

evaluate the quality of the initiatives: firstly, the strategies initiatives used to promote interaction and encounter between forced migrants and locals, the participation rates, the initiatives’ involvement in awareness raising, and the quality of the services provided. Secondly, the aim was to evaluate which role intercultural issues play in the encounter and to which extent the values of hospitality and dignity were emphasised in the work of the initiatives. Finally, *I Get You* evaluated if the initiatives were sustainable. The outcomes of the personal interviews were summarised and rated in a grid with the aim of identifying five initiatives which could be presented as examples of best practice in line with the eight quality indicators mentioned above.

Data Findings

3.1 SUMMARY OF QUANTITATIVE RESULTS FROM MAPPING PHASE

The mapping of initiatives whereby local volunteers support refugees starting their life in Belgium revealed a high number of activities all over the country. *I Get You* contacted 130 of them and invited them to complete questionnaires on their activities, providing information about the way they organise themselves and the profile of the participants.

In Belgium, data on 37 CBIs was collected during the Mapping Phase of the research.

- Of these initiatives, 23 of them operate at the local level, 12 of them at regional level and 2 operate nationally across the country.
- In terms of the CBIs' budget, 81% of the initiatives operate on budgets of less than 25,000 Euros with 59.5% financed by private funding and 27% by grassroots funding.
- 70% of participants are working aged adults between the ages of 26-65; while 8% are young adults aged 19-25 and 21.6% are under 18.
- 95% of the forced migrants involved in CBIs have been in Belgium for more than six months.
- 70% of CBIs organise weekly meetings for those involved.
- In terms of services provided, language courses and assistance finding an apartment were of equal importance.
- While the CBIs mapped covered a large variety of services for people, there was a tendency towards leisure activities.

3.2 RESULTS OF THE QUALITATIVE PHASE

During the qualitative interviews, *I Get You* learned more about the context in which CBIs were carried out in Belgium as people described the insights gained, the activities, and what the participation in the initiative has meant for them.

Unsurprisingly, initiatives cluster around places with a higher presence of refugees, around organisations advocating refugee rights and around the departments of social welfare offices. Since 2014, the Flemish Refugee Action launches a yearly campaign for the nomination of initiatives for and with refugees. The campaign awards 10 prizes for the best initiatives in various categories, for example initiatives run by individuals, by schools, by organisations or art projects. The number of participants has steadily increased every year. In Wallonia and Brussels, the Coordination des Initiatives pour Réfugiés et Exilés (CIRE) coordinates 23 initiatives. In addition, locals have formed support networks around the local welfare offices, which are the main contact point for coordinating the social integration of refugees. Informal support networks grow around parishes, schools and sport clubs. In 2016, the King Baudouin Foundation, the largest private foundation in Belgium, provided 300,000 Euros for projects involving mentoring and individual accompaniment, so-called "buddy projects". Those initiatives all fulfil the *I Get You* criteria of community building set in this project.

The initiatives chosen for analysing best practices are initiatives that have already reached a certain size and level of organisation and have proved effective over a certain amount of time. However, we are aware that many initiatives remain unnamed and invisible, such as those with a model of neighbours helping neighbours.

3.2.1 How the Initiatives Operate

The majority of the initiatives operate based on one-to-one interaction between locals and forced migrants. Weekly meetings among participants are the most frequent, but once friendships are established between people the contacts are more frequent. This particularly applies to people who accompany families with children. They report having almost daily contact with the families, at least during the week.

The nurturing of the human side, the creation of social links and mutual respect appear as operating principles in all CBIs interviewed. Volunteers of the initiatives facilitate opportunities to integrate forced migrants into Belgian life by sharing their professional expertise and life experience. For example, in the CBI Up Together run by JRS Belgium, Flavia benefitted from the help that her host Brigitte provided: “Brigitte showed me all this. I got to know about Brussels, how to take the bus, how to take the metro.”

In most cases, forced migrants first seek assistance from CBIs when they need help finding accommodation, work or a place to learn French or Flemish. From there, social relationships grow when people share stories and realise other needs beyond those that service provision alone can provide. The CBI Agir Ensemble in Ottignies was particularly strong in building such mutual relationships with the people involved expressing the capacity of social workers to truly empathise with the forced migrants involved.

