



## Zoom-in II

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# Plan Einstein's Narrative

Is the Plan Einstein (U-RLP) project contributing to the creation of a new narrative on the reception of refugees in Utrecht?



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# 1 Context and objectives

Perceptions and attitudes play an important role in addressing complex issues, such as migration and diversity management. In this Zoom-in, we focus specifically on **local policies in the reception of asylum-seekers and refugees**.

How public attitudes are formed and what factors influence them is a very complex issue that exceeds the objectives of this report. However, it is relevant to point out some ideas to assess whether at local level -and especially from innovative projects such as the Plan Einstein<sup>1</sup> in Utrecht- it is possible to contribute to the creation of new narratives that have an impact on public attitudes. Thus, the objectives of this zoom-in are summed up in these two questions:

- What criteria facilitate the creation of these alternative narratives?
- Is a city able to help the creation of these narratives through the promotion of policies and innovative projects like Plan Einstein of Utrecht?

It might be naive to think that a single project could make a notable contribution to such a challenge. Nevertheless, it is precisely from the cities where new perspectives and experiences can influence the creation of these narratives. This is a multilevel responsibility in which many diverse actors must participate from politics and civil society. That said, **identifying local initiatives that can serve as inspiration**, should be a necessary objective to improve the capacity to generate alternative, encompassing narratives that takes into account the evolving reality.



## 1.1 Attitudes and perceptions: some considerations

Local reception policies can support or hinder integration by influencing the social context (i.e. labour market access, social participation, urban planning and discourses that affect attitudes and perceptions).

Regarding public perceptions and attitudes on the reception of refugees, first, we witness a bidirectional relationship with policies, meaning that public perceptions and attitudes influence the discourses and policies, and in turn, the **discourses and policies influence the attitudes of citizens**. Second, they are not only the result of political discourses and policies but of multiple interrelated

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<sup>1</sup> The U-RLP project is better known in Utrecht as the Plan Einstein project.

factors, including the **Media and social networks**, the specific **context** of each territory and factors linked to **values, identity and emotions**, such as the perceptions of threat and opportunities.

Despite some segments of population with extreme positions (those who are clearly open and favourable, and those that are more hostile), the **majority of citizens have more ambivalent attitudes and perceptions**, with different levels of acceptance or rejection. This majority has a less ideological vision and their attitude may vary depending on specific issues (economy, identity, the profile of refugees, etc.).

Finally, it is important to emphasize that **attitudes** far from being stable, can suffer notable **changes** as a result of the aforementioned factors, concrete events and the consolidation of a specific narrative that influences public perceptions and attitudes.

## 1.2 The danger of consolidating negative narratives

In recent years, negative narratives about the reception of refugees have gained more space and influenced the political and social agenda. The discourse underlying this issue is reduced to a discussion on the impact on the "cultural integrity", insecurity and restricting arrivals and linked with concepts such as "crisis" or "threat".

Various political parties have contributed to disseminate this narrative through the strategy of identifying alleged offenders and appealing to emotions -such as fear- and cultural identity and repeating simple and populist messages to generate a framework of "us" and "them". These narratives, which tend to be based on distorted visions of reality, find social support in a context of growing complexities and uncertainties.

This strategy can give some political gains in the short term, but in the medium and long term it could have dangerous consequences by reinforcing prejudices and stigmatisation and thus facilitating the breeding ground from which discrimination, racism and hate are fed.

Given this narrative framework, it is essential to generate alternative narratives that emphasize positive concepts, such as rights, solidarity, responsibility, empathy or inclusion. However, experience has shown that they find it much difficult to consolidate. Then, how can we contribute to foster and promote more positive attitudes towards refugees?

## 2 Criteria for the creation of new narratives: how the Plan Einstein has followed these criteria.

Factors influencing attitudes, including narratives, have been studied extensively by different disciplines such as cognitive science, social psychology, politics or neuroscience. Besides research, experience from politics and the work done by Third sector organisations and the civil society sheds light in identifying a set of criteria to take into account when generating new narratives with impact on public perceptions and attitudes.

In this section, each criterion is explained briefly, followed by an analysis on how the Plan Einstein has taken these criteria into account – in what we will call the "project narrative". The idea is to identify concrete examples from the project that help us assess its ability to contribute to the creation of these new narratives. This report, however, is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis to measure the impact of the change of public attitudes on the reception of refugees.

## 2.1 Start from a new frame of reference

In his book "Don't Think of an Elephant" George Lakoff (2004) presented his theory of mental frames and their role in the creation of political and social narratives. According to Lakoff, **frames are mental structures that determine our way of seeing the world**. They are frames of reference that appeal to certain values, from which a set of ideas and language emerge. Moreover, without being aware of it, they influence our way of interpreting reality and what we understand by common sense. Narratives derived from these frames are used to justify concrete policies.

A frame of reference is consolidated when its language is accepted and used by many social, political and media actors, and even by those who do not agree with it. Hence, the impossibility of generating a different narrative if we do it starting from the same concepts and language that derives from the framework we want to debunk.

This is the case of the frame of reference that links the arrival of refugees with the concepts of "crisis", "massive arrival", "abuse of the system" or "insecurity". The majority of "generalist" political parties and the Media are using and normalising this frame, translating it in security and control oriented policies.

