



## **Being a 'Good Citizen':**

The Process of Socio-Cultural Integration of Syrian Newcomers in Utrecht, the Netherlands

Master thesis- **Being a Good Citizen**

*Cover Photo: Dutch scenery near the refugee center in Musselkanaal, Groningen, the Netherlands.  
Photographer: Aziz Kawak, Syrian newcomer living in Utrecht. Photo taken on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017.*

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## **The Process of Socio-Cultural integration of Syrian newcomers in Utrecht, the Netherlands**

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Problem Statement

To have more contact with Dutch people, to learn the language and to get to know the country itself. To build a new and meaningful life. This is the biggest wish of all three Syrian refugee families in the Netherlands that our newspaper has been following since 2015: If you can associate with the Dutch, it is easier to learn Dutch<sup>1</sup>.

The above statement captures a sentiment that lives among many Syrian people who are now living in the Dutch city of Utrecht. Having fled the civil war in their home country, these people have been flowing into Utrecht since around November 2015. Three refugee centers are located in this city, in total offering shelter to a maximum of 1250 asylum seekers. In the refugee center, asylum those people have to await the result of the procedure. If they are allowed to stay in the Netherlands, they receive a residence permit and they get assigned a house in the municipality. Then asylum seekers enter a new stage; the process of *inburgering* (integration) starts, meaning they are obliged to pass within three years a language exam and an exam about general knowledge of the Dutch culture. Within this stage, Syrian newcomers are reasonably assured that they can stay in the Netherlands, which means that they can carefully start making plans for the future and build a life in their new city of residence.

Thus, in order to construct a new life and start working on a new, envisioned future in a new country, Syrians have to integrate successfully within Dutch society. Since integration is such a complex concept, the academic literature often makes a distinction between several dimensions. Fokkema and de Haas (2015, 4) argue that a common distinction can be made between structural and socio-cultural integration. Structural integration “pertains to the acquisition of rights and status within the core institutions of the receiving society, such as employment, housing, education, political and citizenship rights” (Heckmann 2005 *in* Fokkema and de Haas 2015, 4). Socio-cultural integration addresses the “cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal changes in conformity to the dominant norms of receiving societies” (Fokkema and de Haas 2015, 4). Socio-cultural integration

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<sup>1</sup> Algemeen Dagblad, <http://www.ad.nl/binnenland/syriers-praten-graag-nederlands-maar-met-wie~ad92721b/>, accessed 30-04-2017

is often evaluated in terms of host-country identification, proficiency and use of the host-country language, and interethnic social contacts (Ersanilli and Koopmans 2010, 773). According to Fokkema and de Haas (2015), one aspect of this ‘socio-cultural integration’ is interactive integration, based on social intercourse, friendship, marriage and membership of various organizations. This vision on ‘interactive integration’ by Fokkema and de Haas (2015) can thus be seen in the same light as the interethnic social contacts Ersanilli and Koopmans (2010) use to evaluate the process of socio-cultural integration. It will be those interethnic contacts, and therefore this sub-dimension of socio-cultural integration that will be central in my thesis. The main question thereby is as follows:

How do civic projects in the municipality of Utrecht, the Netherlands, facilitate the socio-cultural integration of Syrian newcomers in Dutch society?

The following subtopics will be addressed to answer this main question: First, I will discuss what kind of civic projects are offered to Syrian newcomers in order to help them with the process of socio-cultural integration. I will also present a general image of the Syrians taking part in these projects. Furthermore, the establishment of interethnic contact, facilitated by these projects, and the relation between interethnic contact and socio-cultural integration will be discussed. Lastly, I will elaborate on how civic projects facilitate notions of urban citizenship in the city of Utrecht.

## 1.2 Research Location and Population

### 1.2.1 Research Location

This thesis is based on both literature study and on anthropological empirical fieldwork. Regarding the location of this fieldwork, I have carried out qualitative research during the period from 6 February 2017 until the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 2017 in Utrecht. Utrecht is one of the largest Dutch cities and is located in the center of the Netherlands. This city forms a suitable research location for this research theme, since Utrecht shelters and houses many Syrians and because it is a vibrant city in which its engaged citizens facilitate and organize many projects to promote the (socio-cultural) integration of newcomers.

### 1.2.2 Research Population

The particular research population, namely Syrian newcomers in Utrecht, has been chosen because of their high visibility within Dutch society: not only through their physical presence (according to Amnesty International's statistics, 43.090 people filed for asylum in the Netherlands in 2015, and of this amount people 54 percent originated from Syria)<sup>2</sup>, but also through their presence in the media and within current political debate within the Netherlands. The influx of (Syrian) refugees has caused fear and agitation within Western countries. This has made Europe respond with militarized border regimes and stricter asylum policies, thereby creating a new and worrisome dynamic of in-and exclusion and selective (in)mobility (Ticktfn 2011). Europe had been changed into fortress Europe. With this master thesis, my aim is to capture the faces, the personalities, the stories, in short, the *human beings* who have fled the atrocities of the war in Syria, who have risked their lives to enter fortress Europe, and I will try to relate a story of kindness. This story of kindness is one of Dutch citizens welcoming these newcomers warmly and helping them to build a new, hopeful life in the Netherlands. It will be those Dutch citizens, the residents of Utrecht (*Utrechters*) with a warm heart and open-minded worldview and who volunteer in civic interethnic projects, that will also have a role in this thesis. This story would be incomplete without them. By capturing their story, I hope to gain insight into the process of socio-cultural integration of Syrian newcomers in Utrecht.

### 1.3 Societal and Theoretical Relevance of this research

This research has both a societal and a theoretical relevance. The societal relevance of my research is to provide insight into how interethnic contact can help Syrians in the Netherlands with the process of integration. The necessity for this can be recognized in the report 'Research into voluntary contribution concerning Emergency Shelter for asylum seekers/refugees in Utrecht'<sup>3</sup>. This report states that:

The results of this online survey give limited insight into the involvement, motivation and needs of engaged citizens. Follow-up research could be interesting to elaborate the meaning of these numbers and the backgrounds of certain findings. For example, with respect to the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.amnesty.nl/vluchtelingen-in-nederland>, accessed on 6 January 2017

<sup>3</sup> *Report Onderzoek vrijwillige inzet rond Noodopvang voor asielzoekers/vluchtelingen in Utrecht*, accessed 30-04-2017

contacts between volunteers and refugees: how do these contacts elapse, what sort of contacts are there, what does it yield the participants and how does this contribute to the integration of refugees within society?

In other words, to give meaning to the numbers that are treated in this report, qualitative research is needed to gain insight into the relation between interethnic contact and integration. With this thesis, I hope to make a start to fill this gap. Furthermore, I see a societal relevance on a more personal level. In a time of xenophobia and closed borders, which images are so frequently diffused by the media, I hope to draw attention to another story, namely that of active, engaged citizens who are committed to helping newcomers who have been forced to leave their homes. My personal societal relevance will thus lie in telling the positive side of the story regarding Syria newcomers in the Netherlands, which is a story of care and help.

At the time of this writing, much has already been written about the theme of (socio-cultural) integration of newcomers within a host-country in the academic literature. The theoretical relevance of this thesis can thus be seen in the possibility for a more elaborate or firmer empirical substantiation of what already can be found in the literature.

This thesis has a descriptive function by way of trying to gain insight into the socio-cultural integration of Syrian refugees. I have approached this process of socio-cultural integration in light of civic projects that focus on the establishment of interethnic contact in the city Utrecht, located in the Netherlands. For this purpose, I have contacted an organization that is working with newcomers called *Welkom in Utrecht*. They have introduced me to a couple of other initiatives and activities that are of interest for my research theme. I have obtained permission to mention the initiatives using their actual names, so these are not feigned. To secure anonymity of individual informants, I do have feigned their names. In all, the names of the initiatives and projects named are real, but the persons who make an appearance in this thesis are anonymous.

#### 1.4 Methodology

To answer the central research question I have, as I have briefly mentioned before, carried out anthropological fieldwork in Utrecht. Regarding my research, I have focused mainly on a couple of civic initiatives that citizens of Utrecht themselves have set up for newcomers. These are *Welkom in Utrecht*, *Taalles Vluchtelingen* (Language courses for refugees), handicraft workshop

*van Hagar tot Ruth*, and *de Voorkamer*. The qualitative methods that I have used during this fieldwork are hanging out, participant observation, informal conversations, and (semi-) structured interviews. Beside these field methods, I have made use of document analysis.

During the whole research period, I have made use of the method of hanging out. This is a particular fieldwork method in which the anthropologist is ‘just’ present at his research site exploring the social dynamic that is present within this site. This concretely entailed that I have frequently visited the various projects offered to newcomers. This method has helped me to encounter informants and to build rapport with them, laying the foundation upon which they were willing to share their knowledge with me. These informants were not only Syrian newcomers living in Utrecht, but also initiators and participants of the projects. Moreover, the method of ‘hanging out’ allowed me to do some important observations regarding my research theme.

In manner of participant observation, I have given Dutch language courses to newcomers twice a week, have participated in the handicraft workshop twice a week, and I have promoted the activities of Welkom in Utrecht every week at one of the refugee centers. Furthermore, I have joined a couple of ‘one-time activities’, for instance a trip to the dolphinarium or a city walk for refugees. Carrying out participant observation during these activities and projects proved to be a very useful way of building a deeper relationship of rapport with informants and of engaging in informal conversations. When visiting sites for both hanging out and participant observation for the first time, I have introduced myself as a student at Utrecht University carrying out research and I have asked for their informed consent.

With both methods of hanging out and participant observation, I have encountered a couple of difficulties during my research. Some initiatives did not grant me access, since they already had received and helped a lot of students doing a study concerning the topic of newcomers. Moreover, the COA (Central Organ Asylum seekers) in Utrecht wields very strict regulations when it comes to granting researchers (or even regular visitors) access into the refugee center. I was lucky that I could make use of the network of *Welkom in Utrecht* to get into contact with my participants. Upon entering my field for the first time, I expected that language might be a problem to get into touch with Syrian participants. This turned out not to be the case, since most of them already spoke Dutch very well or English fluently.

Alongside the methods of participant observation and hanging out I have engaged in informal conversations with all my informants. As I had expected, engaging in informal

conversations helped me build a relationship of rapport. Over time, this relationship made informants willing to share their knowledge on my research topic with me in an interview. Moreover, engaging in informal conversations itself has also provided me with useful information regarding my topic. During conversations, I told my informants that the information they provided could be used in my thesis and I asked for their informed consent. During these informal conversations, as well as during my observations, I made field notes. Doing this not only helped me remember what was going on in the field, it also served as a reminder towards my informants that I was carrying out research in which they were participating. I transferred and elaborated these notes on my computer and coded and analyzed these data in Nvivo.

After having constructed a relationship of rapport with my informants through above-mentioned methods, I carried out both structured and semi-structured interviews with a couple of them. At the initial stage of my fieldwork these interviews were mainly fully structured. This provided me with a certain grip and it allowed me to explore what questions were difficult to understand or to answer and what themes and topics were sensitive or of little relevance for my research theme. Based on these observations I have slightly adapted my interview questions. In semi-structured interviews, I have created space to pursue interesting and relevant themes coming up during the conversation. During the course of my fieldwork, I have discovered certain ‘data gaps’. I carried out follow-up interviews or informal conversations with a couple of informants on the concerning topics to fill those empirical gaps. During interviews, I always asked my informants for their permission to record the conversation. Not all my informants agreed to have the conversation recorded. In this case, I tried to listen even more carefully to memorize what was being said exactly and to write along at the same time. Afterwards, I transcribed the interviews as soon as possible and coded them in Nvivo.

Finally, I have made use of the method of document analysis. Through a couple of informants, I have acquired certain documents<sup>4</sup> that provide me with quantitative information about newcomers and involved citizens who are committed to helping newcomers in the city of Utrecht. Furthermore, the websites of *Welkom in Utrecht, de Voorkamer*, and the municipality of Utrecht provided me with interesting data on activities offered, the activeness of the platforms, the

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<sup>4</sup> Examples are, amongst others, “*Rapportage Onderzoek vrijwillige inzet rond Noodopvang voor asielzoekers/vluchtelingen in Utrecht*” obtained due to Henk, employee of Welkom in Utrecht, and *Raadsbrief integratie van statushouders in gemeente Utrecht and Verslag Stadsgesprek Integratie Vluchtelingen*, obtained due to Bart, policy advisor of the municipality of Utrecht.

motives for Dutch volunteers to participate in the projects and on current issues in the media regarding newcomers and integration. Research on social media thus proved to be a fruitful source of data gathering as well. Due to triangulation, I have been able to combine these qualitative research methods and the forthcoming results, thereby creating a portrait about the socio-cultural integration of Syrian newcomers in Utrecht that is as complete as possible.

Every ethnographer must be aware of his own role in the field and his influence on his informants when carrying out fieldwork (DeWalt&DeWalt 2011, 39). I am aware of the fact that who I am as a person, namely a high-educated, white, Dutch female, may quite well have influenced how my informants responded to me. Although the fact that most Syrians are rather ‘modern’, I think that I, as a female, came unavoidably across differently than a male would have. Another reflexive note I am obliged to share with the reader is the issue of language. As I have previously mentioned, the expected language barrier between me and my informants turned out not to be that problematic. However, ‘translating’ the stories of my informants into this thesis proved to be challenging in a literal way. Conducting most of the interviews in Dutch while writing this thesis in English has put me in the position of having to translate quotes of my informants, thereby taking the risk of losing nuance in the Dutch language that cannot easily be captured in English. I want to make explicit here that I am aware of these facts. Moreover, I want to make explicit here that this thesis only captures the stories of ‘good’ Dutch citizens trying to welcome newcomers within Dutch society and not the stories of different-minded Dutch citizens. I will elaborate on this ‘good citizen’ bubble in chapter 5 of this thesis.

