

MICOLL – MIGRATION AND HOUSING

Meeting refugees' housing needs through collaborative housing programmes



A Cross-Country Transition Agenda for Innovative Collaborative Housing with Refugees

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1. Background

For refugees, finding affordable and adequate housing in European cities is a major challenge, alongside restricted economic opportunities and social marginality (UNECE 2017). Mainstream housing sectors insufficiently cater to the needs of people with migrant and especially refugee backgrounds (Aigner 2019; Brown et al. 2022). Nevertheless, adequate housing and stable neighborhoods are central to successful societal participation of refugees (UN Habitat 2014).

Across Europe, collaborative housing projects have proven their ability to establish inclusive, participatory and also affordable living environments in specific places (LaFond & Tsvetkova 2017; Czischke & Huisman 2018). Collaborative housing (CH) is an umbrella term for a range of international housing models with a high degree of social interaction among its residents. Resident collaboration usually takes place throughout the different stages of the housing project – from planning to daily management activities. While CH exists in different house and tenure types, it usually contains shared common facilities (Fromm 2012; Czischke et al. 2020). Moreover, CH initiatives actively promote a sustainable lifestyle, supported by the application of novel organizational models and alternative technologies, e.g. in construction, energy or mobility. Yet, the field is still widely unknown to the public and there is still a lack of key professional areas that would be needed for stable field growth such as financiers, architects, property developers as well as governmental funding agencies (Boyer 2018; Lang et al. 2020).

Against this background, the international research project MICOLL explores the potential of CH for the integration of migrants and especially refugees in Austria, Sweden and UK.

To address this goal, the project applied a transition management lens to critically examine CH for refugees as an emerging niche and its potential to develop into a future, more upscaled housing regime (Loorbach 2010). Transition management generally puts a focus on stakeholder participation for transformative societal change towards sustainability. In MICOLL, we particularly emphasize social inclusion aspects of sustainability given our target group of migrants and refugees. Transition management represents an action-oriented framework to guide transition activities on different interlinked levels.

First, strategic activities are aimed at engaging with complex societal problems that trigger CH as a potential solution. This happens through envisioning, problem structuring and establishing a “transition arena” (Loorbach 2010: 172). *Second*, tactical activities relate to a particular societal subsystem – in our case migrant and refugee housing – entailing negotiation and collaboration of stakeholders towards a joint “transition agenda” (Loorbach 2010: 172). *Third*, operational activities refer to experiments and actions within the CH niche to support social learning, on the

basis that a “convincing application (...) will trigger further adoption on a broader basis” (Huber 2004: 233).

The focus of this paper is the tactical level and the development of a transition agenda for CH with migrants and especially refugees.

2. Method

In the initial stage of MICOLL, we carried out a systematic literature review to analyse the current state of research at the intersection of CH, migration and societal transitions, focused on studies in the European context (Lang & Fernández Arrigoitia 2022). Results were categorized into three main themes in accordance with the transition management lens (Loorbach 2010). Thus, on the strategic level, the literature review delivers insights into the societal problems as well as opportunities of migrant and refugee integration in and through housing. Key results on the tactical included the identification of relevant CH niche-level stakeholders involved in transitions. Finally, the analysis provided evidence on the operational level about selected CH experiments in different places and their transition potential.

The initial findings of the literature review informed the organisation of national collaborative stakeholder workshops¹ – online as well as on site. Further international workshops² were organised to bring together key national stakeholders. Workshop participants came from different fields, sectors and institutions, such as local authority departments responsible for refugee housing, refugee housing intermediaries from the non-profit and civil society sector as well as representatives of social housing and CH sectors, including refugee CH project pioneers and champions. Among these stakeholders were “frontrunners” (Loorbach 2010: 172) who represent crucial actors to be involved in a transition management process because they actively promote societal transitions towards sustainability. In line with Loorbach’s approach (2010), the frontrunners involved in our MICOLL workshops represented key promoters of advancement and scaling-up of collaborative and inclusive housing solutions that explicitly address the societal integration of migrants and refugees. Thus, the collaborative stakeholder workshops organised in MICOLL helped establish a transition arena within and across the three participating countries, i.e. an open, web-based network of innovative individuals (Van Buuren and Loorbach 2009; Loorbach 2010).

Informed by the results of the literature review, an important goal of the stakeholder workshops was to help structuring the identified problems and opportunities on the

¹ National collaborative stakeholder workshops took place, for instance, on 08/09/21 (Austria), 02/09/21 (Sweden), and 30/09/21 (UK).