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The frame of reference of the project is composed by some key values and concepts, from which the narrative and language of the project are derived. Throughout the analysis of the different criteria, we will see examples in what concrete actions these concepts are translated.

- **Human rights:** the city of Utrecht has a long history in its commitment to human rights and, for many years, it has been promoting pioneering policies in the reception of asylum seekers and refugees. This commitment to human rights is a central element of the project's reference framework.
- **Inclusive city:** inclusion is understood from the perspective of a city for and with all people. This means that the activities of the project are not only targeted to asylum seekers and refugees, but to all the residents in the neighbourhood. In addition, the project promotes the inclusion from the very first day, and therefore, long before the resolution of asylum applications is known. The commitment to inclusion also translates in the promotion of positive interaction: first by locating the centre in the city, and not in their surroundings, and second, by organising activities in shared spaces fostering the relationship between asylum seekers and neighbourhood residents.
- **Equality:** the project has opted for an approach that emphasises the equality of status and treatment in the set of activities that are promoted, highlighting the common and shared aspects. An important message is to consider asylum seekers as citizens and neighbours who share interests, needs and concerns with the rest of the neighbours.

Apart from these more general principles, we can identify a second level of various concepts more specific to the project and that determine its narrative.

- **Starting from day one:** As we have said, the focus of the project is on starting the integration process from day one. This is a very important change from the traditional approach of not investing energy in integration until a residence permit is obtained.
- **Work in the future:** the project is based on the idea that asylum seekers and neighbours use training activities and social networks to prepare their professional future. In this sense, the

concept of **'future-free'** applied to asylum seekers is key, as it is considered necessary to rebuild their lives regardless of whether they stay in the Netherlands or return to their country of origin.

- **Contribute to society:** another key idea of the project is to change the idea of asylum seekers as people who are isolated and waiting for their case to be resolved without contributing anything to society. The project focuses on providing opportunities for their personal and professional development and for them to become active, so that, together with neighbours, they contribute actively to the host society.
- **Opportunity:** From the previous concept derives the idea of considering the reception centre for asylum seekers as an opportunity to revitalise the neighbourhood.
- **Focus on common interests:** another key idea of the project approach is to emphasise the aspects that unite and the shared interests between asylum seekers and other neighbours (being parents, wanting to learn English, appreciating the same music, etc.)

As the coordinator of the project, Niene Oepkes says: *"Through following the same courses refugees and local residents discover that they are **pretty much the same**".*

Finally, we can highlight other concepts that are also derived from the narrative of the project, such as **social progress** or the creation of an open space and a **'healthy urban living' environment**. It is an environment in which sustainable and innovative entrepreneurship can flourish and projects can emerge.

All these concepts are translated into different slogans that define the specific frame of reference of the project. Two of these most relevant and repeated messages are:

*"Living together, learning together and working together in Overvecht"*

*"Plan Einstein: building a future together"*

From these messages it follows that the concept **"together"** is one of the most important in the narrative of the project.





## 2.2 The importance of listening

Given the increase in negative public attitudes regarding the arrival of refugees, it is rare that a real effort is made to analyse the underlying concerns and causes behind these attitudes. In this line, there is a need to avoid approaches based on a distorted reality that hides and does not address real complexities.

Devoting time and effort to listen and make good diagnoses but also assuming and addressing complexities is essential to generate alternative narratives.

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Aware of the growing hostility regarding the reception of refugees, one of the key aspects when designing the project was to take into account the concerns of the neighbours before opening the centre. Through open meetings and lots of conversations and active listening, their main concerns were identified, including difficulties to access housing, especially by young people, and the lack of employment. Regarding their needs, the generation of more services, and specially social and cultural facilities for the neighbourhood was also confirmed.

Among other decisions, a part of the building was allocated to housing to local youngsters at more affordable prices. It was also decided to offer training courses (in English language and entrepreneurship) and an incubator space for both asylum seekers and neighbours and to promote cultural activities, in which all could participate.

These decisions, based on the diagnosis, have been key to counteract hostile and negative perceptions from some neighbours regarding the opening of the centre. Sometimes, the concern about the possible reaction of the minority with more negative attitudes prevents listening and attending to the concerns of the majority.

The project coordinators have not shared the idea that all the neighbours were delighted with the centre and with the possibility of interacting with asylum seekers. Indeed, they have been very cautious to avoid a distorted image of reality that could provoke reactions of greater rejection. Rather they have opted for reality to be imposed, creating a narrative that emphasises the positive aspects but without hiding complexities. In any case, it is important to note that during this time, there have been no hostile reactions, protests or coexistence conflicts related to the opening of the centre, quite the opposite.

## 2.3 Proactive attitude and shared responsibility

It is necessary to adopt a proactive and 'leadership' attitude to set the agenda from a new approach, based on different values and ideas. If we simply react or denounce the ideas of the negative narrative, we will surely end up reinforcing that framework, even if we pretend otherwise. Political commitment would favour this proactive attitude.