### 1.5 Structure of this Thesis

In the next chapter of this thesis I will explore the scientific relevance of the concepts globalization, refugees, integration and citizenship. After that, chapter 3 will be the first empirical chapter, in which I provide an overview of the projects that are offered to Syrian refugees in Utrecht. More specifically, I will look at how and why these projects are established and structured and what their specific goals are. Moreover, I will provide a description of the Syrian newcomers that are participating in these projects. In the following chapter, chapter 4, I will explore the relationship between interethnic contact, civic projects and socio-cultural integration based on empirical data. The main focus within this topic will be on how these projects establish interethnic contact and how and to what extent this helps Syrian newcomers finding their way in a new hometown. Chapter

5, which is the last empirical chapter, deals with the relationship between civic projects, urban citizenship, and the city of Utrecht: how is citizenship constructed and contested in a city that is increasingly becoming more diverse by the settling of Syrian newcomers? Finally, the results will be summarized in the conclusion, in which I will formulate an answer to the main question of this anthropological research. Lastly, a bibliography will follow.



## 2. Scientific Relevance

In this research, the socio-cultural integration of Syrians in the Netherlands is central. Before analyzing this empirical anthropological research, it is necessary to outline what is meant by ‘integration’, how this complex concept is approached in the literature, and how the process of (socio-cultural) integration is enacted in the particular neoliberal context of the Netherlands.

### 2.1 Anthropology and Globalization

In recent years, the discipline of anthropology has been considerably focused on globalization and its impacts on the world humans are living in. One very renowned anthropologist who has written a number of prominent publications on globalization and the vast interconnectedness in our contemporary world, is Anna Tsing. She is anxious to stress that globalization is not just shaping localities in a one-way direction, but that local dynamics and events also shape global processes. In her book *friction: an ethnography of global connection* (2005) she shows how multi-faceted and plural global connections can be through the concept of ‘*friction*’. She defines this friction as: “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (Tsing 2005, 4). This friction is called into existence because of the vast, global movement and interconnection between people, goods and services, so that heterogeneous and unequal encounters are established, which, according to Tsing (2005, 5), can lead to “new arrangements of culture and power”.

Anthropologists have stressed that these ‘new arrangements of culture and power’ which are caused by globalization not only have positive outcomes, but that these underlying structures can also lead to or maintain inequalities and injustices. One of the most visible examples of this fact is the mass-migration of refugees that we see nowadays. Because of war, famine, disease, and other societal problems, people are fleeing their home country in search for a safer, stable and more humane life in another country. However, European countries are responding with an anti-immigrant sentiment to these migration flows and are trying to prevent migrant’s entry into their countries with for instance stricter border controls. It is because of this climate of closed borders that Miriam Ticktín (2011, 1) talks about ‘Fortress Europe’. Ticktín (2011, 6) signalizes a striking paradox: “The increasing disparities in wealth between the global North and South have led to even greater movements of people; and yet there is simultaneously an increasing tension between regimes of circulation for capital and people -capital circulates relatively freely, whereas people

cannot [...]”. So, the process of globalization has created mass-movement that is not only unequal in its direction, but also in its very nature since money, goods and services can move freely, whereas some people are restricted and others are not. In Zygmunt Bauman’s (1998, 74) words, the global economic and political elites are able to cross borders at will, while the poor are meant to stay at home: “the riches are global, the misery is local”.

In sum, mobility and the movement of people, especially when these people are refugees, have become central in our understanding of the social world (Castles 2003) because they are presenting challenges towards existing notions of the nation-state, citizenship and global structures of inequality. In the next paragraph, I will especially focus on forced migration, refugees and the challenges they present to notions of citizenship.

## 2.2 Mobility, movement and migration

As I have mentioned above, mobility includes not only a global, accelerated flow of goods and services, but also of people. Movements of people can result in migration. Migration and mobility in their turn are not only just a manifestation of the process of globalization, they also reveal the unequal power structures caused and facilitated by globalization. For instance, Castles (2003) elaborates on the notion of ‘forced migration’ within the process of globalization. A highly visible, problematized and poignant example of forced migration we see today is the large exodus of Syrians fleeing their country. Because of the civil war in their home country, many Syrian citizens fear for their lives and have decided to seek refuge. They are mainly trying to enter neighboring countries, such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, hoping to return to Syria when peace has been reestablished (Yazgan, Eroglu, and Sirkeci 2015, 185). Because of the hopelessness of the violent insurrections, many of them are however deciding to seek refuge and settle in European countries. Europe has reacted with feelings of xenophobia to this influx of Syrian refugees and closed its borders for them. Despite these measures to keep refugees out, these movers are developing creative solutions to enter those countries anyway, where they become a prominent focus of political and societal debate (Yazgan, Eroglu, and Sirkeci 2015, 185). Placing (forced) migration within the broader framework of globalization and its unequal underlying structures reveals how this social process can set societal changes in motion and how it can challenge notions of citizenship. It is this dynamic to which I will turn now.

### 2.3 Refugees, societal change and citizenship

Discussion on migration and migrants is not confined to academia; rather, it has also found its way into politics, civil society, and citizens themselves. More specifically, forced migration stirs the debate on citizenship and lack of it: on the one hand, it shows that when a country is not able to provide for its citizens, those very citizens may make the decision to move to another country where more preferable opportunities are present (Goodman and Hinsky 2008 in Cohen and Sirkeci 2011, 1). This is what we see happening with the Syrian refugees; because Syrian citizens face conflict and insecurity caused by the Syrian state, as well as by non-state actors, these citizens see themselves forced to flee to another country in order to see their citizenship and safety accounted for. On the other hand, migration also address the issue of citizenship in the way that migrants can set societal changes in motion and therefore can challenge existing notions of citizenship. More specifically, in the case of refugees brings to the forefront the dilemma of the nation-state to determine who is to be included and who is to be excluded from citizenship, as well as the question of how to deal with the implications and the effects that come along with this exclusionary divide<sup>5</sup>. To obtain full citizenship, these people have to go through a successful process of naturalization. Often, this process is subject to certain formalities, such as passing a test to evaluate proficiency of the language or knowledge of the culture, or vowing allegiance to the new state. In sum, when migrants enter a host country, these countries are confronted with the question of how to facilitate incorporation of these people. In the following section, I will demonstrate how integration, which is closely linked to the process of naturalization, is approached in the literature.

### 2.4 Integration

The process of incorporation is relevant for the case of Syrian refugees seeking to obtain full Dutch citizenship (Bevelander and Veenman 2006, 4). Migrants are often expected to go through a process of integration, which in the Netherlands is seen as a precondition for naturalization (Bevelander and Veenman 2006, 6). One definition of integration is presented by Valerie Korac (2003). She defines integration as follows: “Integration is used to describe the process of change that occurs when two cultures are forced to coexist within one society” (Korac 2003, 3). Korac

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<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Agamben (1997) elaborates on this by developing a divide between *zoë*, or bare life, and *bios*, which means full life. Bare life only means the fact of being alive, stripped of social or political rights, while full life means the social presence in the world, which enables one to take full part in civic and political arena. So, if an individual is not granted citizenship, he is only assigned *zoë*, or bare life, which means that he is excluded from the social and political arena and deprived from his human rights (Agamben 1997 in Fassin 2005:366). This is the situation in which refugees find themselves when entering another country.

(2003) makes a plea for approaching integration as a dynamic process of change which influences not only immigrants, but can also bring about changes and ask for adjustments on the side of the receiving community. Since integration is an extensive concept, in the literature there is often a distinction between several dimensions. Fokkema and de Haas (2015, 4) argue that a common distinction is made between structural and socio-cultural integration. Structural integration “pertains to the acquisition of rights and status within the core institutions of the receiving society, such as employment, housing, education, political and citizenship rights” (Heckmann 2005 *in* Fokkema and de Haas 2015, 4). Socio-cultural integration addresses the “cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal changes in conformity to the dominant norms of receiving societies” (Fokkema and de Haas 2015, 4). Remarkable is the fact that Fokkema and de Haas define this form of integration as a one-way social process; they assume that immigrants will unavoidably adapt to the ‘dominant norms of the host society’ which provides a one-sided view on a process that, in my view, is more interactive. Socio-cultural integration is often evaluated in terms of host-country identification, proficiency and use of the host country language, and interethnic social contacts (Ersanilli and Koopmans 2010, 773). According to Fokkema and de Haas (2015), one aspect of this ‘socio-cultural integration’ is interactive integration, based on social intercourse, friendship, marriage and membership of various organizations, which corresponds to the ‘interethnic social contacts’ stressed by Ersanilli and Koopmans (2010, 773).

## 2.5 Socio-cultural integration and interethnic contact

Interethnic contact thus seems to facilitate socio-cultural integration according to both Ersanilli and Koopmans (2010) and Fokkema and de Haas (2015). Robert Putnam (2007) also stresses the importance of building solidarity between ‘immigrants’ and ‘hosts’ for successful integration (Putnam 2007, 137). Bram Lancee (2012) talks about bridging and bonding ties to elaborate on the dynamics of interethnic contact and the building of solidarity. Bonding ties encompass within-group connections while bridging ties are defined as between-group connections. So, in the migrant case, bridging ties would be about interethnic contact between members of the ‘host society’ and between ‘immigrants’. The so-called ‘contact hypothesis’ stresses the importance in forging bridging ties for building solidarity. This hypothesis stresses that personal contact between social groups tends to make them less hostile toward one another (Pettigrew 1998, 66). Consequently, Lancee (2012, 664) states that bridging ties are more important within the integration process than bonding ties are.

In order to evaluate the extent to which these bridging ties facilitate feelings of solidarity and therefore the extent to which they contribute to socio-cultural integration, it is important to measure whether they are ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ ties. Weak ties only involve superficial contacts, for example just being acquaintances with somebody. Strong ties are more profound and consist of amicable ties or marriage. So, weak ties do not involve the ‘meaningful communication’ (Allport 1954, 272) to change attitudes or beliefs, whereas strong ties have the capacity to do so.

Integration leads to ‘new arrangements of culture and power’ (Tsing 2005, 5) within the host-society. From the 1970s to mid-1990s there was a trend across western nation-states towards the accommodation of diversity through a range of multiculturalism policies (Kymlicka 2010, 97). Multiculturalism stresses ‘minority culture’ engaging with the ‘host society’, thereby existing next to it as well as reshaping and being reshaped by it (Vasta 2007, 714). The Netherlands was one of those countries taking part in the trend of wielding a multiculturalist integration policy. However, as Will Kymlicka (2010) stresses, there has been a retreat from multiculturalism since the 1990’s. Ellie Vasta (2007, 714) states that there is a current neoliberalized ideology, meaning that integration is increasingly less seen as a responsibility the national government should undertake; rather, integration becomes increasingly privatized as well as being outsourced towards local government. Dutch citizenship becomes neoliberalized and privatized.

## 2.6 Employing the ‘local turn’

Both within academia and politics there is thus a focus on the failure of multiculturalism and the raise and popularization of assimilation<sup>6</sup> as a response to this development. As Tsing (2000) however shows, to understand social reality it is important to look at different scales such as the international, national, regional and local. This is what she calls ‘scale making’. Indeed, as Myrte Hoekstra (2015, 1799) shows for the case of incorporation of immigrants in the Netherlands, national governments adopt restrictive and more exclusionary policies, while on a local level, Dutch cities have abided to ‘old’ multiculturalist policies or experimented with other forms of more inclusive migrant incorporation. Although multiculturalism seems to have retreated on a national level (Kymlicka 2010, 103), on a local level features of multiculturalism have been retained by civic integration initiatives (Hoekstra 2015, 1799). My research focus lies on these local civic

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<sup>6</sup> This assimilation model holds that newcomers will blend in with the dominant group and its culture, thereby letting go of or losing their own cultural roots (Vasta 2007, 715).

integration initiatives. More specifically, my research will be on locally organized projects which operate on the underlying ideology of the ‘local turn’ (Scholten 2013 in Hoekstra 2015, 1798). This ‘local turn’ means the focusing on local dimensions of migration policy making, especially within cities. Looking through the lens of this ‘local turn’ reveals that Dutch cities diverge from national integration models and develop alternative ways of managing diversity (Hoekstra 2015, 1798). Both Hoekstra (2015) and Suvarierol and Kirk (2014) explain this local diversion of integration models through the neoliberal ideology that underlies Dutch civic integration regimes, which implicates the privatization and the outsourcing of integration processes to local initiatives, which now play a complementary role in negotiating and framing citizenship within the state (De Koning et al. 2015, 124). As Katherine Kirk (2010, 1) argues, there is a liberal citizenship hegemony, shaping the contours and content of Dutch civic integration. Kirk (2010, 2) shows how municipalities can depart from national directives and how they can implement their own civic integration models, mostly based on notions and ideals of (neo)liberalism. Elaborating on this neoliberal, civic dynamic, Hoekstra (2015, 1809) uses the concept ‘urban citizenship’ to describe a more encompassing form of citizenship that aims to increase positive intercultural contacts and the appreciation of diversity, thereby trying to offer a more inclusive and less polarizing alternative to integration. As opposed to national citizenship, urban citizenship utilizes a discourse of a shared ‘right to the city’ based on residence within this very city, thereby connecting citizens more strongly to the city while disconnecting them from nationality (Bauböck 2003 in Hoekstra 2015, 1800). Within this overarching identity of being a city resident, urban citizenship enables its citizens to express their diversity and differences (Dukes and Musterd 2012 in Hoekstra 2015, 1800).