3.2.2 Types of Assistance Provided

When working with forced migrants, volunteers become aware of how difficult it is to achieve the fundamental conditions for starting a life in Belgium. This means finding accommodation, work and learning a new language. Many refugees face the challenge of trying to realise these necessities while at the same time navigating difficult asylum procedures, such as applying for family reunification for family members in the country of origin or other EU member states. This puts forced migrants under the double pressure of fulfilling requirements of integration and the standards needed to take care of a family. Veronique, a staff member from L’Hirondelle à Perwez expressed her gradual realisation of all the needs “that the state does not take care of” and how CBIs across Belgium fill such gaps.

The difficulties start with the search for a place to live. Local property owners hesitate to rent apartments to foreigners, in particular people who are in an economically weak position, as most of the newly recognised refugees who depend on welfare benefits are. Volunteers’ initiatives can offer a framework to facilitate the search for accommodation and create conditions to reassure the property owners, for example by facilitating rental guarantees provided by the welfare office.

Many CBIs in Belgium assist people in finding sustainable work by providing knowledge of local networks and training and education opportunities. Volunteers work with forced migrants on a case by case basis to identify how their qualifications fit into the labour market or what new qualifications they might need to obtain. The research of *I Get You* in Belgium has shown that without the assistance of a person with knowledge of the local working requirements, it is almost impossible for newcomers to obtain access to the labour market. Xavier, from Duo for a Job, confirmed this saying, “Once you have a social network, you also find work.”

A common hurdle expressed by many forced migrants interviewed is the acquisition of the local language, and as an additional difficulty in Belgium, having three language communities, the choice of one language binds a person to the labour market in a specific part of the country. In parallel to language classes, informal, often one-to-one language classes are an invaluable path for integration, for example through teaching a specific vocabulary needed in a specific job or adapted to the life context of the person.

3.2.3 Impact on Volunteers and Local Community

Many of the volunteers were already involved in helping others, but for many it is the first time they are dealing with people whose cultural backgrounds are different from their own. Individuals who start their own initiative or decide to spend time in helping refugees are strongly driven by the wish to actively contribute to the challenge of welcoming refugees and creating conditions for them to stay. Statements like “I want to help” or “I want to work against marginalisation, nobody should be left out, this creates only problems” express this view.

CBI volunteers who took part in the interviews want to make the refugees feel part of the local community. Geert who works with St. Michiels Agape Kortrijk expressed how people like her are “ambassadors to make [refugees] feel at home here.” The community feeling is generated because volunteers share a feeling of purpose, in achieving a certain goal for themselves or for their local community. They support the newcomers and at the same time, they also support each other when sharing hopes and frustrations as people try to find their way. They share the view that although most politicians tend to highlight fears and negative narratives about migration, local citizens are still able to make a change through an interpersonal level.

All interviewees stated that being part of the initiative changed the way they perceived the other and opened their eyes to realities they did not know even existed. People discover forms of discrimination that they were not aware of, but saw their work in the CBI to be the first step to deal with such discrimination. Jef, from SOCK a reception house for forced migrants in Bruges, has realised, "Encounter is the key for integration and breaking prejudices. I have learned so much from the people here."

3.2.4 Impact on Forced Migrants

The forced migrants interviewed by *I Get You* were mainly refugees who had been in Belgium for more than 6 months. The interviews revealed that an important element for community building and being able to participate fully in the initiative is that a person has had their first taste of the new culture and society. By living in Belgium for more than 6 months, the forced migrants interviewed had all overcome initial stages of culture shock and were ready to become more settled in the Belgian society.

The refugees declared that basic needs, such as feeling safe, are vital to become ready for taking the steps to start a new life. Finding one's way around town and not being afraid of leaving the house are also important preconditions for being ready for new encounters. CBIs like Duo for a Job, help

refugees find a job in Belgium by pairing them with a local. Ali shared that his mentor Xavier opened his perspective on Belgian people through Xavier's patience and calm attitude when compared to Ali's previous experience dealing with Belgians, who are usually administrative personnel or the authorities. Ali said, "Xavier walked by my side, step by step. He helped me to find my way here." While Jamal, who participates in the CBI Tremplin pour la Vie appreciates the familial aspect of the CBI because it allows him to feel comfortable to "share many things."

CBIs play a key role at a decisive moment in the life of a refugee to become a part of the local community and feel included. They create opportunities to become part of life in Belgium. Some forced migrants interviewed expressed that the contacts established through the initiatives where decisive not only for their integration, but for their survival. In the interviews, forced migrants expressed their tremendous appreciation for the personal commitment of the volunteers in helping them to come to terms with life in Belgium and overcome past traumas suffered in their country of origin or during their migration journey.