Many political and social actors consider that contributing to generate alternative narratives is alien to them. There are those who believe that it is not worth investing in this effort because it is too complex and they do not feel qualified; there are those who prefer to give up creating a narrative because the cost can be higher than the benefit (for example electoral) and prefer to focus on specific policies and not enter into the debate of ideas proactively; and finally there are all those who have not yet realised the importance of this issue.

Responsibility for creating alternative narratives is collective; governments, civil society, media and citizens all have key roles to play. The risk of giving up that responsibility, leaving all space to those who are very clear about how to occupy it with negative and populist approaches, is too high.

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Both at a political and technical level, importance has been given to the objective of creating a new narrative, coherent and in line with the work that has been done for years in the city. However, this does not mean that the project had a defined strategy for this, from the perspective of working on the contents and planning the messages in detail for different audiences and contexts.

Nevertheless, over time, a greater effort has been made to reach a consensus among all the partners on a shared vision and discourse, so that the messages disseminated would be similar and coherent with the "narrative of the project". Moreover, it has an original and innovative focus, with very clear ideas that have generated interest and facilitated its dissemination. It proposes an important paradigm shift on the reception of asylum seekers, based on a different and proactive approach: it does not seek to reverse a previous and existing situation of segregation, but rather to avoid it from the very beginning.

In this sense, the political commitment on the part of the local government has been key, as well as the involvement and participation of a wide range of social actors.

## **2.4 Engagement, cooperation and flexibility**

One of the main weaknesses, when generating new narratives, is the inability to reach consensus among very diverse actors in society. It is very common to put more emphasis on differences and nuances than on the values and basic ideas that are shared, which causes dispersion and a lack of real impact. This happens often both at the political level and among civil society actors.

If we want to have a real impact, it is essential that we are able to add a large number of actors, beyond the "usual suspects" who actively collaborate on a common and shared goal. In this sense, spaces and opportunities at community level must be promoted so that these actors can contribute from their own areas of experience, and that favour flexibility, creativity and networking.

#### **PLAN EINSTEIN:**

The project is based on the addition and cooperation of very diverse actors from civil society, together with the city council. In addition, during the implementation of the project, new social actors have been added that have allowed enriching and expanding the network of actors that have been linked and have contributed in some way to the project. Different social, cultural or sports organisations, other universities and social actors have been attracted by the innovative and stimulating approach of the project.

In addition, the leadership of the project has opted for a management system that gives a lot of freedom and autonomy to the actors to propose and promote new ideas and initiatives.

Often, many projects that are led from a perspective focused on control and hierarchy, limit creativity and the more organic and spontaneous development of new initiatives. In this case, a more horizontal rather than vertical management approach and the willingness to add new allies along the way have allowed its innovative approach to spread to various areas of society.

We can highlight here just one of the many examples that have taken place, which have to do with the involvement of the Centraal Museum of Utrecht.



Every six months, the museum asks a group of residents of the city to give a reflection on the collection. This time, in collaboration with Welcome to Utrecht and Plan Einstein, the museum asked residents of the Overvecht district and six residents of AZC Einstein. In pairs of two, they sought out a work of art for each other in the Centraal Museum. The conversations that led to this choice have been recorded and contain special stories. The interviews were presented for the first time in the presence of local politicians and the results could be seen and heard at the reception centre and the Centraal Museum.

There are many more examples that show the large number of social, cultural, educative and sports organisations that have collaborated and participated in some way in activities related to the project. These activities have fostered the inclusion process and helped to spread a different and more positive narrative.

## 2.5 From prejudices to common interests and positive interaction

The tendency of the brain to categorise social groups through stereotypes hinders our ability to perceive social complexity and diversity. Prejudices play a key role in our way of interpreting reality, and can lead us to more easily accept negative discourses about stereotyped social groups.

**Physical and mental segregation is one of the main barriers to generating truly inclusive narratives and a sense of shared belonging.** Therefore, in order to build an alternative narrative we would aim at promoting critical thinking and at facilitating "productive" daily encounters.

Following Allport intergroup contact theory (1954), for these interactions to positively contribute to generating a different narrative, some circumstances have to be given, such as equal status, common goals and a climate conducive to cooperation.

### PLAN EINSTEIN:

From the outset, the project has focused on creating spaces and opportunities for interaction, encounter and also cooperation between asylum seekers and neighbours. Regardless of the number and intensity of these relationships, it is evident that compared to other reception centres, Plan Einstein has generated a social environment, in which these encounters have been much richer and more productive than in other centres.

The fact that youngsters from the neighbourhood lived in the same building as the asylum seekers made it easier from the outset to have encounters and relationships between them. Some dynamics, such as the organisation of a weekly meal together, also facilitated to create an atmosphere conducive to these encounters.

On the other hand, the fact that some asylum seekers went to English or entrepreneurship courses with other neighbours has also facilitated the creation of these relationships and social networks. But also the activities that have energized the youngsters themselves and the number of activities that have promoted different local actors such as Welcome to Utrecht, have created this atmosphere of social community and open space for meeting and mutual knowledge. From language cafés, to sports activities, gardening, theatre, music or collaborating together in the new design of the open space of the centre among many others.