Thus, the Dutch state has retreated from the field of integration by making cities, civic projects, and migrants themselves responsible for negotiating the process of integration (Suvarierol and Kirk 2015, 249). Schinkel and Van Houdt (2010, 697) call this “a neo-liberal emphasis on individual responsibility and participation”. As Van Houdt et al. (2011 in Schinkel and Kirk 2014, 250) state: “citizenship becomes a commodity that needs to be ‘earned’ by performing a series of duties and tasks that proves the migrant’s integration and investment in society”. So, Dutch citizenship becomes ‘neoliberalized’, which means that integration becomes the individual responsibility of new citizens (Suvarierol and Kirk: 2015, 248). In this context, notions of the ‘good citizen’ arise (Hoekstra 2015; de Koning et al. 2015). In the context of neoliberalized

citizenship, a 'good citizen' would be a person who is actively taking his individual responsibility to integrate. This leads to a dichotomy between migrants who 'choose' to be a citizen and 'learn' how they should do this, and between migrants who are 'unwilling' and 'uncooperative' or do not know how to deal with this form of privatized integration (Hoekstra 2015, 1811). This could lead to inequalities between and within groups of migrants. Willem Schinkel (2010, 269) is also critical on the inclusionary nature of urban citizenship. He argues that notions of the 'good, active citizen' transform citizenship in a 'choice for participation in Dutch society'. Because of this underlying idea, a culture-centered way of thinking and a loyalty-centered way of thinking come to the fore within the integration discourse. This means that 'good citizens' have to think and to act in accordance with 'the dominant culture' and that this citizen has to show 'loyalty' towards this society. Schinkel (2010) argues consequently that urban citizenship makes use of the concept of the 'active citizen' to discipline a city's residents and make them conform to a blueprint of the 'ideal citizen', with ideals and norms based on those of the dominant culture (Schinkel 2010, 269). Cities can thus be examined as political spaces where rights and duties of citizenship and processes of in-and exclusion are enacted. How local citizenship is negotiated and given shape in the urban area of Utrecht will be explored in this thesis.

### 3. The projects and their participants

*On a rainy Sunday afternoon, two Arab-looking men are sitting on the sidewalk of the busy, colorful main street of Lombok, one of the multicultural neighborhoods in Utrecht. One of them is sitting on a little stool while stirring into a casserole. The other man is holding an enormous umbrella to protect him and the casserole from the rain. Upon approaching, I see that they are frying chickpeas in the casserole to make their savory falafel. When the two men see me approaching, they greet me enthusiastically. I greet them back, but quickly enter the building they are sitting in front of to escape the heavy rainfall. Inside, a flood of chatter and color comes down on me. After having quickly gazed around I walk towards Abdel, a baker from Syria who has been living in the Netherlands for one and a half year now. He offers me a piece of his delicious, ant sow Levantine knafeh<sup>7</sup>. Around me, Dutch people are having conversations with Arab-looking men and women. Together, they are drinking tea or strong, typical Arab coffee, laughing, eating, or playing typical Dutch board games. The ambiance is cosy and inviting. With my knafeh, I go sit down randomly together with one of the groups, where I listen to the stories that people are sharing with each other.*

This vignette describes an event at de *Voorkamer*, which is a meeting place for *Utrechters* and newcomers. At this particular event, a *soek*<sup>8</sup> was organized where Dutch citizens could engage in conversations and dance with newcomers while tasting a variety of traditional Arab dishes. This is only one example out of the vast range of activities, events and initiatives that have been set up by Dutch citizens to facilitate the integration of newcomers in Utrecht. In this chapter, this range of activities, events and initiatives will be explored, so that a general overview of civic projects in Utrecht is established. Furthermore, a general description of the Syrian participants taking part in these projects will be offered. The goal of this descriptive chapter is to provide the reader with an elaborate introduction into civic initiatives contributing to the process of socio-cultural integration of Syrian newcomers in Utrecht.

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<sup>7</sup> *Knafeh* is a Middle Eastern cheese pastry soaked in syrup

<sup>8</sup> A *soek* is a traditional Arab market



### 3.1 Initiatives working towards socio-cultural integration

In the municipality of Utrecht, a vast range of civic projects is offered to newcomers to help them with the process of integration, namely one hundred and twenty initiatives in total<sup>9</sup>. Many of these initiatives were founded in the end of 2015, right after an enormous influx of (mainly Syrian) refugees into the Netherlands. These refugees also reached Utrecht, where they were temporarily housed in massive emergency shelters because of the great numbers of refugees flowing into Utrecht. At that time, many *Utrechters* were concerned about refugees coming to the city *en masse*. On one side, there were sentiments of fear and concern for safety, but on the other side, there were also a lot of engaged citizens wanting to do ‘something’ to help the refugees. A second major triggering event stirring the public debate on refugees in the Netherlands was the wash ashore of a dead Syrian boy in Bodrum on 2 September 2015<sup>10</sup>. This event gained major media coverage and arose feelings of enormous indignation amongst many Dutch citizens concerning the refugee crisis. This arousing ‘indignation as a motive’ (Nader, 1972) stimulated many Dutch citizens to get engaged regarding refugees. In September 2015, the enormous visibility of refugees both in the media and in their physical appearance in the city caused a wide range of initiatives to be called into existence by engaged Dutch citizens to help refugees with the process of integration into Dutch society. Integration is a complex concept, and therefore Musterd and Ostendorf (2009, 1523) call it ‘multi-dimensional’. Valerie Korac (2003, 2) agrees with this multi-dimensionality by stating that ‘integration is about both its functional aspects and social participation in the wider community’. Fokkema and de Haas (2015, 4) consequently make a distinction within academic integration discourse. They argue that a common distinction can be made between structural and socio-cultural integration. Structural integration ‘pertains to the acquisition of rights and status within the core institutions of the receiving society, such as employment, housing, education, political and citizenship right’ (Heckmann 2005 in Fokkema and de Haas 2015, 4). In Utrecht, there are some foundations that focus mainly on accompaniment with a study or with finding an

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<sup>9</sup> Report Onderzoek vrijwillige inzet rond Noodopvang voor asielzoekers/vluchtelingen in Utrecht

<sup>10</sup> <http://nos.nl/artikel/2055567-geschokte-reacties-op-foto-aangespoeld-jongetje-voor-turkse-kust.html>, accessed on May 29<sup>th</sup> 2017.

This boy, Aylan Kurdi from Kobani, Syria, died because of a boat-accident near the coast Bodrum, a Greek island. This boat contained 23 refugees, who were on their way to the Greek island Kos. The photo that was taken from him lying dead on the shore of Bodrum gained enormous media coverage and became symbolic for the refugee crisis facing Europe.

employment, such as UAF<sup>11</sup> or New Dutch Connections. These organizations are thus mainly focusing on what can be defined as structural integration. Socio-cultural integration addresses the ‘cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal changes in conformity to the dominant norms of receiving societies’ (Fokkema and de Haas 2015, 4) Besides the just-mentioned initiatives that are focusing on structural integration, there is a vast number of projects and foundations that are mainly aiming towards ‘social participation’ (Korac 2003, 2), or socio-cultural integration of Syrians in Utrecht. The events organized by such foundations are, in line with this dimension of the integration process, mainly revolving around cultural elements and activities, such as language, cooking, sports, gardening, or handicraft. Since the focus of my research topic is on initiatives that are working towards accelerating socio-cultural integration, I will exclusively elaborate on initiatives focusing on the socio-cultural dimension of integration. In the section below, I will present a description of four such initiatives.

### 3.1.1 *Welkom in Utrecht*

One of the most prominent actors in the socio-cultural integration process of Syrians in Utrecht is *Welkom in Utrecht*. This foundation was founded on 11 September 2015. The purpose of *Welkom in Utrecht* is to offer refugees a soft landing into their new hometown and to help refugees build a self-employed life in the Netherlands by means of constructing a social network together with Dutch citizens<sup>12</sup>. *Welkom in Utrecht* therefore coordinates, facilitates and promotes a vast number of citizen initiatives and activities for refugees regarding cultural elements such as sports, language, and culture. To unite and coordinate these initiatives, *Welkom in Utrecht* was established as a platform for these engaged citizens. The main activity of *Welkom in Utrecht* is to structure and facilitate different initiatives and activities and to make sure that these are acquainted with and complement each other. *Welkom in Utrecht* can therefore be seen as an umbrella organization for all of the activities and events set up by Dutch residents in Utrecht. Although they started off as a citizen’s initiative, *Welkom in Utrecht* eventually grew to such an extent that it is a foundation now and they receive subsidy from the government<sup>13</sup>. Through the activities that *Welkom in Utrecht*

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<sup>11</sup> Universitair Asiel Fonds

<sup>12</sup> Informal conversation Carolien, 15-02-2017

<sup>13</sup> At first instance, *Welkom in Utrecht* was granted subsidy from the municipality, under the condition that they would structure the activities offered at Plan Einstein, which is an innovative project inviting students and asylum seekers to live together and to organize joint activities, such as cooking, music, or sports, thereby advancing the process of integration. However, this project kept being delayed time after time, so *Welkom in Utrecht* had to

facilitates relationships of trust, understanding and tolerance, as well as actual friendships, are hoped to be established. The devise of *Welcome in Utrecht* is ‘a warm welcome contributes to integration’<sup>14</sup>. *Welkom in Utrecht* also aspires to make newcomers acquainted with the Dutch culture; that is to say, to show them ‘Dutch’ customs and desired ‘Dutch’ norms and values. Efforts to build relationships between ‘old’ citizens and newcomers and showing the latter party norms and values of the ‘host’ society corresponds to Musterd and Ostendorf’s (2009) definition of socio-cultural integration, namely that the level of contact between ethnic minorities and the Dutch population, as well as language skills and confirmation to attitudes and norms of the ‘host’ society are indicators of this form of integration (Gordon 1964 in Musterd and Ostendorf 2009, 1525). The goals of *Welkom in Utrecht* are thus to include newcomers within Dutch society not only by way of helping them to build a social network, but also by way of ‘showing what the ropes are’ in Dutch society, thereby aspiring to contribute to the process of socio-cultural integration.

### 3.1.2 Handicraft workshop *van Hagar tot Ruth* and *Taalles Vluchteling*

Two examples of initiatives that *Welkom in Utrecht* facilitates and supports are a handicraft workshop and language courses. Both are bottom-up initiatives, set up by engaged citizens, and they are organized on a weekly basis. The handicraft workshop is called ‘van Hagar tot Ruth’, Hagar meaning refugee, and Ruth meaning friend. This initiative is set up by Ester, an energetic, open-minded woman who has the extraordinary personality trait to make everyone feel at ease and welcome. Ester has founded the handicraft workshop with the distinctive goal of propagating charity. She works from a Christian background, which is manifest in the name of the workshop, in the location<sup>15</sup> and in the day opening of the workshops, in which a passage from the Bible is read out. However, this Christian character is not apparent during the workshop itself; and if people do not want to attend the day opening (for whatever reason), they are free to do so. The Syrians participating, who are themselves mostly Muslim, therefore indicate that the Christian background is not a problem for them. The organizer has set up the workshop based on Christian values: her main goal with the workshops is to share God’s love; she envisions it as some sort of personal drive to share the love of God towards people in need. Secondly, Ester’s purpose is to

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change their route and start off with the other two refugee centers, at the Joseph Haydnlaan and the Ravellaan. At the time of this writing, they are still continuing this line.

<sup>14</sup> Interview Alice, 10-04-2017

<sup>15</sup> Namely buildings from the Salvation Army

give the refugees an occupation, as well as to restore their identity and dignity. She wants the handicraft workshop to be a two-way encounter: besides giving refugees a safe haven where they can shelter and settle down, many Dutch participants perceive the workshop as place for shelter as well. For example, one Dutch participant came out of a depression and was looking for a way to rebuild a social network and to re-adapt to a daily working structure. In this way, a relationship based on equality is established; the social dynamic is not just about ‘the refugee’ in need of help but also about the volunteering Dutch citizen that can develop him- or herself and re-integrate in a working environment through this activity<sup>16</sup>. This interactive social dynamic can be interpreted as to counter the view of Fokkema and de Haas (2015,4) on socio-cultural integration. These authors perceive this form of integration as a one-way social process; they assume that immigrants will unavoidably adapt to the ‘dominant norms of the host society’. This provides a rather one-sided view on a process that, concerning the social dynamic at the handicraft workshop, should be seen as more interactive and as a two-way social process.

One of my other research sites, *Taalles Vluchtelingen*, provides a second example of an initiative facilitated by *Welkom in Utrecht*. *Taalles Vluchtelingen* offers free complementary<sup>17</sup> Dutch language courses to both status holders and asylum seekers to help them with their first steps towards integration within Dutch society. The classes were set up by a group of students during the mass-influx of refugees in 2015. The classes take place twice a week, every Monday evening and Wednesday morning. During these classes, Dutch citizens are interacting with refugees living in the nearby refugee center and with status holders to teach them the Dutch language. When the project was initiated, the main goal was not so much to teach Dutch to the newcomers; much more, the goal of the language lessons was to contribute to the lives of newcomers in a social way, that is to say, to give them an occupation, to treat newcomers as human beings and to make an effort to make their lives a little bit more pleasant in the Netherlands<sup>18</sup>. Refugees still living in the refugee center often live in uncertainty or do not have a daily structure or occupation. Status holders already living in Utrecht also find it hard to structure their daily life and to make contact with new people. *Taalles Vluchteling* tries to improve these conditions and to treat them as human beings, not as “a refugee in need of our

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<sup>16</sup> Informal conversation Ester, 22-02-2017

<sup>17</sup> I call these language courses ‘complementary’ since many newcomers already participate in ‘regular’ language courses offered by the municipality or COA.