3.2.5 A Mutually Enriching Experience

All interviewees expressed the same outcome of participating in CBIs, that the experience of encounter with other people who were different

📷 Jamal with his hosts as part of Tremplin pour la vie, Collectif des femmes Louvain-la-Neuve. (Tremplin pour la vie)



from them allowed them to have an enriching experience in the CBI. Both local citizens and forced migrants declared that they were beneficiaries and participants at the same time. Many forced migrants expressed that after participation in the CBI, they had altered the image that they had of Belgians that was formed through contacts with the public authorities. In direct contact with the local population, they discovered the generosity, but also the concerns, of the local population.

Belgians have benefitted from their involvement in CBIs by discovering new ways of perceiving life. Tine, from St. Michiels Agape Kortrijk says that “you give a lot and you receive a lot.” Another example of this was found in a CBI where a local citizen who is an atheist was paired with a forced migrant that practices a religion. The local citizen could realise the value that belief and religion brings into some people’s lives if not personally into his own.

Both local citizens and forced migrants have gained new contacts and networks through participating in CBIs and have discovered that they share the same dreams, needs and hopes. This is what Amancay from Tremplin pour la Vie described as “circular integration” where “integration and adaptation are working both ways.”

3.2.6 Hospitality, Dignity and Interculturalism

In terms of the evaluation criteria hospitality, dignity and interculturalism, the interviewees, particularly the staff and volunteers of CBIs, found it difficult to describe how these values were specifically emphasised in their work. Spending one’s free time to assist forced migrants is, in itself, a genuine expression of hospitality, and, in their view, this did not merit special mention as such. Likewise, interviewees perceived that dignity is associated with the strong emphasis of mutual respect present in all CBIs. As Ali from Duo for a job believes, he and his mentor Xavier “are brothers in humanity.”

The interviewees all perceived the presence of interculturalism in their initiatives as a positive aspect. While at times there are questions or challenges to overcome with CBIs regarding the cultural differences between people, such as ways of communicating, all outcomes of such challenges lead to growth and understanding rather than being obstacles to the work. In CBIs,

learning other people’s cultural codes give people time to establish respect and confidence in relationships. This provides the foundation for addressing sensitive issues and topics later on between people.

3.2.7 Awareness Raising and Education

I Get You has shown that the scope of awareness raising activities conducted by the CBI is linked to the size and resources available to CBIs. The more institutionalised initiatives rely on social media and information sharing events to recruit new volunteers and to inform forced migrants about the services they offer. On the other hand, smaller CBIs rely on awareness outreach done by their volunteers who raise awareness about their work to their own family and friends. In this way, more and more Belgians learn about the issues faced by forced migrants in Belgium through hearing the experience of their family members or friends who are involved in CBIs. Chantal, a volunteer with Duo for a Job stressed how she became “an ambassador for their cause,” when speaking about raising awareness about the issues faced by the refugees who participate.

While the importance of education in combatting stereotypes was stressed by the Delphi experts, and is present in other *I Get You* countries such as Italy and Malta, most CBIs in Belgium are not able to provide systematic awareness raising in schools to young people. The exception is School without Racism (School Zonder Racisme / Ecole Sans Racisme) where secondary school children participate in workshops that equip them with knowledge and experiences to better understand issues faced by migrants and refugees to prevent prejudices and racism. One of the organisers of the CBI stresses this point saying, “Schools provide the most important reference point and awareness raising is necessary starting with kindergarten.” In this way, this CBI works to break down perceived barriers between people that are learned over time and artificial labels that some communities have been given.

Inspiring Community Building Initiatives

I Get You has found examples of initiatives whereby volunteers support or host refugees when they first arrive to Belgium. These initiatives present a variety of best practices operating at different organisational levels. With personal encounters as core criteria for success, they are exemplary in terms of community building with local Belgians and forced migrants. They give examples of how to organise the welcome of families in local neighbourhoods, how the guidance given by mentors/duos/buddies is crucial for finding one's way (accommodation and work) within the existing support structures, and how volunteers are necessary to fulfil special needs of forced migrants. Syrimont in Ottignies

This CBI started when a young mother encouraged her neighbours to welcome a refugee family into their community. Collectively, they rent an apartment and organise everything the family needed to integrate. They have now repeated the same practice with more families. The network springs into action with the announcement of the arrival of a new family.

This initiative is an authentic example of community building because, it integrates newcomers in a respectful way, responding to their individual needs, while it also creates new social networks among the locals involved.