² International collaborative stakeholder workshops were held on 01/01/22 (online), 31/08/22 (Barcelona, Spain) and 20/10/22 (Bergsjön, Sweden).

societal level which represent guidelines for our transition agenda for CH with migrants and especially refugees to be introduced in the subsequent sections. In line with Loorbach (2010), we understand a transition agenda is a compass for key stakeholders and frontrunners that contains a series of actions points to achieve a transition from the current state of the system of housing for migrants and refugees to a desired more inclusive and sustainable system that draws on CH solutions. The recommended actions should guide stakeholders during the transition process and help overcome structural challenges to develop CH in the desired direction. However, the transition agenda is not a fixed plan but needs to be adapted to changing circumstances and new learning over time. Therefore, monitoring and evaluating progress is critical to the success of the transition process.

3. Advocating for changes to the institutional framework for housing and urban development

The first thematic area focuses on challenges and corresponding action points regarding policy interventions, as well as public perception of CH with migrants and refugees. The engagement with policymakers is an important part of any transition process. This requires joint action by stakeholders of the transition arena to advocate for policy changes such as for land allocation, zoning regulations and funding. Interventions aim at embedding CH as a mainstream approach to migrant and refugee housing in relevant institutions, policies and legislation.

3.1 Challenges

- In all three participating countries we find a lack of awareness and knowledge about existing CH options in the population at large as well as among the target group of migrants and refugees. There is also suspicion towards bottom-up processes, co-creation and co-governance.
- Widespread negative societal attitudes about migrants and refugees play into this type of CH (e.g. it triggers models, might entrench segregation in the area and influence residents' perception).
- Public support structures for inclusive CH models are underdeveloped, e.g. in terms of legislation, funding and planning mechanisms. The existing municipal support structures vary between the different participating countries.
- There is especially little support from English local authorities for CH models, also due to housing shortages and budget constraints. Swedish municipalities dispose of favourable planning and policy instruments, but

lack of will to apply them to support CH projects. Therefore, in these two country contexts, CH often means slow self-building with little if any public support, mainly relying on self-financing and private ownership models.

- In contrast, Vienna has provided support for CH through subsidised land allocation and rental schemes for vulnerable resident groups. Consequently, new CH initiatives targeting migrants and residents can still build on certain links to municipal and third sector support structures in housing and welfare. However, current supply of CH through these means is rather stagnating and future supply not guaranteed.
- Housing finance systems are a major barrier to develop CH projects in all three participating countries. Resident groups usually do not have the necessary expertise and are often unable to access sufficient financial resources themselves to start a CH project. In the Viennese context, resident groups can at least reach out to non-profit housing associations in order to access public funding for construction, including for communal spaces, process facilitation and capacity building. In Swedish and English municipalities, however the public financing options for CH are more complicated and with the target group of vulnerable residents can be even impossible. Banks and the financial market are basically inexperienced with CH housing models.
- The availability of land at an affordable cost is a major challenge in the context of CH with vulnerable groups who mostly have to operate within a largely market-driven housing provision system. Municipalities often have the possibility to provide building sites to CH groups but for different reasons they are reluctant to do so. In many places, such as in English municipalities, land allocation usually works according to the principle of maximising the financial value of land which clearly favours commercial investors and for-profit developers.

3.2 Action points

- Local authority housing and refugee departments should list CH models as options for migrant and refugee housing. This information needs to be accessible to potential vulnerable resident groups, but also key institutional actors, such as housing intermediaries, non-governmental organisation in housing and the refugee field and mainstream housing and social service providers. In a further step, know-how and information exchange between municipalities and CH groups should be intensified and institutionalised through respective agencies. This can build on experiences from other countries' regional and national support functions for CH, e.g. Mitbauzentrale München in Germany and

Vejledningssenheden for bygge- og bofællesskaber at the Danish Agency for Housing and Planning.