<sup>18</sup> Interview Astrid, 1-03-2017

help”<sup>19</sup>. Newcomers have indicated that they appreciate this approach and that they enjoy meeting *Utrechters*. Apart from being able to practice Dutch, those are the main reasons why they enjoy participating in the complementary language courses.

### 3.1.3 *De Voorkamer*

Another actor that is very prominent when it comes to facilitating socio-cultural integration, is *de Voorkamer*. This initiative started in December 2016 in Utrecht<sup>20</sup>, focusing on facilitating interaction and meeting events between local residents and Syrian newcomers. There are many activities organized with and by Syrians, such as playing music, cooking workshops, and poetry evenings. The goal of *de Voorkamer* is to connect people and to give Syrians the feeling that they have friends and that they are welcome in Utrecht. So-called ‘project groups’ are formed with the purpose of connecting asylum seekers in the refugee center with Dutch citizens, who will help those refugees to discover, develop and employ their talents. Another purpose is to give Dutch people a positive picture of the Syrian people by getting into touch with the Syrian culture<sup>21</sup>. According to the contact hypothesis, personal contact between social groups tends to make them less hostile toward one another (Pettigrew 1998, 66) Thus, by serving as a meeting place between people from different social and cultural backgrounds, *de Voorkamer* hopes to create tolerance and understanding.

### 3.2 Citizens’ initiatives within the socio-cultural integration process

At the time of this writing (mid-2017), all the initiatives mentioned above receive subsidy from the government, except for *Taalles Vluchtelingen*. The organizers of this initiative did purposely not apply for subsidy. They indicated that they do not necessarily need this and they perceive it as an advantage not to receive subsidy<sup>22</sup>. They can now independently do whatever they deem right and important, without authorities such as the municipality watching over their shoulders and coordinating them<sup>23</sup>. This is one of the major advantages of independent civic initiatives. *Utrechters* can in their urban space contribute to and negotiate whatever they deem important regarding the construction of a sustainable social environment. As Carolien, an involved woman

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<sup>19</sup> Interview Willem, 08-03-2017

<sup>20</sup> Before, a pilot was run in Haren, Groningen from April till June 2015

<sup>21</sup> Interview Thom, 17-05-2017

<sup>22</sup> Interview Astrid, 01-03-2017

<sup>23</sup> Interview Willem, 08-03-2017

who is one of the initiators of *Welkom in Utrecht*, put it as follows: “*The citizen does what he wants*”. Although Carolien made this statement with a positive undertone, being in the field, exploring and scrutinizing the large variety of activities and events offered to newcomers, has made me realize that some critical notes apply to this dynamic in which “*the citizen does what he wants*”. First, there is the enormous range of initiatives set up by involved citizens. As of this writing, one hundred twenty initiatives are documented by the municipality<sup>24</sup>. As a refugee, having been through all sorts of hardships, seeking safety and refuge in a new country, seeking rest and recovery, it could be rather tiresome to constantly hear about all of these activities offered and having people around you, trying to convince you to participate. An umbrella organization could and should structure this. It is therefore of added value that *Welkom in Utrecht* has been called into existence and is now such a big actor within this tangle of civic initiatives. This sentiment can be vouched with my own experience finding and entering a suitable research site in the initial stages of my fieldwork. The range of initiatives I encountered was so vast to the extent that I just could not see the wood for the trees. *Welkom in Utrecht* proved to be an enormous structuring organization, probably not only for myself as a researcher, but also for newcomers trying to find their way in a new society. Moreover, during the enormous mass-influx of refugees in 2015, helping refugees was ‘hyped’. Recently, this ‘hype’ has passed and less citizens are actively engaged with refugees. Thus, citizens’ initiatives can be said to be rather sensitive for ‘hying’ by politics or the media<sup>25</sup>. Another disadvantage of the vast range of citizens’ initiatives is the unease of communication between themselves and between the initiatives and other instances such as COA. This ‘miscommunication’ has, amongst other things, led to a rather monotonous offer of activities for newcomers to help them with the process of socio-cultural integration and to misunderstandings both on the side of official instances and civic initiatives. Specifically, there are many initiatives that focus on the Dutch language to accelerate this process, while a myriad of initiatives focusing on the same issue might be fiddling.

Another critical note I would like to make is that citizens themselves often do not have the skills and knowledge to set up a project or activity that is sustainable or accountable. Some citizens have a plan or activity in mind which is truly based on good intentions, but might turn out to not be suitable at all. For instance, activities concerning refugee children or activities focusing on

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<sup>24</sup> Report Onderzoek vrijwillige inzet rond Noodopvang voor asielzoekers/vluchtelingen in Utrecht

<sup>25</sup> Interview Bart, 08-05-2017

trauma treatment might conversely do more harm than good if not supervised by professionals. Another illustration of ‘unsuccessful’ initiatives is one *Utrechtse* who has tried to set up a choir for people living in the refugee center. She did not receive the interest she had hoped for, and lastly the event was cancelled. The explanation given for this was that sometimes activities are organized on an inconvenient timeslot for the newcomers (e.g., they have language courses for their *inburgering*, they hear news from relatives in their home country, or they have to take care of their families), or they just do not like the particular activity that is offered to them. This could unfortunately turn out to be a great deception and disappointment for the Dutch citizen who is trying to ‘do good’ but who does not encounter the hoped-for enthusiasm on the part of the newcomers. Moreover, instances such as *COA* or the municipality are afraid that participation in activities that are working towards incorporation within Dutch society might give asylum seekers ‘false hope’. By this, these instances mean to stress that asylum seekers might be starting to think that they will definitely obtain a residence permit in the Netherlands, since they are already profoundly engaged with Dutch citizens through the initiatives<sup>26</sup>. Willem, one of the founders of the *Taalcafe Vluchteling* commented on this by saying that giving asylum seekers ‘false hope’ might indeed be a side effect of their initiative, but that ‘seeing people smile again, makes this [the Dutch language courses] all worthwhile. It could be a little bit irresponsible from our side, but looking around and seeing all these smiling people is just wonderful’<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, having engaged Dutch citizens around might de-stimulate newcomers to take their own responsibility to integrate within Dutch society. A councilor of the municipality commented on this: “They [newcomers] have to learn how they should do things on their own. It is easy if people they have contact with help them and do everything for them, but that is not sustainable. They have to be self-employed as well”<sup>28</sup>.

The whole ‘*laissez-faire*’ political discourse described earlier in which the government takes a step back whilst engaged citizens themselves are committed to creating a sustainable social environment, taking on responsibility for the process of integration might sound idyllic and straightforward, but in reality, it is not. To some extent, regulation at a governmental level is *needed*, at least to support and direct engaged citizens and to ‘protect’ newcomers from well-

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<sup>26</sup> Interview Bart, 08-05-2017

<sup>27</sup> Interview Willem, 08-03-2017

<sup>28</sup> Interview Bart, 08-05-2017

intended, but improper civic initiatives. In chapter 5, I will describe more elaborately how this works in the social reality of Utrecht.

### 3.3 Syrians taking part in civic projects

In this section, I will present a general description of the Syrian newcomers in Utrecht. As a note to the reader, please keep in mind that this is a general profile, which does certainly not apply to the personal variety of individuals within the range of Syrians in Utrecht.

#### 3.3.1 Leaving Syria

Most Syrians taking part in the projects I described above have fled their home country mainly because of the dangers of the civil war, to escape military service, the dictatorship of Assad or because of family reunification. Most of them entered the Netherlands during the mass-influx around November 2015, and thus have been at the time of this writing about one and a half year in the Netherlands. This enormous influx of refugees has dried up recently. Now, most refugees entering the Netherlands are women and children by way of family-reunification. The asylum procedure for Syrians is currently relatively short; most Syrians must wait approximately six months until they obtain a residence permit to stay in the Netherlands. From that moment on, they are *inburgeringsplichtig*, meaning they are supposed to pass an integration program, consisting of language courses, knowledge of Dutch society, and an orientation on the labor market<sup>29</sup>. They move out of the refugee center into their own assigned house. For most other nationalities (except for Eritrean nationality) the procedure takes much longer than six months and it is far more insecure whether those asylum seekers will be assigned a status or not. This policy direction, almost without exception granting refugees with a Syrian or Eritrean nationality asylum in the Netherlands, has been chosen since the current security situation in Syria and Eritrea is life-threatening and enduring<sup>30</sup>.

#### 3.3.2 Entering the Netherlands

Most of the Syrians already chose to move to the Netherlands upon undertaking their journey. The main reason brought up by my informants for choosing the Netherlands was that they had heard

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.inburgeren.nl/inburgeren-hoe-moet-dat.jsp>, visited on 30-05-2017

<sup>30</sup> In other countries where many refugees in the Netherlands are originating from, such as Afghanistan, Irak or Iran, this security-situation has not been deemed severe enough by the government to apply to the whole country, which means that every personal case is scrutinized and judged individually. Informal conversation Alice, 12-04-2017



about the mild climate and favorable political regulations regarding refugees in this country. Most of my Syrian participants perceive the Dutch people as kind and they perceive the Netherlands as a country with little racism against refugees. Wariq, one of my Syrian participants, believes that the presence of other cultures has taught Dutch people to live with and tolerate other traditions and religions, and he therefore sees the Netherlands as a highly multicultural society<sup>31</sup>. Furthermore, some of the Syrian newcomers indicate that they already had family or friends living here, which would to some extent ease their life in this new country.

Upon entering the Netherlands, the central arrival location in Ter Apel is the first center where asylum seekers have to apply. In this center, they are told on which location identification, registration and, if deemed necessary, a TBC and scabies control will take place. Immediately after this, people move to another refugee center<sup>32</sup>. Most often, newcomers cannot choose their own municipality they prefer to live in. Oftentimes, they have to move to a number of different refugee centers until their asylum procedure is finished. When allowed a residence permit in the Netherlands (which is, as I have explained above, now mostly the case for Syrians), people get assigned a house and they have to enter the process of *inburgering*.

### 3.3.3 Participation in civic initiatives

Participation in the activities, such as the handicraft workshop or *de Voorkamer* is completely voluntary. People often know about these activities and projects through *Welkom in Utrecht*. This foundation promotes all sorts of activities on a weekly basis in the refugee center. They can be seen as the bridge connecting newcomers and the projects to each other. *Welkom in Utrecht* mostly asks a couple of asylum seekers to volunteer during the promotion, by way of helping them to translate information about the activities directly into Arabic. This however brings certain complications since not all Syrians see eye to eye. Often, they differ in their opinions and views on a political or religious level, or on both. Therefore, people with divergent political or religious ideas are not very eager to join some activities if they will be a minority there.

The Syrians I have encountered during the activities generally have the same profile: they are almost all male, young (age 20-40) and highly educated, and most of them not only speak

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<sup>31</sup> Interview Wariq, 22-04-2017

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.coa.nl/nl/actueel/veelgestelde-vragen/asielzoekers-en-hun-procedure#registratie>, visited on 28-04-2017

Arabic, but also English very well. The reason for this remarkable, rather homogenous male profile is that in Syrian-Arab culture it is more accepted for males to move in the public domain than it is for women, and because males are perceived to be strong enough to undertake this dangerous journey. Most families do not have enough money to flee with a whole family to Europe, and males are preferred to flee ahead rather than women. This ‘gendered mobility’ corresponds to Rutvica Andrijasevic’s (2007, 42) description of the moving female body: “The female body is [...] the site where control over gender hierarchies and the control over geographical territories meet” (Andrijasevic 2007, 42). In contrast to the Syrians living in the Netherlands and participating in the projects, the *Utrechters* volunteering within the projects are mostly female, of all ages, highly educated and often politically active.

#### 3.3.4 Syria: returning, but when?

Most of my participants indicate that they do wish to return to Syria, since they perceive it as their home country and they still feel a deep connection to this country. Most of my participants indicated that they have experienced feelings of great frustration in the Netherlands. They were highly educated in their home-country, most of them were working in a well-paid, challenging job with a bright future ahead of them. This aforesaid prospering situation makes it rather painful for them to start all over in a new country, where they find themselves in a socially, economically and politically marginalized position. None of the informants I talked to has the slightest idea of when (s)he can return to Syria, although (s)he deeply desires to do so. In the meantime, my participants are trying to make their time in the Netherlands worthwhile and they are eager to participate as plenary and as fast as possible in Dutch society. Their insecure future motivates them to strive towards full integration within the Netherlands. With Leandra, one of my informants and a very active *Utrechtse* who offers support to two Syrian families, I had an interesting conversation on this topic. She compared the current situation of Syrians with the situation of Moroccan and Turkish guest workers in the Netherlands in the sixties:

The Moroccan and Turkish guest workers, they never expected to stay in the Netherlands; they came here just to work, they thought their stay would be temporary, they had no intention to stay in the Netherlands. So, neither themselves, nor the government has ever truly invested in their integration within the Netherlands. I think this sentiment is

completely different among Syrians now: they cannot go back in the near future, they intend to stay here for a longer period and make the best out of it<sup>33</sup>.