BUDDYBEGELEIDING REFUGEE FORUM DENDERLEEUV AND SOCIAL WELFARE OFFICE DENDERLEEUV

When refugees register with the local welfare office they are offered accompaniment by a "buddy". This volunteer assists the refugee in his or her integration efforts and in adapting to life in Belgium. The buddy's role is to personally support the refugee and to create a link to existing support structures. This CBI is an example for numerous other buddy projects in Belgium because it was set up in a structured way, with specific attention given to training volunteers and the social workers who

work with them. By bringing together refugees with existing support activities, which are not set up especially for refugees, the aim is to create social cohesion and awareness for other people in need of support.

L'HIRONDELLE | PERWEZ

L'Hirondelle provides specialised social and legal services to refugees. In addition, they organise individual support to refugees by volunteers, which is entirely flexible and leaves refugees free to decide the pace of the support offered by the volunteer and what they can help with, such as finding a language class or assistance in enrolling in a citizenship class. They also organise events for refugees and broader local population such as trips to the cinema, discussion evenings and summer activities for children.

This CBI is an excellent approach for accommodating special needs while respecting the participants' dignity. Because they focus on assisting people with a combination of various vulnerabilities, the support is individualised and tailored in a way that public services are not.

UP TOGETHER | ANTWERP, BRUGES, BRUSSELS, LIÈGE, AND TOURNAI

Up Together is a network of volunteers hosting rejected asylum seekers in their homes. These are persons whose asylum claims have been rejected, but the Belgian authorities are unable to return to their country of origin because the countries refuse to take them back or other circumstances prevent them from doing so. By providing accommodation and support in the home of a local Belgian individual or family, the forced migrants are not subjected to the dangers of living on the street. The main objective of the CBI is to establish social networks, to create communities of hospitality and to give forced migrants the opportunity and freedom to make decisions about their future.

This CBI demonstrates how people offer hospitality and solutions for shelter that are not otherwise provided under existing government policies. By sharing their homes with refugees, the volunteers demonstrate the *I Get You* criteria of hospitality most strongly.

DUO FOR A JOB | ANTWERP, BRUSSELS AND LIÈGE

Duo for a Job is a mentoring project whereby experienced professionals coach young migrants for 6 months on how to integrate into the Belgian labour market. By using their expertise and professional and personal connections, the mentors share knowhow and create invaluable social links for their refugee mentees.

Duo for a Job features a high level of professionalisation in areas such as in the selection and coaching of the volunteers and in the financial structure, which is based on social investment models. The results of the CBI have also been very successful with about 770 duos formed since it began and 56% of mentees finding a job after 12 months. The professional standards of the CBI are balanced with values of respect and dignity that both Belgians and migrants tangibly feel.

SCHOOL ZONDER RACISME⁷

Introduced in the 1980s, School Zonder Racisme (School without Racism) is an education project for pupils and teachers. This CBI applies experience-based training through workshops on how to fight prejudices and racism and guides students in developing answers on the challenges of living in a globalized world. By providing teachers with material to be used in the classroom to broaden student's perspective through various educational activities on topics of racism the CBI works to encourage critical thoughts and discussions among children and young people.

School without Racism strives to uphold education and innovation because it partners with many civil society organisations working with migrants and refugees in Belgium and uses a "train the trainer" model.

7 <https://www.schoolzonderracisme.be>



“A mother of three children who lives down the road from us saw the pictures of the small boy drowned in the Mediterranean on his journey to Europe. She wrote a letter to all the people in our street. She wanted to do something. A few days later, we met at her house. I had seen her, but I did not know her. We were probably fifteen people. We asked ourselves what we could do. We found an apartment in the neighbourhood. We pay part of the rent. We looked for furniture. A refugee family from Syria moved in. We accompanied them in the administrative procedures. A language teacher offered language classes.

We meet regularly. Our network opens up contacts for the family. In addition, we created new contacts among neighbours and with other Syrians who live around here. This is the creation of a new social tissue.

Because the integration of the first family worked out so well, we decided to welcome a second family, and then a third one. Five members of the first family were able to join them via family reunification. We called this spontaneous initiative “Syrimont”, because this part of town is called “Stimont”.

Our initiative continues to gain momentum. We also organise activities for asylum seekers and refugees which are not accompanied by us. For example, ‘open kitchen Saturdays’ where we cook together in various households and gather in the evening in the community centre to share the meal. Last time we had 60 people eating. It is extraordinary. People who did not know each other become friends.

Guidelines for Best Practices for Community Building Initiatives

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The CBIs *I Get You* has conducted interviews with in Belgium are representative to establish guidelines for best practice because of sufficient identified patterns despite the initiatives' diversity.