As Johan Van Doorn, an Overvecht neighbour said: *"The course I've followed here, on entrepreneurship that's make me come in contact with refugees. At the first moment I was thinking... ooh what is that going to be? But I was very surprised, they are very nice people and I have some friends among them now".*

This reality favours knowledge and breaks stereotypes and prejudices and helps to counteract negative narratives. This is not to say that all asylum seekers and neighbours were participating in the activities. One cannot give the impression that everyone was delighted and making friends. However, even for those who did not experience such encounters, living in an open and facilitating environment changes perceptions and reduces mental distance and distrust.

As Olivier, a Dutch student who lived in the centre said; *“is always easy to judge without knowing what is really going on. But people should invest time to find out what is happening here. Then you’re free to judge, but don’t scream without knowing what is going on.”*



## 2.6 Adaptation to the context and to different audiences

As we have already pointed out, the narrative must be based on clear values and ideas that can reach many people. In order to achieve that in an efficient way, it must be able to adapt to different contexts, profiles and communication channels. A message will have a different impact depending on who is the messenger or the means: a political speech, a face-to-face conversation, a message on social networks or an article in a newspaper.

### PLAN EINSTEIN:

Some elements of the project have facilitated this ability to adapt the discourse to different contexts and audiences. Firstly, the diversity of the project partners has been fundamental, allowing it to reach very different fields and contexts: voluntary organisations, with universities, with professionals in the field of entrepreneurship or with youth associations.

Secondly, the different activities in different fields have allowed the construction of a narrative in everyday life: from the experience of young people residing in the centre and their relations with asylum seekers; from the experiences of the neighbours and asylum seekers themselves in sharing training courses and activities; in the organisation of academic seminars; in political debates at local and national level; and obviously through the media and social networks.

It is still too early to assess how the project approach has spread in all these areas and whether this has contributed to generating a shared and coherent narrative of the project, with the capacity to contribute to generating a new narrative. However, there are not a few examples that lead us to think that this project has had a notable impact in conveying an innovative and different message to very different audiences.

One example of how to reach different audiences in an original way, that also reinforces the importance of attracting very diverse actors, comes from the theatre field. The WijkSafari is a theatre project with the aim that the “public” knows better the reality of different neighbours of the city. In this case, the project consisted of some people living for two weeks in the asylum seekers' centre and then explaining their personal experiences to the theatre group. Based on these stories, the theatre company designs a route through the neighbourhood in which local youngsters accompany the public on scooters, attending different performances in various spaces and come into contact with asylum seekers and neighbours.

One participant says: *“The neighbourhood safari is love. It starts with the warm manners of initiator and director Adelheid Roosen and her dramaturge Lauren Rissik and runs through all walks of life, from actors, local residents, volunteers and scooters. It leads to theatre, organised to bring the visitor into contact with the other, the unknown. Because as a spectator/participant you come to strange people's homes to hear their stories and talk to them. This theatrical intimacy creates a wonderful, overwhelming sensation”*.

Another example of how to reach wider audiences is Radio Einstein (<https://www.radioeinstein.nl/>). An initiative of Stut Theater and Theatergroep Vreemde Vis, is a radio studio located in the reception centre (now moved to the Haydn Centre) with asylum seekers as reporters, experience experts and storytellers.

*“An asylum seekers' centre. Do you ever wonder what is going on there? Who lives there? What are their stories? What do their days look like? Listen to Radio Einstein for an answer to these questions and more! In 30 short episodes you can listen to the residents of this place. Listen to their special stories about home, music from faraway places and everyday talk.”*



## 2.7 Beyond data and rational arguments: visibility and the power of stories

Another fundamental mistake is to believe that in order to dismantle the ideas that emerge from a narrative, it is enough to offer data and rational arguments that contradict it. The evidence shows that people do not change their beliefs simply because of objective data and rational arguments. In contrast, we are more likely to adjust reality to our beliefs than vice versa. For data and arguments to generate changes in our way of thinking, it has to be able to fit into our way of seeing the world, which is marked by our identity, values and emotions.

Currently on Internet, we have access to all kinds of arguments that reinforce our ideas (even if we believe that the earth is flat, we can find a wide variety of "scientific" research that "demonstrates" it). Also, social networks filter the information so that we receive the one that best suits our way of thinking.

Moreover, data and arguments are not only insufficient, but according to how they are exposed, they can be counterproductive and further strengthen our beliefs. To have an impact, **emotions must be incorporated, and we would need to be able to generate solid but stimulating arguments.**

An effective way to convey ideas and concepts with a greater impact is through stories that include emotions and personal experiences. Our ability to retain information is very limited, and it has been shown that we remember much more the content of a story than a set of data and arguments, no matter how rigorous they may be.

Similarly, it is very important to promote the visibility of refugees and the diversity of profiles in order to break stereotypes and avoid the process of dehumanisation that stems from ignorance, prejudices and the dangerous narratives that reinforce this message.

#### PLAN EINSTEIN:

The project coordinators and partners were aware of the importance of the stories and of making the reality visible through the testimonies of the asylum seekers themselves but also of the young people, neighbours and professionals involved. The testimonies and stories of the protagonists have been disseminated through social networks, the production of videos, interviews, presentations in various events and as well, as we have seen, through radio.