Taking the immigration history of the Netherlands into account, lessons concerning the process of integration may be drawn from experiences and insights from issues regarding immigrants in the past. The report *No time to lose: from reception to integration of asylum migrants* (2015, 8) states: “Today’s Syrians are comparable with the Iraqis in the 1990s. For example, the differences in socio-economic conditions between Syria today and Iraq in the 1990s are not very great”<sup>34</sup>. In comparison with Turkish and Moroccan migrants in the Netherlands, Iraqis have more contact with ‘Dutch’ people than the first-named group (Sociaal-Cultureel Planbureau 2011, 87) According to Ersanilli and Koopmans (2010, 773), this interethnic contact can be seen as an indicator of successful socio-cultural integration. Other indicators are, according to these scholars, ‘host’ society language proficiency and identification with the ‘host’ country. The report *Vluchtelingengroepen in Nederland: Over de integratie van Afghaanse, Iraakse, Iraanse en Somalische migranten* (2011, 69) indicates that Iraqis in the Netherlands master the Dutch language rather well and that they have rather strong feelings of being ‘Dutch’ (2011, 191). Taken together, these factors indicate that Iraqis in the Netherlands are rather well integrated on a socio-cultural level. Taking into account that this group is comparable to Syrians in the current age (Sociaal-Cultureel Planbureau 2011, 8), Syrians can be expected to go through their socio-cultural integration process in the same, rather successful, manner.

In this first empirical chapter, I have presented a description of the civic projects focusing on socio-cultural integration in Utrecht and their Syrian participants. In the next chapter, I will describe how these projects establish interethnic contact and how this contact, as well as the projects themselves, contribute to the process of socio-cultural integration of Syrian newcomers in Utrecht.

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<sup>33</sup> Interview Leandra, 29-03-2017

<sup>34</sup> However, this report continues by saying that these groups differ in the percentage of young adult males, which is larger for the Syrians today than it was for Iraqis in the earlier period.

## 4. Interethnic contact, civic projects and socio-cultural integration

The most important thing for any Syrian here [in the Netherlands] is friends. That is the most important thing. People think we need a job, we need money, but no. Sure, anyone needs the basics, just to live, but what we really need is friendship. To make us feel more at home<sup>35</sup>.

In this fourth empirical chapter, the relationship between interethnic contact<sup>36</sup> and socio-cultural integration will be discussed. I will specifically pay attention to how civic projects establish and encourage interethnic contact and I will present a general image of the nature of this contact. Moreover, the importance of this interethnic contact for both Syrian newcomers and for Dutch citizens themselves will be presented and I will discuss how this interethnic contact, facilitated by the civic projects, relates to socio-cultural integration. To conclude, I will argue in what way Syrians in the Netherlands are a ‘special’ immigrant group and how this ‘being a special immigrant group in the Netherlands’ might be an advantage for Syrians in the process of socio-cultural integration within this country.

### 4.1 The establishment of interethnic contact

The projects described in the previous chapter are all working to bring Dutch citizens and (Syrian) newcomers into contact with each other. According to Henk, who is one of the founders of *Welkom in Utrecht*, there are certain conditions an initiative needs to meet in order to establish contact between people from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds. I had many informal conversations with him taking place while we were promoting the activities of *Welkom in Utrecht* at the refugee center. During one of these conversations, Henk mentioned that a common, binding factor is crucial when it comes to connecting people: “out of common interests and activities, you can bring people together. Hobbies and interests have the power to unite different people”. During this conversation, he gave the example of doing sports together. He perceived sports not only as a physical exhaust-valve, but also as a bounding factor. It is a common activity that people from different backgrounds and who share the same interest can undertake together. This creates a two-way encounter in which both parties participate and interact equally. Another example of an

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<sup>35</sup> Interview Abbas, 30-03-2017

<sup>36</sup> Specifically, interethnic contact between Dutch citizens of Utrecht (*Utrechters*) and Syrian newcomers.

effective establishment of this two-way interethnic encounter is the handicraft workshop *van Hagar tot Ruth*. At the workshop, people from a wide range of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds come together to work on their passion: handicraft. The interaction and ambiance is based on the principle of equivalence. Everyone is welcome to visit the workshops and join the ‘family’ Ester has created. A truly two-way encounter is established here in the way that it is unclear to distinguish between ‘the refugee’ or ‘newcomer’ and the ‘Dutch citizen’: as I have previously shown, Dutch participants often seek refuge at the workshop as well, for instance to rebuild a social life or to re-integrate into a working environment. The Syrian participants, some of whom were professional sewers or worked in the clothing industry in Syria, help them wielding the sewing machines or advise them about patterns and colors. This two-way encounter, based on the principle of equivalence and a shared interest, creates an empowering environment for both parties in which the distinction between ‘newcomer in need of help’ and ‘caring Dutch citizen’ is blurred. Fokkema and de Haas (2015, 4), however, perceive socio-cultural integration as a one-way social process. These scholars assume that immigrants will unavoidably adapt to the ‘dominant norms of the host society’ which provides a one-sided view on a process that, based on my research data, could be perceived as more interactive. My own perception is more in line with scholars like Korac (2003), who is making a plea for approaching integration as a dynamic process of change which influences not only immigrants, but can also bring about changes and ask for adjustments on the side of the receiving community.

#### 4.2 Nature of interethnic contact established by civic projects

Musterd and Ostendorf (2009, 1527) perceive ‘contact with others’ as an important indicator of socio-cultural integration. Lancee (2012, 664) talks about bridging and bonding ties to elaborate on the dynamics of this ‘contact with others’, in other words, interethnic contact. According to this scholar, bonding ties are about within-group connections while bridging ties are defined as between-group connections. The projects I have previously described, vary in the degree to which they strive towards and manage to establish this ‘contact with others’. I cannot say that the *Taalles Vluchtelingen* establishes long-term, intensive interethnic contacts. The contact between Dutch citizens and participants remains rather superficial. For instance, the Dutch volunteers often get invited for dinner by newcomers, and they are very reluctant to go. The main reason for this is that these Dutch volunteers, being students or working citizens with well-paid jobs, already have a very busy life. The Dutch volunteers enjoy helping newcomers to learn the Dutch language, but they

prefer to keep their distance when the classes are over. There are however some volunteers who have built a deeper relationship with participants. For instance, one Dutch young male teaches the same Syrian lady every week and they keep in touch outside of the language courses. This is one of the examples of friendships that have been established between Dutch volunteers and newcomers through the language classes, but those are few. The same applies to the handicraft workshops. During the classes, people from different ethnic backgrounds interact with each other and they help each other with their handicraft projects, but they do not get into touch outside of the workshop times. The *Voorkamer* is an example where a couple of longer lasting relationships are established. Every week, there is an event called *Straffe Koffie* (Strong Coffee), with the distinct goal of being a meeting event between newcomers and local residents. People from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds play games together, drink a cup of Arab coffee, and engage in conversations with each other. The sphere is very open and dynamic, and ‘mixing’ between people from different backgrounds takes place very easily. For instance, during a meeting event one Syrian newcomer has told the group that he needs to pass an exam in business management to enter university. One local resident who has completed this same study immediately offered to help him. They exchanged numbers and now they are meeting regularly to discuss the curriculum. Based on my conversations with them in the weeks after this event, it can be said that the relationship that is established between them is a strong bridging tie. According to Allport (1954, 272) it is important to measure whether bridging ties are ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ ties to evaluate the extent to which they are generating feelings of solidarity and therefore socio-cultural integration. Weak ties only involve superficial contacts, for example just being acquaintances with somebody. Strong ties are more profound and consist for instance of amicable ties or marriage. The common perception is that weak ties do not involve the ‘meaningful communication’ to change attitudes or beliefs, whereas strong ties have the capacity to do so. Based on my observations and conversations with participants in the various projects, it can be said that the *Taalles Vluchteling* and the handicraft workshop *van Hagar tot Ruth* establish mainly weak bridging ties, while the *Voorkamer* succeeds to construct bridging ties of a stronger nature. In the academic literature, it appears as if weak bridging ties are of limited value and that strong bridging ties are much more worthwhile for the process of socio-cultural integration. I would like to counter this dominant sentiment regarding the valuation of weak bridging ties by showing in the next paragraph that the bridging ties

established by certain initiatives might be of a weak nature, but they are of vast value for both newcomers and Dutch volunteers.

#### 4.3 Importance of weak bridging ties

*I just want to be able to talk to the people in the streets*<sup>37</sup>.

The above statement captures a desire that is present among many Syrian newcomers in Utrecht. While Ibrahim and I were sitting down on a chilly Tuesday morning in a small, cosy coffee bar, slowly sipping our coffee, we had an in-depth conversation about his life in Utrecht and about what he deemed to be most important at that moment: namely to build a new life in this city. Meeting Dutch people, talking to them, and learning their language and customs were of crucial importance for him to accomplish this, he said to me.

As I have argued in the above section, the process of socio-cultural integration could best be perceived as a two-way encounter in which both the ‘host’ society and ‘newcomers’ are reshaping societal structures and creating a ‘new dynamics of culture and power’ (Tsing 2005, 5). Based on my research data, this can be seen as a reciprocal process, influencing and diversifying the social life of both Syrian newcomers and Dutch citizens. In this section, I will first describe how interethnic contact, established and facilitated through the delineated projects, is of value for both Syrian newcomers *and* for Dutch volunteers.

##### 4.3.1 Importance for Syrian newcomers

On the side of Syrian newcomers, I distinguish between the importance of interethnic contact on three levels: practical, socio-psychological, and prospective. Subsequently, I will discuss the value of this interethnic contact on the side of Dutch citizens.

##### Practical value

My Syrian participants have indicated that their Dutch contacts are valuable in the sense that they can offer help with everyday practical matters. Examples of these ‘practical matters’ are applying for an *uitkering* (unemployment benefit), buying a bicycle, translating letters in Dutch, or help with moving from a refugee center to an own home:

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<sup>37</sup> Informal conversation Ibrahim, 12-04-2017

They [Dutch acquaintances] are doing a lot for me. For example, when I need help, they help me as soon as possible. Sometimes they are busy themselves, but they still go with me. For example, I was working on my house, I had to move from the refugee center. They helped me with buying stuff. They helped me with the car, because I do not have a car. And also with what I had to choose. They know more than me about quality.

The practical value thus lies mostly in the fact that Dutch acquaintances better know ‘how things work’ in the Netherlands, and they can use and demonstrate this knowledge to newcomers to help them finding their way around.

### Socio-psychological value

Having Dutch connections and participating regularly in activities helps Syrians, who are often traumatized, on a socio-psychological level. Talking to my participants, I realized how they appreciate doing something that is useful and meaningful to them and how this helps them to regain their self-esteem. One example is provided by Tharik, who used to work in his uncle’s clothing store in Syria. He has encountered a second-hand clothing store via the handicraft workshop, where he now works as a volunteer. Being able to continue his former workmanship has had an empowering influence on him. Another example comes from Saïd, an *oud*-player<sup>38</sup> from Syria. Music runs through his veins and as a child, he already knew that he wanted to be a musician: ‘Music is the most important thing in my life. It is really special to me. Because I do not know myself without music- I started playing *oud* when I was 8 years old. In my life, I am a musician. Music is the only interesting thing for me’<sup>39</sup>. At *de Voorkamer*, Saïd often plays his music during events together with a Dutch volunteer who he has encountered in this meeting place. Saïd is thereby introducing Dutch local residents to traditional Arab music. Finding a platform to continue doing something that is useful and meaningful and that reminds them of their former occupation in Syria has helped Tharik and Saïd to regain their self-esteem after having been through traumatizing events. Moreover, interacting with Dutch citizens and doing activities they appreciate offers Syrian newcomers a welcome distraction from everyday psychological issues.

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<sup>38</sup> An *oud* is a pear-shaped string instrument that is often used in Arab music

<sup>39</sup> Interview Saïd, 30-03-2017



### Prospective value

For Syrian newcomers, the contacts and activities function as a stepping stone towards the construction of a working future in a new country. During an interview, Thom related a story that showed him how valuable the projects on this level can be for newcomers:

People said that they have been through extremely bleak things. And because of this, they could not even think of their past, neither of their future. Their brain was dusty. But after the first workshop, someone told me that for one moment, the dust had been blown off her brain, and that for a moment, she could think of the past again, and that she could even think about the future as well<sup>40</sup>.

Moreover, the Netherlands is often described as a networking society, meaning that contacts and a network are highly important regarding job perspectives<sup>41</sup>. Getting regularly into contact with Dutch citizens might increase employment chances. Moreover, having your life already structured by participating in structural activities could assist in adapting and preparing for a working rhythm and for the norms and values regarding working culture within the Netherlands, thereby paving the way for the process of integration.

#### 4.3.2 Importance for Dutch citizens

Now that the value of civic activities on the side of Syrian newcomers is described, I will do the same for the side of Dutch citizens who are participating in the projects to give a more complete view on this two-way encounter. For Dutch citizens, I have found the value of interethnic contact with newcomers on a moral-psychological, societal, and on a socio-political level.

### Moral-psychological value

Motives for engaging in the two-way encounter with Syrian newcomers can be of a more individual and intrinsic nature. A number of engaged participants I spoke to see it as their moral obligation to help newcomers build a life in their new country from the moment they arrive onwards:

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<sup>40</sup> Interview Thom, 17-05-2017

<sup>41</sup> Interview Sarah, 07-04-2017

I find it really important that the refugees are given the opportunity to start something from day one [...] But when entering the Netherlands, they are placed in a refugee center, and in Utrecht a reasonable amount of activities is organized for them, but in the countryside already way less, and as a refugee, you are just waiting there, often traumatized, you are still always worrying about your family that is left behind, and you are just sitting in your small bedroom, now that you are in a new country, while you wanted to build a new life here, while you entered with such great ambitions and enthusiasm<sup>42</sup>.