Volunteer initiatives add the invaluable human dimension to community building without which the creation of social links cannot happen. However, best practices should be considered that there are limits in terms of capacities, resources and the amount of work that can be carried out by volunteers.

Good will is not enough to ensure the quality of the work. Volunteers need adequate training and support. CBI organisers need to create a reassuring framework for volunteers and forced migrants to avoid frustrations and damage caused by unforeseen needs or wrong expectations.

Based on the initiatives encountered and evaluated in Belgium, JRS Belgium recommends the following guiding principles for best practice:

- **Community Building Initiatives should complement the network of existing structures:** CBIs play a vital role in complement the work of public authorities especially in areas where the public support networks remain limited. Before starting a new initiative, organisers should evaluate the existing support networks and identify where they can contribute in a meaningful way. Coordination and exchange of practices should be sought from the very beginning through carrying out a needs analysis with beneficiaries as well as public authorities.

CÉCILE



VOLUNTEER, UP TOGETHER

“What is great with such an experience is that you start questioning your own way of perceiving life. It was a very enriching experience.

I think we must go beyond these ways of imagining that just because they are foreigners they are against the Belgians. It is not because they come from elsewhere that they are not able to adapt.

I thought it was magnificent that two boys, a twenty-year-old Malian and a Senegalese who was 28 years old, cooked very well, managed to get by. Because you always hear that in Africa, it is the women who cook and the men who do nothing at all and here it was just the opposite. For us Europe feels like it is old. We are a little disappointed and pessimistic about Europe. They see Europe as a chance. As a country, a continent where one can flourish. This is a wonderful contrast. They trust in life while I need reassurance. To be certain to have a place to stay, to have money, otherwise I do not leave. They have an extraordinary attitude to life.

What a tremendous confidence in life. In their abilities. In the opportunities, they hope to find. For me, a learned lesson of life that I find interesting and rewarding.

And it made me drop a lot of clichés, prejudices. When I was told: beware of men, young, black, Muslim, African and all that. That's all wrong!”



📷 The 'Music in Colour' initiative in Thuin. (Music in Colour)

- **Forced migrants are referred and selected by professional organisations:** The cooperation with professional organisations, either social services or NGOs active in the field can have a great impact in reassuring forced migrants and the volunteers. In this case, the situation in terms of administrative procedures is clear and there are persons to whom to refer when difficulties arise.
- **The roles of the volunteers are well established:** The meetings with the volunteer organisations revealed that it is essential that the roles of the volunteers and the limits of their activities are set out clearly. Codes of conduct can provide useful reference for organisers and volunteers. In the cases of far-reaching engagement of volunteers, like CBIs that involve hosting people at home, it is essential to lay expectations to avoid disappointment or even damage.
- **Volunteers are selected, trained and supervised:** Volunteer work can be very demanding. When encountering forced migrants, volunteers witness a multitude of challenges. Organisers need to set-up a screening process of potential volunteers and not necessarily accept everyone willing to help. Then, initial training must be provided where volunteers can have a structured exchange about their experiences. Follow-up, regular supervision is needed to sustain the volunteer in his or her work.
- **Initiatives should aim at empowering forced migrants to be independent and autonomous:** *I Get You* has seen that community building measures go beyond the provision of the humanitarian assistance and should complement existing support structures. CBIs should therefore prioritise that the aim of the assistance is to enable forced migrants to create themselves an independent, dignified life in Belgium. This is best done achieved through models that use coaching to pair local citizens and forced migrants as mentor, duos or bodies.
- **Uphold the human dimension of the activities and encounters:** The encounters between volunteers and forced migrants generate multiple feelings and perceptions, both positive and negative. All people participating in CBIs must be aware that community building is only successful if there is enough room for dialogue when conflicts arise. Such genuine encounter and dialogue fosters environments of dignity and respect between people.

Policy Recommendations

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Community Building Initiatives (CBIs) are an invaluable resource for the integration of refugees in Belgium and a very effective model to foster social cohesion. They demonstrate that meaningful encounters with the local population are essential to counter marginalisation and to establish mutual confidence. The large number of initiatives for refugees demonstrates the desire among the local population to assist refugees in starting their life in Belgium.