These testimonies allow a more personal message to be conveyed and make visible the diversity of profiles and trajectories of asylum seekers, such as that of Dimah Kadre a Syrian refugee who lived in the centre and asked what she thought about the project in an interview, said: *"I think it could be difficult for refugees to live without this kind of project: it would be hard to build any network and meet new people. This kind of initiative really helps us to integrate into the country."*

Another refugee: *"What is special about this reception location is that we live in a residential district, among local people. People chat with us when we meet them in the street and in the shop. We share a home environment with young people and other asylum seekers. We often eat with one another, make music together and follow the same courses. Here we no longer feel like foreigners or strangers, like in the other reception centres. We just belong and that gives us a nice and safe feeling. Like our lives are no longer on hold and we can again build on our future."*





There are also several success stories in the Plan Einstein, such as Dimah's case, who has started college fulfilling her dream of studying international law, or Johan, a local neighbour who has started his own business, and even a local youngster who joined the project has become actively involved in politics.

It is also important to share and disseminate the testimonies of the professionals involved in the project, such as Maaïke Wit, who was teaching entrepreneurship lessons: *"It's not me helping them and them having to say 'thank you'. It really becomes cooperation and everyone has a responsibility and feels ownership to be here. I like a lot that I'm part of it and that I learn a lot about my own city but also speak to people from all over the world."*

Surely, the most symbolic cases and related to the change of attitudes are those of neighbours who recognised that at the beginning they were critical of the opening of the centre and after having participated in some activities, they showed a change of attitude and even commented that they were saddened by the closure of the centre, as one local neighbour admitted on a national television interview.

Obviously, these cases cannot be generalised, but precisely because the positive cases are hardly visible or known and in reality are much more common than we might think, it is so important to disseminate them.

## 2.8 Inclusive, positive and honest approach

Narratives will be more effective if they are inclusive and addressed to the whole society based on shared values and interests. If citizens' perceptions are that this new narrative is targeted just to a certain social group (refugees, people with a specific ideological position, etc.), it will not be able to influence that majority with more ambivalent positions.

In addition, it must provide a positive vision, avoiding blaming or considering the majority as ignorant and racist and falling into an approach that reinforces the idea of "us" and "them".

Moreover, the approach must be honest and based on what we really believe. The opposite would be to fall into the trap of manipulation, creating a narrative that is not coherent not only with what we believe but also with what we do. That means that the narrative has to be supported by concrete policies that fit this frame, otherwise we would be using the same strategies that we want to avoid.

### PLAN EINSTEIN:

As we have already pointed out, the project aimed not only at facilitating the integration of asylum seekers, but also to understand the opening of the emergency reception centre as an opportunity for the neighbourhood.

It is a clear example of an inclusive and positive approach, by changing the paradigm of what was meant by a reception centre (a closed and segregated space, in which asylum-seekers concentrate and wait for their application resolution, with little contact with the host society). The positive approach is also related to defending the idea that this centre can be an opportunity for the neighbourhood by, for instance, offering cheaper housing to local youngsters and free training activities to all neighbours.

In words of Dimah Kadre: *"Being in Plan Einstein, meeting the people in the neighbourhood, learning and spending time together, has changed my life... We feel like we are neighbours, not refugees."*

In terms of the honesty of the project's approach, it is evident that its goals and implementation comes from a strong political commitment, coherent with the other past and present policies of the city in this field. It is also true that the financing of the European Union's UIA Initiative has been fundamental

to promotion, but it is also important to point out that the project will continue with municipal funds. This demonstrates, on the one hand, the sustainability of the project and, on the other hand, the commitment of the local government.

Another thing is the degree of success and impact of the project, and the need not to spread a message that does not include critical analysis to learn from the experience.

No doubt the main complexity has to do with the differences in approach (determined by different policy frameworks) between the city and the state government. This is where we can find differences in priorities or important aspects of the approach, which can make it difficult to scale up the project keeping its key principles, in other centres and cities in the country.

## 2.9 The difficulty of counteracting the simple from the complex

Another challenge we encounter when creating new narratives is that usually negative narratives are based on simple ideas, with an emotional component and that do not care much about the rigour of the arguments. However, reality is more complex and requires a greater effort to incorporate nuances and visions.

Nowadays, it is prioritised to consume short messages that are easy to understand. Even the most rigorous media sources tend to simplify messages to get a bigger audience. If we oversimplify the messages, we fall into the trap and contribute to aggravate the problem, but if we only share long and complex messages it will hardly reach many people. Finding an effective balance is one of the great challenges.

### PLAN EINSTEIN:

We have seen that promoting meeting spaces, making reality and diversity visible or sharing stories and testimonies are useful strategies for the creation of a new narrative. However, we also know that in order to reach wider audiences and through different channels such as social networks or the media, it is important to be able to transfer these experiences through simpler and more direct messages.

In this sense, probably the messages that have reached a wider public the most is the idea that asylum seekers and young people from the neighbourhood were living in the same building and also that they participated in training courses with local neighbours.

Although it is not always easy to synthesize the narrative framework that supports the project, in this case there are these innovative elements that arouse the curiosity and interest of people and the media for their novelty. This is an opportunity that must be seized to make an effort and be able to convey in a few words the most relevant and effective messages for the consolidation of the narrative of the project.