These citizens are thus engaged with the accommodation of refugees in Dutch society based on the principle of ‘indignation as a motive’ (Nader 1972). Moreover, next to ‘altruistically’ doing good, my participants indicated that it gives them personal fulfillment to be engaged with the process of socio-cultural integration of newcomers. Informants admitted that their motives might not be all too altruistic when critically reflecting upon them. For instance, while we were having a conversation about this theme, one Dutch girl said to me: “I just want to pimp my resume by way of doing this volunteer work with refugees. Then I enlarge my opportunities for getting into university”<sup>43</sup>. Furthermore, as I have mentioned previously, a couple of volunteers are joining the handicraft workshop to improve their own psychological state of mind.

### Societal value

Next to those individual, intrinsic motives, local residents participating in the projects see interethnic contact with Syrian newcomers in light of a societal asset. Alice, one of the founders of *Welkom in Utrecht* spoke during an interview about a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ to describe the necessity of incorporating newcomers within Dutch society. By this ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’, she means to stress the importance of demonstrating newcomers what morally right behavior is in the Netherlands, in other words, that having contact with Dutch citizens will show them the ropes:

What I see happening here, is that is very important to welcome people and to get into contact with them. It is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: if you do not help people and do not welcome them, well, then they will avert themselves from society. That might be what

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<sup>42</sup> Interview Iris, 27-02-2017

<sup>43</sup> Informal conversation Liza, 20-02-2017

is happening anyway, but well, people will stay here and continue to live here. So anyhow, you have to do something, and you can better do it right<sup>44</sup>.

In Alice's view, a society has to invest in newcomers to make sure that they will successfully participate within society. Another vision on the value of Syrian newcomers within Dutch society was provided by Sarah, an employee at COA. She mentioned that Dutch society '*vergrijs*', meaning that the number of elderly people rises and that the number of younger people declines, causing an upsurge in the average age. For a society, this could be problematic since elderly people will not work and thus do not pay taxes, whilst there is just a small employable younger generation. Sarah perceived the influx of high-educated, young Syrian newcomers as "a source of labor force and taxpayers"<sup>45</sup>. Her vision was that newcomers form an employment opportunity for society on the long term, provided that the Dutch people invest in these people at an early stage. Within the immigration history of the Netherlands, the societal value of immigrants in the past has been manifest before within Dutch society. An illustration is provided by Moroccan and Turkish '*gastarbeiders*' (guest workers) who have migrated to the Netherlands in the sixties. During these times, those guest workers were eagerly welcomed since their skilled labor was highly needed for Dutch economy at that time. This example shows the added value immigrants can have for (Dutch) society, thereby implicitly illustrating the urgency to invest as a society in those immigrants.

### Socio-political value

A couple of participants have underlined that direct contact can change views and prejudices about other people. As Thom put it:

When I heard about these [anti-migration] protests<sup>46</sup>, I could not believe that the population in a receiving country reacts with fear and aggression. We are talking about refugees, people who need to flee from a war situation. Imagine, they arrive in a new country, where they seek safety. They are not welcomed, they are given the feeling that there is no place for them. And I think that ultimately, this reaction comes forth out of fear.. And I think

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<sup>44</sup> Interview Alice, 10-04-2017

<sup>45</sup> Interview Sarah, 07-04-2017

<sup>46</sup> Thom is here referring to the protests in Eindhoven against asylum seekers in 2014.

encounter is the most powerful way to make someone change his thinking about another person. Getting into contact with the other is crucial. What I mean is that nowadays, you even exclusively read the news that fits you, via social media. If you read an article that does not meet your opinion, your vision, you just close it, you just do not read it. If you see a documentary that you do not like, you just switch it off. But if you are sitting in front of somebody, it is hard to deny human values. I think face-to-face encounter is highly important. [...] I think it is the most powerful way to change someone and his thinking about the other<sup>47</sup>.

Thom's statement about changing one's thinking about 'the Other' is in line with the academic literature. According to the so-called 'contact hypothesis', bridging ties, or personal contact between social groups, tend to make these social groups less hostile toward one another (Pettigrew 1998, 66) Following the logic of this 'contact hypothesis', bridging ties thus have the power to change the dominant socio-political discourse and to create 'new arrangements of culture and power' (Tsing 2005, 5). Leandra, a Dutch citizen who has intensively contact with two Syrian newcomers and who is committed to helping them with the process of integration, confirms this: "I have profound contact with those families and I have so many friends that are helping them. This has made me realize how many engaged people there are. I do not believe anymore that there is really that much xenophobia. That cannot be the only side of the story"<sup>48</sup>.

The Syrian newcomers evaluate bridging ties as useful, even crucial, in building their life in their new city, even though these ties could best be described as weak bridging ties. Dutch informants also evaluated these bridging ties as worthwhile. Those empirical findings underline Lancee's (2012, 664) view, who states that bridging ties are more important within the integration process than bonding ties. However, these findings undermine the common academic perception that strong ties are more worthwhile than weak ties. Weak ties are believed to 'not involve the meaningful communication to change attitudes or beliefs, whereas strong ties have the capacity to do so' (Allport 1954, 272). I have shown, however, that weak ties do involve the 'meaningful communication to change attitudes or beliefs'. I will now continue with a description of how

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<sup>47</sup> Interview Thom, 17-05-2017

<sup>48</sup> Interview Leandra, 29-03-2017

Syrians as a specific immigrant group negotiate the process of socio-cultural integration in the Netherlands.

#### 4.4 Being a special immigrant group in the Netherlands

Based on the ‘profile’ of Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands as described in the third chapter, I argue that this group can be described as a special immigrant group. Henk, one of the founders of *Welkom in Utrecht*, has called Syrians ‘extrovert’ and ‘culturally similar to ours’<sup>49</sup>, which would, according to him, make them ‘highly prone to integrate successfully into Dutch society’<sup>50</sup>. By calling Syrian newcomers a special immigrant group, I mean to stress that in general they are highly educated, extrovert, ‘modern’, and culturally rather similar to ‘Dutch’ culture. Because of these distinctive features, the engaged citizens I talked to have a rather positive image of the Syrian newcomers. Moreover, these features might be resourceful for their integration into Dutch society.

Musterd and Ostendorf (2009, 1525) argue that ‘members of ethnic groups who are young, higher educated, and second generation have more contacts outside their own ethnic group than members who are older, less educated and first-generation’. Although the Syrians who have entered the Netherlands cannot be described as ‘second generation’, in general they are indeed young and high educated. According to Martinovic et al. (2009), there are three determinants of interethnic contact: preferences, opportunities, and third parties. ‘Preferences’ are believed to be based on (cultural) similarity. ‘Opportunities’ consist of meeting chances between people from different ethnic backgrounds, and, lastly, ‘third parties’ encompass outsiders (dis)encouraging interethnic contact. Thus, through Syrians ‘being a special immigrant group’ that, according to Henk, is ‘cultural similar to Dutch culture’, a preference framework for interethnic contact is established. The civic initiatives described in the previous chapter offer the opportunity framework (Martinovic et al. 2009) where interethnic contact can be established and function as a ‘third party’ encouraging interethnic contact. Following both Musterd’s and Ostendorf’s (2009) and Martinovic’s et al. (2009) perspectives, Syrians are likely to have contact outside of their own ethnic group, or to construct bridging ties. Moreover, according to the contact hypothesis (Pettigrew 1998, 66) Syrians, being extrovert, culturally similar to Dutch culture, and willing to invest in creating bridging ties, are an immigrant group that is likely to counter hostile attitudes towards their group and to build solidarity within Dutch society. Based on the contact hypothesis,

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<sup>49</sup> ‘ours’ in this context refers to ‘the Dutch culture’

<sup>50</sup> Informal conversation with Henk, 6-04-2017

these factors might advance the process of socio-cultural integration for this specific group of newcomers. Taking this into account, it can be argued that the idea of Syrian newcomers 'being a special immigrant group' makes them likely to successfully negotiate the process of socio-cultural integration in the Netherlands. In the next chapter, I will discuss how Syrian newcomers are playing out their socio-cultural integration process within the urban space of Utrecht.

## 5. Civic integration initiatives, urban citizenship, and the city of Utrecht

According to Musterd and Ostendorf (2009, 1515-1516), cities have traditionally accommodated a vast range of different categories of people. This is due to certain key functions that define cities: to be centers of trade, culture, knowledge production and innovation. Musterd and Ostendorf (2009, 1516) argue that to uphold these core functions, openness, diversity, and the willingness to learn from others are required. In this final empirical chapter, the contemporary accommodation of Syrian refugees in Utrecht will be discussed. First, the Utrecht vision or philosophy on the process of integration will be addressed. Then, I will focus on ‘civic integration initiatives’ and the concept of ‘the good citizen’ facilitating this neoliberal form of integration. To conclude, I will critically look into the dynamic that is created by ‘the good citizen’ contributing to the process of socio-cultural integration of Syrians in Utrecht.

### 5.1 Integration policy in Utrecht

During my research, a number of participants have called Utrecht ‘progressive’ when it comes to her integration policy. In this section, I will elaborate on the distinct direction the city of Utrecht is taking regarding the theme of integration and in what way this can be called ‘progressive’.

In Utrecht, the processes of structural and socio-cultural integration are “a local, committing and reciprocal process with the purpose of ameliorating social and economic self-reliance of refugees as new *Utrechters*”<sup>51</sup>. The municipality envisions three assumptions to pursue this philosophy: First, Utrecht strives towards handling a housing policy based on the idea of a so-called ‘continuing line’ (*doorgaande lijn*). This ‘continuing line’ entails that asylum seekers who are sheltered in Utrecht will continue to be housed in the municipality itself during their procedure and after obtaining a status. This makes integration within Utrecht a continuing process with an ongoing line in healthcare, education and social embedding<sup>52</sup>. The advantage of this policy direction is thus that newcomers continue to benefit from their previous investment in Utrecht, for example from an already built-up social network<sup>53</sup>. The second assumption Utrecht deems

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<sup>51</sup> Raadsbrief integratie van statushouders gemeente Utrecht, 25 January 2017

<sup>52</sup> Interview Bart, 08-05-2017

<sup>53</sup> Interview Bart, 08-05-2017

important is ‘activation from the first day onwards’ (*activering vanaf dag één*). The purpose is to activate asylum seekers and status holders as much and as soon as possible. With this concept, Utrecht makes profitable use of the waiting time asylum seekers are facing in a refugee center by letting them participate in various courses (for example, a course in international business or English) or by letting them work in voluntary jobs<sup>54</sup>. This ‘activation from the first day onwards’ is meant for all asylum seekers, whether they will be assigned a status in the Netherlands or not<sup>55</sup>. The purpose is to contribute to an active, fast and successful integration and to contribute to labor prospects, both in Utrecht *and* potentially in the country of origin<sup>56</sup>. The underlying logic of this activation is that people will psychologically benefit from continuing to be active<sup>57</sup>. Lastly, Utrecht strives towards being an ‘inclusive city’ (*inclusieve stad*). This means that Utrecht perceives all residents as part of the city, including asylum seekers, irrespectively of gender, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnic background. Newcomers are consequently not treated as a special entity that ‘deserves’ or ‘needs’ more help than other groups. This means that activities are organized for and by newcomers and that these should be accessible for local residents as well, thereby trying to connect groups and avoiding an unequal division of social and political attention.

Based on these three ‘pillars’ of integration, Utrecht can be called rather unique in its approach<sup>58</sup>. The ‘continuing line’, ‘activation from the first day onwards’, and the idea of ‘inclusive city’ are visions that have been developed within Utrecht. Other Dutch cities, for instance Amsterdam or Groningen, are operating on the base of a rather similar approach, but not as thorough as Utrecht<sup>59</sup>. Other cities such as Rotterdam or Den Haag diverge entirely from the Utrecht vision by making newcomers completely responsible for their own integration<sup>60</sup>. In sum, in line with Hoekstra (2015, 798), I have found that various cities in the Netherlands diverge from

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<sup>54</sup> A critical note should be made here. Although this is already a significant improvement on not having the opportunity to work at all, it is still a pity that immigrants are not allowed to work in paid jobs to sustain their own livelihoods as much as possible.

<sup>55</sup> The possibility of being rejected a status is why this ‘*activering vanaf dag een*’ offers ‘safe’ or ‘neutral’ activities and courses from which a refugee could benefit in a ‘new country’ as well as in his home country, such as English courses.

<sup>56</sup> Raadsbrief integratie van statushouders gemeente Utrecht, 25 January 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Interview Bart, 08-05-2017

<sup>58</sup> Interview Bart, 08-05-2017

<sup>59</sup> Especially Amsterdam is trying as well to handle a continuing line and activation from the first day onwards. However, this is yet not as extensively developed as in Utrecht.

<sup>60</sup> Interview Bart, 8-05-2017



each other and from national models regarding their approach and vision on integration based on the discourse of neoliberalism and the local turn.