Although some of the short-term successes of initiatives are impressive, integration and social cohesion remain long-term policy goals. There are limits to the amount of work initiatives, such as the ones covered in the scope of *I Get You*, which are small, local, reliant on the support of volunteers, can deliver. The work of CBIs and other NGOs and Civil Society Organisations cannot take over the responsibility of public authorities in the implementation of service provision and integration policies. Successful integration needs sustainable mechanisms that allow refugees to find work and accommodation outside of ghettos of communities composed exclusively by new arrivals, but also language lessons, education and training, and access to social supports.

Public authorities should draw on the observations of CBIs to identify areas where the public authorities should invest to promote integration work and social cohesion. Best practice initiatives need to receive structural support to multiply success stories. At this moment, it is impossible to determine how many refugees receive individual accompaniment and which effect this has their social networks.

We call on the Belgian authorities to acknowledge the civic commitment of volunteer initiatives to create socially inclusive communities and to decreasing the fear of the other. Support for voluntary activities does not imply government downsizing or replacing paid employment. It means recognising volunteer initiatives as a vital resource for integration.

Therefore, we recommend to policymakers and public authorities in Belgium to take the following actions to improve policies fostering social inclusion:

For the Federal Government:

Guarantee fundamental rights to all forced migrants in Belgium by:

- Elaborating the necessary legislative changes to ensure access to accommodation and welfare benefits for all forced migrants, including irregular migrants who cannot return to their home country for reasons outside their will (for example, because their country of origin does not take them back).

For the institutions responsible for social cohesion⁸:

Support social encounter by:

- Acknowledging the benefits of grassroots organisations who offer one-to-one encounters in a non-institutionalised unofficial context. Grassroots initiatives are low threshold fora to foster mutual exchange and therefore contributing to combat xenophobia and fear.

⁸ In Wallonia: the Directorate General for Local Authorities, Social Action and Health (DG05)

In Flanders: the Agency for Integration (Agentschap voor Integratie en Inburgering)

In Brussels: Brussels-Capital Community Commission (COCOM), the French Community Commission (COCOF)

At the level of municipalities: the public centres for social welfare (CPAS/OCMW) and their associations – VVSG (Flanders), UVCW (Wallonia), Brulocalis (Brussels)

- Mapping and evaluating cooperation schemes of local social welfare offices (CPAS/OCMW) with grass root initiatives.
- Taking up a role in the coordination of all initiatives taken by the different public and private organisations.
- Identifying needs for training and information of social welfare offices employees' and those of volunteers to guarantee effective cooperation.
- Increasing structural financial support for citizen's initiatives.
- Connecting measures implemented by state-authorities and their partners with grassroots initiatives. Examples for this can be found in existing best practices, such as the "buddy project" as implemented by the OCMW Denderleeuw.
- Implementing a system of publicly accessible, transparent and effective impact assessments of taken measures. To establish such a system the responsible authorities should appoint independent experts from academia, NGOs and grassroots initiatives to develop a reliable assessment tool. The system should be evaluated on a regular basis.
- Ensure access to accommodation for forced migrants by:
- Consolidating the current practice of some CPAS/OCMW of providing forced migrants with loans for the deposits needed in order to conclude rental agreements.
- Identifying and supporting best practice models for access to accommodation, based on volunteer experiences, such as civil society networks that act as mediators and facilitate encounter between forced migrants and potential landlords.

For the Public Employment Services⁹:

Facilitate the access of forced migrants to the labour market by:

- Investing structurally in mentoring projects whereby local professionals, who have inside knowledge of the local labour market, are matched with forced migrants. The practice shows that this is an effective way to facilitate their integration into the labour market.
- Establishing networks with local professionals who can play a bridging role

between the public employment services and the forces migrants. These networks should be evaluated on regular basis.

For the Ministers of Education within the Flemish and the French Communities:

Strengthen school-curricula on prevention of racism and xenophobia by:

- Encouraging the collaboration of schools with local community building initiatives to organise awareness raising.
- Promoting and supporting projects and initiatives that organise activities allowing personal encounters with forced migrants and the possibility for children and adolescents to discuss their perceptions of forced migrants, such as School Zonder Racisme / Ecole sans racism.

For local governments and administrations (such as municipalities and public centres for social welfare):

Support the efficiency of volunteer work by:

- Acknowledging the important contribution made by volunteer work.
- Provide adequate financial support for volunteer initiatives, after evaluating their contribution in the enhancement of social cohesion.
- Provide sufficient funding for training, coaching and supervision of volunteers.

9 FOREM in Wallonia, VDAB in Flanders, Actiris in Brussels



Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation with a mission to accompany, serve and advocate for the rights of refugees and others who are forcibly displaced.

Jrseurope.org

Igetyou-jrs.org