This is a responsibility shared by the political leaders and by those responsible for the project and the set of actors involved. If we look at the content of brochures, messages on networks, websites and speeches in public presentations, the messages that have best simplified the key ideas of the project have been those that we commented on at the beginning and that put the emphasis on "living together, learning together and working together" and "building a future together". Other messages are along the lines of stressing that "we are all neighbours", or putting emphasis on common interests, on the diversity of profiles and talents of asylum seekers, their contribution in many different tasks or that the centre is an open and dynamic space for the neighbourhood, are also messages that allow us to counteract narratives based on false rumours, ignorance and prejudices.



Finally, we cannot forget a message that although it is more “negative”, sometimes has an important impact, such as pointing out the absence of conflicts and the normality with which the opening of the centre has been lived in the neighbourhood.

## 2.10 Repeat, repeat and... repeat

For a frame of reference and a specific narrative to be consolidated, it is essential that people become "familiar" with it. This has to do with the previous point of simplicity and complexity, and with the need to incorporate emotions, but also with a key aspect: repetition. Although people could agree with a certain message, if we only hear it a few times and instead receive the impact of an opposite message repeated a hundred times, we will end up believing the most repeated message.

### PLAN EINSTEIN:

This point is very much related to the previous one. However, it is one thing to identify some simpler and more direct messages that we consider to be more effective, and another to follow the conscious strategy of repetition.

As we have said, the innovative nature of the project makes this task a little easier, as there are two or three very essential ideas that are those that normally stand out and are therefore repeated more. But it is not possible to assess at this point (nor is it the aim of this zoom-in) whether the repetition of key ideas has had an impact on perceptions and attitudes. In any case, analysing the different sources of information, it does appear that in comparison with other projects a high level of repetition of the key messages has been identified.

If we look at the content of several news and content appeared in the media and websites of different organisations about the project, we can identify some ideas as the most repeated:

- <https://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/westenmiddennederland/plan-einstein>  
“Plan Einstein is a project in which living together, learning together and working together are central. The project is for local residents and refugees who do not yet have a residence permit, but who have been working on their future since day 1.”
- <https://www.ad.nl/utrecht/asielzoekers-opvangen-het-utrechtse-plan-einstein-maakt-iedereen-blij~ab7d3677/?referrer=https://www.google.com/>  
The Utrecht 'Plan Einstein' makes everyone happy. The cooperation between asylum seekers and local residents in the asylum seekers' centre on the Einsteindreef in the Utrecht district of Overvecht...
- <https://utrecht.nieuws.nl/stadsnieuws/68256/werkwijze-plan-einstein-ook-azc-joseph-haydnlaan/>  
Plan Einstein is a combined form of housing in which young people form a community with asylum seekers. Asylum seekers are encouraged to be active from day one, together with local residents.
- <https://www.uu.nl/en/news/words-of-praise-for-plan-einstein-at-vluchtelingenwerk-awards>  
Plan Einstein is a project of the City of Utrecht and partners such as University of Utrecht to improve integration and accommodation for asylum seekers. Living and learning together from day 1: that's what makes Plan Einstein innovative.

- <https://nos.nl/artikel/2194464-jongeren-en-vluchtelingen-een-grote-familie-in-azc-overvecht.html>  
Young people and refugees 'one big family' in AZC Overvecht
- <https://indebuurt.nl/utrecht/gids/plan-einstein/>  
Living in Plan Einstein is more than living alone. This new housing project of Socius Wonen with 35 rooms will be in the same building as the refugee shelter at Einsteindreef 101.
- [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/newsroom/news/2018/05/23-05-2018-euronews-integrating-migrants-and-refugees-project-in-utrecht](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/news/2018/05/23-05-2018-euronews-integrating-migrants-and-refugees-project-in-utrecht)  
It provides an inclusive approach to facilitating integration from day 1 by introducing a shared living concept in which local young people and asylum seekers live together.
- <https://www.euronews.com/2018/05/23/breaking-down-barriers-between-locals-and-refugees-in-utrecht>  
Breaking down barriers between locals and refugees in Utrecht
- <http://healthybitesutrecht.blogspot.com/2019/05/plan-einstein.html>  
In 2016, Plan Einstein saw the light aiming to create a social environment where local youngsters and refugees live together, learn together and work together.

### 3 Some unexpected impacts

We have set the criteria that could facilitate the creation of new narratives and briefly analysed how the project has met those criteria. However, it is not possible yet to provide a real analysis of the impact of the project's narrative in relation to a possible change in the neighbours' attitudes. In this sense, it will be very interesting to know the results of the final evaluation of the project carried out by a group of experts.

It takes a long time to analyse these possible changes. Nevertheless, the aim of this Zoom-in was mainly to focus on the process and to assess whether or not the project could be contributing to generating a new narrative. This will depend on many factors: the evolution, sustainability and possible expansion of the project; the set of policies promoted by the city that can undoubtedly reinforce the narrative; and "external" factors, such as the evolution of the country's political situation, the possible increase in populist narratives or the arrival of more refugees.

However, we would like to highlight some indirect or unexpected and short-term impacts that can help us to assess whether the project is on the right track to contribute to this goal.