### 5.2 Integration: neoliberalism, scale making and the local turn

Nowadays, there is a neoliberal citizenship hegemony, shaping the contours and content of Dutch integration processes (Kirk 2010, 1). This has caused Dutch citizenship to become ‘neoliberalized’, which means that integration is expected to be the individual responsibility of new citizens (Suvarierol and Kirk 2015, 248). The local initiatives I have described in the previous chapters proliferate themselves in this neoliberal rhetoric, since they are semi-dependent from the government and they are voluntary and additional for newcomers within the process of integration. These ‘complementary’ local civic initiatives are in line with neoliberal hegemonic thinking as it is particularly played out in the Netherlands. According to Evelien Tonkens (2014, 3), the specific ‘Dutch’ political form of neoliberal thinking has resulted in a so-called ‘*participatiesamenleving*’ (participation society). This policy is an alternative on the ‘*verzorgingsstaat*’ (welfare state) and is based on the idea of ‘social participation’. This social participation entails that the government withdraws and makes a call to its citizens to roll up their sleeves to make a contribution towards society (Tonkens 2014, 3). Thus, within the Dutch *participatiesamenleving*, the processes of neoliberalization and privatization have caused the integration processes to be partly outsourced to local initiatives (De Koning et al. 2015, 124). These initiatives now play a complementary role in negotiating and framing citizenship within the state. I will now elaborate on the workings of the processes described above.

### 5.3 Civic integration initiatives and the local turn

Salman, one of my Syrian participants, mentioned during an informal conversation that he perceives Utrecht as a multicultural society in which people and groups with different backgrounds, traditions and religions can co-exist with each other. This corresponds to the core functions Musterd and Ostendorf (2009) assign to cities. These scholars regard cities as centers of trade, culture, knowledge production and innovation. Both within academia and politics there is a focus on the failure of multiculturalism. As Tsing (2000) however shows, to understand social reality it is important to look at different scales such as the international, national, regional and local. This is what she calls ‘scale making’. Indeed, although multiculturalism seems to have retreated on a national level (Kymlicka 2010, 103), on a local level features of multiculturalism

have been retained by civic integration initiatives (Hoekstra 2015, 799). Following the description I have presented above, the ‘local turn’ is evidently apparent in the urban areas of the Netherlands. Those urban areas adhere to a relative different approach regarding integration. In Utrecht, this concretely means that the development and operation of integration based on the three pillars described above has worked to move Utrecht away from a fundamental neoliberal discourse. The municipal philosophy of ‘*doorgaande lijn*’ ‘*activatie vanaf dag één*’ and the idea of ‘*inclusieve stad*’ have offered newcomers handles within society, thereby not completely imposing themselves with the task of accounting for their own integration. The municipality of Utrecht is thus, completely in line with the idea of the ‘*participatiesamenleving*’, actively engaged with stimulating and encouraging citizens in Utrecht to get involved and to take on the task of assisting new residents with their process of integration. In an interview, a municipal policy advisor commented on this: “we always advocate citizens’ own initiative, it is the responsibility of society itself to let things happen. As a government, we do not have to impose how things should be done and arranged. A vision like that is not of this time anymore”<sup>61</sup>. The policy direction of the municipality of Utrecht can be thus described as ‘neoliberal’ in the sense that she stimulates and expects her citizens to take on the task of assisting new residents with their process of integration. Both ‘new’ Dutch citizens and citizens that have already been living in Utrecht are responsible for the participation and integration of newcomers in the city. The municipality engages herself in this process and offers clear guidelines to newcomers, as well as eagerly subsidizing local integration initiatives set up by engaged citizens. Through this dynamic the municipality of Utrecht has a facilitating and steering role in the integration process, but not a commanding or executive one. In line with the philosophy of the ‘*participatiesamenleving*’, the municipality is successfully stimulating its citizens to participate within society, which in my view creates a constructive alternative to the welfare state.

#### 5.4 Urban citizenship

During my research, I noticed that local integration initiatives are working to let different groups co-exist within society, thereby retaining features of multiculturalism on a local level. Indeed, as Hoekstra (2015, 1799) shows for the case of incorporation of immigrants in the Netherlands, national governments adopt restrictive and more exclusionary policies, while on a local level,

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<sup>61</sup> Interview Bart, 08-05-2017

Dutch cities like Utrecht have resorted to ‘old’ multiculturalist policies or experimented with other forms of more inclusive migrant incorporation. In this section, I will discuss how urban citizenship, as a particular form of a ‘more inclusive migrant incorporation’ in Utrecht is played out. I will first briefly touch upon how Syrian newcomers perceive the Netherlands and Utrecht and in what way they identify themselves with this country and this city. Moreover, I will discuss how, looking through the lens of ‘scale making’ (Tsing 2000), urban citizenship creates a distinctive multiculturalist dynamic within Utrecht.

Many Syrian participants indicated that upon leaving their home country, they already have been contemplating to go to the Netherlands as their ‘new’ country. Their reasons for choosing the Netherlands were the mild climate regarding refugees, the presence of acquaintances from Syria who fled ahead, and family reunification. Most often, my Syrian participants perceive the Netherlands as a liberal country with a friendly and tolerant population. As Salman illustrates this:

I knew some things about the Netherlands, because I had contact with other people already living here. They told me a lot about this country. About the people, how nice they are here, it is different from other countries in Europe. They can live with other traditions there, they can tolerate other religions, traditions et cetera, because they already have a lot of different cultures<sup>62</sup>.

My informants indicated that they enjoy living in Utrecht for a number of reasons. First, they enjoy the activities that are offered to them. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, these activities are of value to them on a practical, socio-psychological, and prospective level. These activities help them with the process of socio-cultural integration and they offer distraction from psychological issues. Moreover, they enjoy the vibrant and vivid atmosphere of a city. They describe *Utrechters* as open-minded, friendly and welcoming people with usually an open attitude towards Syrian newcomers. The vibrant atmosphere of being in a city offers them a feeling of safety:

I do not want to live in a small village. I cannot live with the quietness anymore. I need to have people around me. Back in Syria, it was a bad sign if there was no one in the streets.

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<sup>62</sup> Interview Salman, 22-04-2017

If the streets were empty, it meant danger. It meant that people were hiding from the bombings. So when I see empty streets, I immediately think of hiding from the bombings<sup>63</sup>.

Moreover, living in a city with a historical city center like Utrecht reminded one of my participants of his former town of residence, Damascus. This similarity made it easier for him to settle in this new town.

Myrte Hoekstra (2015, 1809) uses the concept ‘urban citizenship’ to describe a more encompassing form of citizenship that aims to increase positive intercultural contacts and the appreciation of diversity, thereby trying to offer a more inclusive and less polarizing alternative to integration. As opposed to national citizenship, urban citizenship utilizes a discourse of a shared ‘right to the city’ based on residence within this very city, thereby connecting citizens more strongly to the city while disconnecting them from nationality (Bauböck 2003 *in* Hoekstra 2015, 1800). Within this overarching identity of being a city resident, urban citizenship enables its citizens to express their diversity and differences (Dukes and Musterd 2012 *in* Hoekstra 2015, 1800). This expression of diversity and differences within the framework of urban citizenship corresponds to Musterd and Ostendorf’s (2009, 1515-1516) view that cities traditionally are inclined to strive towards openness, diversity, and the willingness to learn from others to uphold the above-named core functions. These authors continue to elaborate on the expression of diversity and differences within cities by shedding another light to current reality:

Yet, nowadays many people seem to prefer a break with the past, and are making active efforts to reduce diversity. They fear other cultures and hence reduce the atmosphere of openness. According to their viewpoint, if something ‘foreign’ comes to the city, this element should be assimilated as soon as possible (Musterd and Ostendorf 2009, 1516).

This does not correspond to the findings I collected during my fieldwork. There will indeed be citizens that fear other cultures and will try to reduce diversity. However, this could be contested based on my fieldwork focusing on ‘the other side of the coin’, namely engaged Dutch citizens welcoming and celebrating human diversity. To be honest, I must admit that it is rather natural that I have not encountered Dutch citizens who have a negative attitude vis à vis refugees, since the

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<sup>63</sup> Informal conversation Alima, 15-05-2017

engaged volunteers that participated in my research are a special group in Dutch society that is inherently interested in creating social diversity. Although this particular group is definitively *part* of Dutch society, they are certainly not representative for the *whole* Dutch population<sup>64</sup>.

In the light of ‘welcoming, engaged citizens’, the notion of ‘urban citizenship’ in Utrecht thus unites these ‘traditional’ features of diversity and intercultural contact within cities with a contemporary trend of constructing an overarching identity, in this case being a city resident. In the specific case of Utrecht, the notion of ‘urban citizenship’ entails that Syrian newcomers identify themselves with Utrecht and are included in urban society. Within this context they can operate to express their diversity and differences, creating what can be called a distinctive multiculturalist dynamic within urban space. In this respect, employing the concept of ‘scale making’ (Tsing 2000), urban citizenship, operating on the logic of the ‘local turn’ (Hoekstra 2015, 799), in Utrecht works to create cultural diversity. This enables engaged citizens to undermine Musterd and Ostendorf’s (2009, 1515-1516) view that within urban space, the general trend within societies will be a reduction of diversity and assimilation of other cultural groups. A rather multiculturalist dynamic is upheld by the engaged Dutch citizens that participated in my research.

In the next section, I will show how the ‘local turn’, caused by the larger process of neoliberalization (Scholten 2013 *in* Hoekstra 2015, 1798) has created a social dynamic in which the ‘citizen’s own initiative<sup>65</sup>’ has created so-called ‘good citizens’ who are working to uphold this multiculturalist dynamic. I will critically look at Syrians as ‘good citizens’ within their socio-cultural integration process in Utrecht.

### 5.5 Being a good citizen in Utrecht

In a context in which Dutch citizenship and integration have become neoliberalized and privatized, a ‘good citizen’ would be someone who is actively taking his individual responsibility to integrate (Suvarierol and Kirk 2015, 248). Based on my observations and conversations with Syrian newcomers in Utrecht, as well as taking into account that they can be perceived as ‘a special immigrant group’, I would say that my Syrian participants in Utrecht can indeed be labeled as ‘good citizens’. Most of them were already active citizens in their home country. For instance, Amir used to do voluntary work for the Red Cross in Syria and he was politically engaged. He is continuing this line of social and political engagement in the Netherlands.

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<sup>64</sup> I will elaborate on this ‘good citizen bubble’ later

<sup>65</sup> Interview Bart, 08-05-2017

As I mentioned before, I would like to counter Fokkema and de Haas' (2015, 4) perception that (socio-cultural) integration can best be seen as a one-way social process. Rather, I would stress that (socio-cultural) integration is a two-way encounter. To acknowledge this reciprocal relationship, it is critical to extend the notion of the 'good citizen' in the context of neoliberalized Dutch citizenship. According to the logic of the 'good citizen' not only Syrian newcomers should be held responsible for their integration process, but Dutch citizens as well should take their responsibility for the accommodation of newcomers within society in this two-way encounter. Reviewing the initiatives I have described in chapter three, a reciprocal dynamic between 'new good citizens' and 'old good citizens' is played out rather well in Utrecht. These 'good citizens' are perceived to be human actors who make an effort to Syrian newcomers to start from scratch in a new city. My research participants see a clear contrast between those 'humane' actors and bureaucratic instances such as *COA*, which are often subjectively perceived as non-transparent, bureaucratic, distant and pragmatic instances working against newcomers. Thom, founder of *de Voorkamer*, agrees with them and perceives a refugee center as a total institution, in which asylum seekers have no space for individual expression. He signals the need for "a neutral space, outside of the refugee center, where people can meet and show their talents"<sup>66</sup>. In other words, in a refugee center people are confined to the camp, thereby only being assigned *zoë*, or bare life (Agamben 1997 in Fassin 2005:366). Engaged citizens make efforts to help them to enter the social and political arena, in other words, to help them exit the camp and to obtain *bios*, or full life to some extent.

### 5.6 Being stuck in a 'good citizen bubble'

Thom, one of my participants, has pointed out the idea that within Utrecht, roughly three groups can be identified: firstly, the group of engaged *Utrechters*, the Dutch citizens who are participating in the projects and who have an open-minded attitude towards newcomers and who are making an effort to help them finding their way in a new city. Secondly, there is a group of Dutch citizens who do not exactly know what stance to take on regarding newcomers. They might be willing to become engaged, but they do not know how to do this or they are still rather reluctant to do so. Thirdly, according to Thom, there is a group of Dutch citizens with a negative attitude towards

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<sup>66</sup> Interview Thom, 17-05-2017

newcomers and who react to their coming to the city with feelings of xenophobia. This vision is slightly more extended and nuanced than that of Musterd and Ostendorf (2009, 1516-1517), who in the debate on integration and the city acknowledge merely two ‘contrasting visions of the relationship between the city, the immigrants who settle in it, and integration’. In the first vision, integration is not automatically perceived as a ‘problem’, but instead as a long-term process in which migrants will ultimately have positive effects for urban society. Their second vision presumes a more negative relationship between the city, immigration and integration, namely a relationship in which expressions of xenophobia are paramount.

The local integration initiatives create an environment for Syrian newcomers in which they almost exclusively engage with the first group, the open-minded, welcoming ‘good citizens’. Circulating in these civic integration initiatives, newcomers can be stuck within the bubble of ‘good citizens’, while feelings of xenophobia and fear for terrorist attacks in name of Islam are still highly present within the political arena, the media and within other parts of Dutch society. This could cause a negative shift in dominant popular thinking about Syrian newcomers. As I have done before, I again must admit that I, as a researcher, too have been stuck in the ‘good citizen bubble’ and that I have exclusively heard stories of open-minded, welcoming and caring volunteers. By being stuck in this bubble, I have only captured this side of the story, and not the narratives of people who might be less engaged with and less positive towards newcomers.

According to the ‘contact hypothesis’, bridging ties, or personal contact between social groups, tend to make these social groups less hostile toward one another (Pettigrew 1998, 66). To counter negative images and to counter polarization and to change popular xenophobic thinking, it is thus necessary that the civic integration initiatives endeavor to break open their ‘good citizen bubble’ by including and engaging Dutch citizens who might be prone to have feelings of xenophobia.