- Strengthen the awareness among public funders and in the banking sector regarding financial advantages and challenges of CH. This can build on experiences from other countries, such as with crowdfunding campaigns to secure bank loans (e.g. as practised by the Mietshäusersyndikat in Germany and now also by the Habitat network in Austria). Awareness raising for financing CH models can also build on the growing interest among investors in impact investment, generating social and/or environmental impact alongside financial return. For public and municipal funding, investigate and suggest changes to regulations that support and formalise the role of non-profit local development companies as value-creating organisations in housing provision. The social benefits of creating specific funding schemes for CH should be advocated (as was the case with the National Community-led Housing Fund in England) and linked with key government priorities like community cohesion, well-being and anti-loneliness measures.
- Targeted public promotion and dissemination of CH pioneer projects with migrants and refugees³ can help change dominant negative narratives about residents and migrants in a particular area and among the wider public. It can also prepare the ground for further CH project development in other urban neighbourhoods, especially when accompanied by media and public relations work on behalf of CH and refugee organisations, intermediaries and umbrellas. An example for the success of such a communication campaign approach were the Baugruppen projects in Seestadt Aspern in Vienna between 2011 and 2015 which served as showcase projects for subsequent developments across the city.
- There should be increasing national and international exchange among municipalities and cities regarding the societal benefits and application of Housing-First-Schemes⁴ and “SMART Housing Construction Programmes”⁵ especially applied to the context of the refugee housing and CH field. These support programmes would help address the existing affordability barrier and facilitate access for refugees to CH.

³ e.g. Sällbo in Helsingborg, Oase.inklusive in Vienna or Startblok Riekerhaven in Amsterdam

⁴ These housing programmes target formerly homeless people and enable them to live independently and have their own secure and permanent home. The underlying assumption is that the stabilisation process for homeless people – where there is clear overlap with refugees – needs to start with independent living and not the other way round. See also: https://www.neunerhaus.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Fachpublikationen/2015/20150925_HousingFirst_Report_english.pdf

⁵ These subsidised building programmes offer lower rents and lower equity contributions than in mainstream social housing for smaller sized flats that optimise available space. See also: <https://socialhousing.wien/best-practice/viennas-future/smart-housing-construction-programme>

- It is important to build acceptance among municipalities and suggest changes to rules and regulations for public land release according to social values (instead of market values), such as creating stable and inclusive communities, which would be very beneficial to CH groups. Instruments could include long-term and/or non-profit land lease contracts as well as multi-level scoring models for land allocation such as already practised in Vienna where public land release is based on four different pillars: architectural, environmental, economic and social values.

4. Capacity building for collaborative housing with refugees

This second thematic area presents challenges and corresponding action points related to fostering the development and growth of CH with migrants and especially refugees. Capacity building is an essential element of any transition process. It involves developing skills and knowledge for the expansion of CH through growing networks of CH practices among community groups, architects and planners, non-profit housing developers, local authorities, and civil society organisations (e.g. refugee organisations). Capacity building activities should for instance include knowledge transfer on commonalities and specificities of CH models, e.g. in terms of resident participation and financing. This can also draw on the work of CH umbrellas, intermediaries and hubs that already exist in all three participating countries as well as international CH networks, such as the respective ENHR working group. The capacity building should consider the following challenges and recommended action points identified during MICOLL.

4.1 Challenges

- Compared to mainstream housing, CH projects are bottom-up housing models based on co-creation and co-governance involving many different parties: not only the residents themselves but also non-profit housing organisations, civil society actors, social enterprises, consultants, municipalities and commercial operations. Setting up CH requires skills, time and financial resources on behalf of the residents who often come from middle-class, educated backgrounds. It is even more difficult for vulnerable groups, such as migrants and refugees, who possess few resources and little knowledge of the host society to understand how to start, run and complete a CH project. The lengthy and intensive development process is a major barrier for participation of refugees who often have immediate housing need.
- Many CH groups and initiatives want to be more inclusive, but there is either little knowledge about how to go about it, or little public support for

it. Additionally, knowledge exchange about existing inclusive practices is underdeveloped between different CH sectors and projects, and also with migrant and refugee movements and networks.

- Migrants and refugees are often considered a homogeneous group with similar needs and behaviour. However, in fact, refugees present a diverse group of residents in terms of their cultural backgrounds, housing careers, individual needs etc. One needs to keep in mind that native residents differ in many aspects too. Therefore, diversity is a feature of any housing project, although diversity tends to be more pronounced in CH with migrants and refugees.
- Cultural differences and language can be a source of misunderstanding in participatory planning processes, e.g. when it comes to the use of housing jargon. As professional translators are missing, often older children act as lay translators for their parents.