The examples of these impacts are classified into three categories or areas, which are key to the construction of new narratives: the political sphere, the civil society and the Media.

#### 3.1 Political level

In the municipality of Utrecht there has been the same political trend for some 15 years (left-green) and this has facilitated the sustainability of a certain approach over time, which indeed, it is focused on human rights, inclusion and integration policies. Thus, we can argue that at the local level there is a fairly broad consensus on these issues.

Please find below some indicators that show the impact of the project's approach and narrative on other policy areas and levels:

## 1) National policies

During these years, the political colour of the central government has been different from the local one, and this has translated into the existence of clear differences in the approaches of the reception and integration policies. However, Plan Einstein has allowed a greater rapprochement in the positions that have been concretised in some measures that demonstrate the influence of the project in state policies.

### *The expansion and adaptation of the model in other reception centres for asylum seekers*

In the Netherlands, policies for the reception of asylum seekers are the responsibility of the state and are managed through the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA). The COA is an independent administrative body and is the political responsibility of the State Secretary for Justice and Security.

It is important to note that the most proactive role of the Utrecht City Council in intervening in the reception of asylum seekers through the Plan Einstein has been thanks to the EU Initiative Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) that has funded the project, together with municipal funding.

The COA has collaborated with the Plan Einstein, and thanks to the positive experience, has decided to adapt the project approach to other reception centres in the country. This is undoubtedly a positive result of the impact of the project and has been translated so far in the adaptation of the model to another city centre (Haydn). Many of the actors involved in the Plan Einstein continue to work in the Haydn centre. However, the conditions are different and without the umbrella of the European Initiative, the relationships and competences in deciding how to adapt the approach are more complex, and the COA has much more decision-making capacity. There are some relevant differences in how to adapt the model in this centre, but without going into the complexities of this process, which have been more detailed in the [project journals](#), it is unquestionable that the Plan Einstein has managed to influence state policies. Nowadays, the idea of starting the inclusion process from day one and the need to link asylum seekers with the host society are two approaches that have been incorporated into the state policy approach. Although it is still too early to assess the level and real impact of this influence, this is a good indicator on the influence of the narrative of the project.

## 2) Parliamentary support

Another very important impact is the motion passed in the Dutch parliament, with the support of the vast majority of political parties, on the need to adopt the project's approach in all reception centres for asylum seekers.

*“Motion by Segers/Paternotte on the use of the concept of Plan Einstein.*

*Noting that the Cabinet is committed to intensive civic integration from day one; noting that good experiences have been gained in Utrecht with Plan Einstein, an open asylum seekers' centre with mixed accommodation and a wide range of activities and courses for the entire neighbourhood; whereas such innovative concepts contribute to civic integration and activation, and at the same time ensure meeting and involvement; asks the government, together with municipalities and COA, to examine whether the Plan Einstein concept can be used in more places in the Netherlands, both for existing and new asylum seekers' centres, and to inform the House of Representatives about this before the summer of 2019”<sup>2</sup>*

We see how the text of the motion clearly specifies the main principles of the project approach. It is very remarkable that a local project has achieved such broad recognition from all political positions in

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.parlementairemonitor.nl/9353000/1/j9vvij5epmj1ey0/vktmd1gyerzm#p1>

the country. Obviously, it is up to national government to open up to this initiative from the local government and their close relationship with grassroots civil society.

### **3) European and international impact**

Finally, it is important to highlight the impact that the project has had at European and international level.

The city has received many requests from European cities to get to know the project better and participate in various forums to present their experience. The Eurocities Social Forum that took place in 2018 in the city helped in the dissemination of the project by organising a visit to the centre with the participation of policy makers from different cities. A delegation from Australia also visited the project and the fact that the project was funded by the UIA Initiative constitutes another important dissemination platform.

Other international networks of cities have also been very interested in the project, such as the *Intercultural Cities* programme of the Council of Europe or the organisation Welcome in America, which works with many cities around the world on policies for welcoming immigrants.

## **3.2 Civil Society**

To consolidate a narrative is not enough with the discourse and public policies. It is necessary for this narrative to be compatible with and constructed by a large number of different actors in civil society. We have already explained in the previous sections that in addition to the project partners, many organisations, actors in the social, cultural, sports and even economic fields, have collaborated in different activities, sharing the focus and objectives of the project.

The number of volunteers, who wanted to participate in the activities of the Plan Einstein, was much higher than in other reception centres, demonstrating the importance of providing stimulating and concrete spaces and opportunities to participate.

This has contributed to involve asylum seekers in different activities and tasks, allowing them to improve their employability and generate social networks. Moreover, this has also allowed the local population and different organisations to get closer and better know the reality of asylum seekers and to develop activities that have contributed to enrich and energise the social and cultural life of the city.

To counteract prejudices related with the fact that migrants lack interest on integration and do not want to contribute to the society, Plan Einstein puts this assumption upside down showing ways in which refugees or asylum seekers do contribute. In cooperation with Welcome to Utrecht, asylum seekers and refugees have been involved in translation and support tasks, and even becoming trainer themselves (as it is the case of a Syrian and a Yemeni who started giving computer lessons in the centre). In addition, different museums have also been involved. This is the case of the old Catholic museum of the city that has organised group visits mixing local visitors with Eritrean refugees. The Orthodox Coptic Church of Eritrea has many paintings similar to those in the museum and they talk and learn together about art and these similarities.