The expectation dynamic of what constitutes a ‘good citizen’ leads to a dichotomy between migrants who ‘choose’ to be a citizen and ‘learn’ how they should do this, and between migrants who are ‘unwilling’ and ‘uncooperative’ or do not know how to deal with this form of neoliberal integration (Hoekstra 2015, 1811). This could lead to inequalities between and within groups of newcomers. For instance, in Utrecht, this is visible in the difference between Syrians, who are high-educated, extrovert and socially engaged, and Eritreans, who are less educated and rather introvert and could therefore not have the resources to be a ‘good citizen’ in their integration

process. Regarding in-group inequalities, some individuals could be more psychologically damaged than others, making them less prone to take up successfully their integration process. In agreement with Hoekstra (2015), Schinkel (2010, 269) is also critical on the inclusionary nature of urban citizenship. He argues that notions of the ‘good, active citizen’ transform citizenship in a ‘choice for participation in Dutch society’. Because of this underlying idea, a culture-centered way of thinking and a loyalty-centered way of thinking come to the fore within the integration discourse. This means that ‘good citizens’ have to think and to act in accordance with ‘the dominant culture’ and that this citizen has to show ‘loyalty’ towards this society. Schinkel (2010) consequently argues that urban citizenship makes use of the concept of the ‘active citizen’ to discipline a city’s residents and make them conform to a blueprint of the ‘ideal citizen’, with ideals and norms based on those of the dominant culture. Although the concept of urban citizenship aims to create an inclusive form of integration through positive intercultural contacts, appreciation of diversity, and the construction of an overarching urban identity, paradoxically, newcomers have to adapt to a model of ideal citizenship based on the norms of the dominant culture. The concept of urban citizenship thus takes on an exclusionary nature if ‘new’ citizens do not act in accordance with this dominant culture. Syrians, being a special immigrant group in Utrecht, can move successfully within this paradoxical dynamic, indicating that they could be seen as the ‘ideal citizen’ in their socio-cultural integration process. Other immigrant groups however might encounter trouble with ‘acting in accordance with the dominant culture and with ‘showing loyalty towards this society’. That being said, I agree with Korac (2007,7), who argues that ‘policy interventions should recognize refugees as social actors with differentiated needs, rather than ascribing them a common identity without any acknowledgement of differences caused by age, gender, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of refugee populations’. I like to stress that not only policy interventions, but civic initiatives and engaged citizens as well should take into account age, gender, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of refugee populations as factors that contribute to the extent to which those immigrant groups negotiate (un)successfully their process of neoliberalized, socio-cultural integration.



## 6. Conclusion

In this final chapter, the conclusions that can be drawn from this empirical anthropological research will be discussed. With this case study, I have tried to gain insight into the socio-cultural integration process of Syrian refugees through civic initiatives in Utrecht, the Netherlands. To make a couple of final statements on this master thesis' theme, I will provide an answer to the central research question:

How do civic projects in the municipality of Utrecht, the Netherlands, facilitate the socio-cultural integration of Syrians newcomers in Dutch society?

First, I will give a short summary of the arguments being made in the three main chapters. Hereafter, I will answer the central research question by tying the arguments into the main argument of this thesis, namely that within a neoliberalized discourse on citizenship, civic integration regimes, set up by Dutch 'good citizens', are complementary but necessary within the process of socio-cultural integration, but that a couple of critical notes can be applied to these initiatives.

In chapter three, I presented a general overview of the initiatives that focus on the socio-cultural integration process, and I presented a description of Syrian newcomers in Utrecht. First, I have stressed that socio-cultural should be seen as a two-way encounter influencing and changing both 'host' society and newcomers. Four initiatives focusing on socio-cultural integration have been addressed, namely *Welkom in Utrecht*, *handicraft workshop van Hagar tot Ruth*, *Taalles Vluchteling*, and *de Voorkamer*. The common factor connecting all these initiatives is that they are civic initiatives, meaning that they are all bottom-up organizations set up by engaged Dutch citizens. This dynamic in which '*the citizen does what he wants*'<sup>67</sup> can be assessed in a critical light. First, there is the enormous range of initiatives set up by involved citizens, which might be overwhelming for newcomers. It is therefore of added value that *Welkom in Utrecht* serves as an umbrella organization structuring and facilitating the activities that are organized by engaged citizens. This enormous range of initiatives is caused by the 'hying' of helping refugees. At the time of this writing, the 'hype' starts to attenuate, showing how sensitive these civic initiatives are for temporarily extreme media-attention. Finally, through the vast range of initiatives,

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<sup>67</sup> Informal conversation Carolien, 6-03-2017

communication does not come easy. Many initiatives are not into contact with each other or with important instances such as *COA*. This miscommunication has, amongst other things, caused a rather monotonous offer of activities for newcomers to help them with the process of socio-cultural integration and has caused misunderstandings between official instances and civic initiatives<sup>68</sup>. Another critical note I have made is that citizens themselves often do not have the skills and knowledge to set up a project or activity that is sustainable or accountable. Citizens are not ‘professionals’ and participation in the projects might turn out to be rather disappointing for both sides: asylum seekers might develop ‘false hope’ concerning chances of staying in the Netherlands, making it even more difficult when declined a residence permit. Dutch citizens might on their part be disappointed when they enthusiastically set up an initiative that does not live up to their expectations or is not attractive to newcomers and therefore not well-visited. In this third chapter, I have also presented a general image of the Syrians taking part in the civic projects. Most of them entered the Netherlands in 2015 to escape the dangers of the civil war or to escape military service, or because of family reunification. Their (rather homogenous) profile is remarkable: the Syrians I have encountered during the activities are almost all male, young (age 20-40) and highly educated, and most of them not only speak Arabic, but also English very well.

In the fourth chapter, the relationship between interethnic contact and socio-cultural integration was discussed. First, I have stressed that interethnic contact or ‘contact with others’ is an important indicator of socio-cultural integration (Musterd and Ostendorf (2009, 1527, Lancee 2012, 664), and I have explored how civic projects establish and encourage interethnic contact. To achieve this interethnic contact, a common binding factor is crucial as well as creating a relationship that is based on equivalence and takes into account that socio-cultural integration is a two-way encounter, meaning that this process influences and changes both ‘host’ society and newcomers (Korac 2003, 3). To evaluate the nature of this interethnic contact, I have put it in the light of ‘bridging and bonding ties’ (Lancee 2012, 664), bridging ties being ‘between-group’ connections and bonding ties being ‘within-group connections.’ I have shown that the interethnic contact established through the various civic initiatives can be described as ‘bridging ties’, and that this concerns mainly ‘weak bridging ties’ (Allport 1954, 272). In the academic literature (Allport 1954) weak ties are often evaluated as not ‘worthwhile’ in comparison to strong ties. However, I have argued that the weak bridging ties established through the civic initiatives are of

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<sup>68</sup> Based on own observations

value for both parties on different levels. I have shown that on the side of the Syrian newcomers, participation in the initiatives is of practical, socio-psychological, and prospective value. Within the reciprocal process of socio-cultural integration, I have found the value of interethnic contact with newcomers for Dutch citizens on a societal, moral-psychological and on a socio-political level. By showing the value of weak ties for both newcomers and for the host-society within the process of socio-cultural integration, I have argued that the common academic perception regarding the valuation of weak bridging ties should be adapted. Moreover, in this fourth chapter I have demonstrated that based on their general, homogenous profile, Syrian newcomers in Dutch society can be described as a ‘special immigrant group’ and that this ‘being a special immigrant group in the Netherlands’ might be an advantage for Syrians in the process of socio-cultural integration within this country. In comparison with other immigrant groups in the Netherlands, the relative cultural similarity between Syrians and the Dutch (namely being modern and high-educated) might create the ‘preference’ (Martinovic et al. 2009) to establish interethnic contact. Furthermore, the civic initiatives function as a ‘third party’ and create the ‘opportunity’ (Martinovic et al. 2009) framework to establish interethnic contact. I concluded that Syrians being ‘a special immigrant group within the Netherlands’ possess excellent factors to build bridging ties within Dutch society, thereby enlarging their opportunities for a successful socio-cultural integration process.

In the final chapter, chapter five, the relationship between civic integration initiatives, urban citizenship, and the city of Utrecht was explored. First, the Utrecht vision or philosophy on the process of integration was addressed. I have shown that, following the logic of the ‘local turn,’ different cities in the Netherlands are able to diverge from national models of integration and develop alternative ways of managing diversity (Hoekstra 2015, 798). The specific approach Utrecht is taking can be described as ‘progressive’ based on the ideas of ‘the continuing line’, ‘activation from the first day onwards’, and the ‘inclusive city’. These three pillars make Utrecht unique in her integration approach compared to other Dutch cities. I have hereafter shown that a neoliberal citizenship hegemony is now shaping the contours and content of Dutch integration processes (Kirk 2010, 1). This has caused Dutch citizenship to become ‘neoliberalized’, which means that integration is expected to be the individual responsibility of new citizens. The civic integration initiatives I have described above are complementary in the integration process and semi-dependent from the government. This is completely in line with the idea of the so-called

*'participatiesamenleving'*, which is the way in which neoliberal hegemonic thinking is played out in the Netherlands within political discourse. This particular 'Dutch' form of neoliberal thinking entails that the government withdraws and makes a call to its citizens to roll up their sleeves within society to be actively engaged on a social level (Tonkens 2014, 3). Thus, in the processes of neoliberalization and privatization, the integration of newcomers is partly outsourced to local initiatives.

These initiatives are working to let different groups co-exist within society, thereby retaining features of multiculturalism on a local level, while on a national level political discourse is withdrawing from a discourse of multiculturalism. Indeed, as Hoekstra (2015, 1799) shows for the case of incorporation of immigrants in the Netherlands, national governments adopt restrictive and more exclusionary policies, while on a local level Dutch cities like Utrecht have abided to 'old' multiculturalist policies or experimented with other forms of more inclusive migrant incorporation. Hoekstra (2015, 1809) uses the concept 'urban citizenship' to describe a more encompassing form of citizenship that aims to increase positive intercultural contacts and the appreciation of diversity, thereby trying to offer a more inclusive and less polarizing alternative to integration. In this specific case in Utrecht, the notion of 'urban citizenship' entails that Syrian newcomers identify themselves with Utrecht and are included in urban society. Within this context they can operate to express their diversity and differences, creating what can be called a distinctive multiculturalist dynamic within urban space. In this respect, looking at the particular example of Utrecht, employing the concept of 'scale making' (Tsing 2000), urban citizenship, operating on the logic of the 'local turn' (Hoekstra 2015, 799), works to create cultural diversity. Through the 'good citizen bubble' that is created by and within the civic integration initiatives, a rather multiculturalist dynamic is upheld, while within the 'bigger' regional civil society of Utrecht and within Dutch society on a national level more assimilationist sounds can be heard.

The whole *'laissez-faire'* political discourse described above in which the government takes a step back whilst engaged citizens themselves are committed to creating a sustainable social environment, taking on responsibility for the process of integration might sound idyllic and straightforward, but in reality, it is not. In a context in which Dutch citizenship and integration have become neoliberalized and privatized, newcomers have to actively take their individual responsibility to integrate. A person who is capable and willing of doing this would be a 'good citizen'. This dynamic can be evaluated from a critical stance. I have argued that Syrians 'being a

special immigrant group' might be 'good citizens' who are actively taking up their process of socio-cultural integration and who know how they should negotiate this process. Other groups however, who do not possess these particular features, may be less successful within this process. This creates a division that undermines the 'inclusionary' discourse of urban citizenship and that, on the contrary, in reality turns out to be an exclusionary mechanism. Moreover, newcomers might be stuck in a 'good citizenship' bubble, encountering mainly engaged people who are welcoming and willing to help them, thereby not being in touch with the part of society that is less welcoming and that might even have feelings of xenophobia. To conclude, I like to stress that not only policy interventions, but civic initiatives and engaged citizens as well should take into account age, gender, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of refugee populations as factors that contribute to the extent to which these immigrant groups negotiate (un)successfully their process of neoliberalized, socio-cultural integration. Taking these factors into account, paying attention to individuality and particularity will expand the notion of 'the good citizen' to a more inclusive and more effective nature.

Based on my experiences in the field, I would like to conclude this thesis by making a couple of recommendations for future research. Firstly, I have noticed that most current initiatives are mainly visited by Syrians. In this thesis, I have demonstrated that this group can be seen as a 'special immigrant group', which is likely to integrate rather successful within Dutch society. This leads to the question of how projects can reach out to and engage other immigrant groups that are probably less likely than Syrians to integrate successfully and that might be even more supported by participation in interethnic projects? This same line of reasoning applies to intragroup differences regarding the level of (socio-cultural) integration. In the rather homogenous profile of Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands, Syrian women are rather invisible in Dutch society. Therefore, not much is known about their integration process. To widen academic knowledge and to give Syrian women a voice as well, future research should burst out of the 'gender bubble' by showing the differences within the integration process between Syrian men and women.

In this thesis, I have described that it is necessary to burst out of another 'bubble' as well, namely the 'good citizen bubble'. The concrete way in which civic initiatives can achieve this has not been accounted for in my thesis. I would future researchers recommend to investigate how to let newcomers burst out of the 'good citizen bubble', to widen their engagement in larger society.

As a final recommendation for future research, I have shown that academic lessons can be drawn from experiences of immigrants in the past regarding the process of integration. Future research can indicate how societal lessons can be drawn from their experiences, for example when ‘earlier’ immigrants share their experiences and knowledge with ‘recent’ immigrants to smooth the integration process of contemporary newcomers.

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