4.2 Action points

- CH with refugees and migrants requires substantial process support, external facilitation and low-level access mechanisms. Architects and planners should include top-down elements in development and planning to facilitate access and participation of residents with migrant and refugee background in CH projects. An example would be lower requirements for participation in group meetings. Not every topic is relevant for everyone. Resident consultations during the planning process should be more pre-structured. This helps migrants and refugees to accommodate with time constraints and limited resources.
- Public and private funders need to be convinced of the importance of sufficient funding support for external moderation and facilitation in CH projects to ensure its long-term societal benefits for successful integration of vulnerable residents.
- Mentoring programmes are needed to learn from existing CH models and projects that apply inclusive practices to support new CH initiatives, e.g. in relation to legal forms of association and tenure forms, process models, community building, skill development practices and financing models. The collaboration among existing CH umbrella organisations and between them and local refugee support organisations should be intensified.
- Expertise and services that already exist with intermediaries outside the housing field (civil society associations, NGOs, social enterprises) should be offered to both CH initiatives and potential residents with migrant and refugee background.

- Best practice should be collected and displayed online, such as through existing national and international repositories (e.g. Wohnprojekte Plattform of the Initiative Collaborative Building & Living in Vienna or the Co-Lab Mapping Project at TU Delft⁶).
- Addressing the needs of residents with refugee and migrant background requires the inclusion of specific partners in the co-creation process of CH, such as process facilitators specialised in migration, diversity and inclusion; social workers with housing and refugee integration experience; non-governmental organisations in the refugee and homelessness field; larger non-profit developers and housing associations that have substantial project management expertise and experience in community-led approaches.
- CH stakeholder networks should also engage with large construction and housing companies regarding their social responsibility and the value of investments that generate social and environmental impacts alongside financial returns.
- Awareness needs to be raised for the use of professional translation services in housing with migrants and refugees to make sure everyone understands key housing jargon and to facilitate mutual understanding of residents, such as during the planning process and community building. Public and private funders need to be convinced of the importance of sufficient funding support for translation services.
- As for co-design processes with the target group of refugees and migrants, more knowledge exchange is needed among architects to consider different cultural habits, e.g. the different importance of cooking habits in the daily routine of residents and families.

5. Improving and scaling-up collaborative housing models with refugees

This section focuses on challenges and related action points concerning the improvement and scaling up of successful CH models. Thus, this third thematic area of the transition agenda builds on interventions by forerunners through innovative CH pilot projects. Investigation of and experimentation with CH test-beds during MICOLL helped gather feedback which can be used for refinement and scaling up of existing CH models with migrants and refugees based on what works and what does not:

⁶ MICOLL has engaged in a collaboration with this mapping project.

5.1 Challenges

- The assumed integration potential of CH projects results to a certain extent from the attitudes of their residents, and especially core resident groups, activists and initiators of projects. Seeing themselves as changemakers, these residents want to get personally and actively involved in refugee integration. Nevertheless, they can experience tensions between their strong commitment to support vulnerable residents and the risk of becoming overburdened with caregiving duties.
- Compared to mainstream housing, CH can empower refugees through individualised support, social interaction and skill development. However, refugees' ability and willingness to participate in CH is limited due to time and resource constraints as well as deliberate social withdrawal due to previous negative and traumatic experiences.
- A primary motivation for refugees is to find readily available and affordable housing – and not necessarily communal living. On the contrary, refugees can associate CH models with their flight histories and the negative and even traumatic experience of crowded camps that represent forced communities.
- Cultural differences and language can be a source of misunderstanding in communal living when it comes to rights and responsibilities of residents.

5.2 Action points

- Local (public) meeting places are crucial to the success of inclusive CH projects with migrants and refugees. CH projects should contain sufficient open and green spaces for children as well as playgrounds. These spaces are crucial to support social interaction and communication among residents, e.g. not only between children, but also among parents.
- CH initiatives can supplement language signs and explanations of tenants' obligations and rights with pictograms as guidance systems.
- CH groups should nominate mentors or buddies for refugees that have just joined the housing project. CH residents need to clarify but also request information how exactly refugees want to be involved in communal activities. The advantage of CH compared to mainstream housing is that to some extent informal and individual solutions for vulnerable residents can be negotiated instead of general house rules.
- If residents feel overburdened with care duties for refugees, they should be able to draw on institutional support structures for counseling and social care. CH stakeholder networks should also advocate for specific public

support and contact points available to CH groups. However, in group building and resident selection in CH projects it is important to consider whether refugees possess a sufficient degree of independence.

- It is important to explicitly invite residents with refugee background to participate in communal activities, especially when they have just joined a CH project. However, their participation should not be expected. On the other hand, quid pro quos can be demanded that enable refugees to give something back to the community too. During a longer stay in the CH project, trust and personal relationships develop naturally and lead to more participation in communal activities.

6. Project funding and more information

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For more information, see <http://micoll.org/> and contact:

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