Another important outcome has been the decision made by the Utrecht University to open up a wide selection of modules where some refugees main join the regular students. The students/asylum seekers do much to highlight the Plan Einstein narrative. They turn into ambassadors of the narrative, just as the neighbourhood created their own ambassadors, such as the theatre folk and the musicians.

From the point of view of the objective of this Zoom-in, what is important is not only the engagement of the civil society, but that the activities it promotes are coherent with the main concepts of the

narrative framework. Especially, the importance given to generate spaces for encounter, exchange, knowledge and cooperation between asylum seekers and the neighbours, and placing the emphasis on opportunities.

### 3.3 Media

Finally, we cannot fail to comment on some questions about the impact of the project in the media and which are very important in the dissemination of a narrative.

In this sense, we have to emphasize that those responsible for the project did not want to put a focus of attention on the project. Conscious of the sensitivities that the project aroused in many neighbours, it was preferred to focus on a time in the construction the social community without exposing the project to excessive media attention.

However, as the project progressed it was obvious that it attracted media attention. Without having a well-defined communication strategy, coordination between the partners was worked out in order to convey a coherent and shared vision and narrative. We can say that the result of the project's impact on the media has been very positive.

In the section dedicated to the importance of repetition we have already highlighted several examples of news about the project, and the vast majority have positively highlighted the approach and principles of the project. Newspapers, televisions, radios... provided a great variety of news and articles with a positive vision of the project, and practically none in negative.

The important thing about this question is that it confirms some ideas. Often from the field of reception and integration policies, the media are blamed for offering a negative, distorted and stereotyped view of reality. Although in many cases this may happen, it is also true that when different, innovative and positive content is "offered" and that breaks down many preconceived ideas, it is possible to have a more positive coverage in the media. The message of living together, learning together and working together is engaging and attractive, although not everyone can agree.

Furthermore, this impact has helped to reinforce the image of the city as an innovative and pioneering city at European level on these issues. Undoubtedly, the positive impact of the project in the media is one of the most interesting indicators to assess the possible impact on the construction of a narrative that positively influences the perceptions and attitudes of the population.

## 4 Conclusions

In this Zoom-in we have tried to analyse the potential of the Plan Einstein project to generate a new narrative on the reception of asylum seekers and refugees in a context where negative narratives favouring fear or hostility have recently gained ground.

For this purpose, we have identified ten criteria that should be taken into account when creating effective narratives with impact on perceptions and attitudes, and we have analysed, whether the project was heading in the right direction. Based on this analysis, we highlight some conclusions:

- The innovative approach of the project involved a change in the paradigm of reception policies in the country's reception centres, moving from a segregating and passive approach to an **inclusive and proactive** one. This required political commitment, creativity and even courage.

- The project evidences the fundamental role of the local sphere, both of public policies and of the civil society, together with the need to generate environments of **collaboration and cooperation** between different actors and levels of government.
- Although there was no planned strategy on how to incorporate the narrative construction into the development of the project, its focus and characteristics have allowed the main messages to reach a **wide and diverse** audience.
- The project's frame of reference, determined by a set of well-established values, clear and innovative ideas, has facilitated the construction of a **positive and alternative** narrative and the positive impacts at the political, civil society and media levels.

One of the key aspects when designing the project was to take into account the concerns of the neighbours before opening the centre. This diagnosis led to the decision of allocating housing to local youngsters in the centre and offering training courses to both asylum seekers and neighbours. This allowed to counteract hostile and negative perceptions regarding the opening of the centre while fostering positive interaction and opportunities for personal and professional development, and creating a social and dynamic atmosphere. These "productive" daily encounters, together with the promotion of critical thinking have been key to build truly inclusive narratives and a sense of shared belonging.

Knowing that data and arguments are not sufficient to have an impact in changing perceptions, emotions must be incorporated, and Plan Einstein did that by sharing stories and testimonies. Similarly, the project promoted the visibility of refugees and the diversity of profiles in order to break stereotypes and avoid the process of dehumanisation.

Finally, the steps taken so far and some unexpected early impacts such as the adaptation of the project approach to other reception centres, a motion passed in the Dutch parliament, and the growing interest from European and international organisations and cities in the project, lead us to conclude that the project has already made a very relevant contribution in the construction of new narratives. It is still too early to assess its real impact in the medium and long term, and for this reason, it is important that all the actors involved take advantage of this opportunity to join forces and combine the energies in order to continue reinforcing and consolidating these narratives.







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Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) is an Initiative of the European Union that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges. Based on article 8 of ERDF, the Initiative has a total ERDF budget of EUR 372 million for 2014-2020.

UIA projects will produce a wealth of knowledge stemming from the implementation of the innovative solutions for sustainable urban development that are of interest for city practitioners and stakeholders across the EU. This Zoom-in, written by a UIA Expert, captures and disseminates the lessons learnt from the project implementation and the good practices identified. It is part of the capitalisation and dissemination activities of the UIA – Urban Innovative Actions Initiative.