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Guessing games with target groups: Securing a livelihood by supporting refugees in a hostile environment

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Abstract

In the wake of mass-migrations of refugees seeking safety and stability in Europe, this contribution studies emerging grassroots organizations that support refugee status holders in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. The municipality expects these organizations to adhere to the European trend to incorporate immigrant integration priorities in interventions that apply to all residents. The article discusses the paradox of how bureaucratic classifications regarding preferred target groups cast certain grassroots responses as fringe-activities that are less legible bureaucratically. Based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork, this article shows how this lessened legibility translates into profound insecurities for grassroots organizers. The article discusses how these insecurities, in combination with the uncertainty grassroots organizers feel regarding their employability, motivate them to play guessing games and to give in to municipal preferences to boost their eligibility for funding. It argues that this process of giving in to municipal preferences should be understood as an attempt to render their endeavors legible, reduce precariousness, secure a livelihood, and turn affective labor into a life-sustaining practice. In so doing, this contribution evokes the story of a particular grassroots organizer—a woman of color with a forced migration background.

Keywords: migrant advocacy, classification, bureaucracy, integration policies, grassroots responses

1 Introduction

After the mayor of Rotterdam approved the construction of an asylum seekers center[1] *(asielzoekerscentrum)* in 2015, tensions in the vicinity were palpable. At an information meeting, groups of rioters threw stones and fireworks at police officers, chanted that the reception center should go, and damaged police cars. Multiple arrests were made that

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[1]   A facility managed by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, where asylum seekers wait for their asylum application to be reviewed and processed. Generally, successful applicants are then allocated housing in a Dutch municipality.

evening. In response to this riot, the solidarity platform You Are Welcome was established, an initiative that promotes 'a culture of welcome' (cf. Hamann & Karakayali, 2016) for refugees in Rotterdam. It was founded by a collective of churches, members of the Dutch Socialist Party (SP), and activist groups. Asked about its mission, Jozefien, one of the co-founders of the platform said to me: 'We seek to enact solidarity with refugees and highlight what they add in terms of skills.' The city of Rotterdam thus has a refugee support platform run by engaged residents, while migrant hostility pervades the city, too. In this ambivalent environment, aspiring grassroots organizers with a forced migration background seek to provide support to refugee status holders.[2]

This contribution evokes the story of a particular grassroots organizer, Aida, to demonstrate how, in an urban landscape in which migrant support and hostility converge, illegible bureaucratic classifications translate into profound insecurities for grassroots organizers who struggle to secure a livelihood. When I met Aida, she had just set up an initiative to help Eritrean refugee status holders with their paperwork. Aida longs for her labor to be recognized in the form of funding. What however stands in the way of obtaining the municipal funds, according to Aida, are contradictory requirements regarding target groups. Because of the European trend toward 'mainstreaming integration governance' (Scholten & Van Breugel, 2018a), the municipality expects resident initiatives to benefit the population of Rotterdam in general. The City Council, in other words, prefers 'generic policies' over specific interventions that assume ethno-racial differences. At the same time though, what is and what is not allowed in terms of targeting particular groups remains opaque, because, for instance, consecutive reports (KIS, 2017; The National Ombudsman, 2018; SCP, 2018) call for targeted interventions for people from Eritrean descent—and as such fly in the face of any 'generic' policy assumption. Moreover, different political parties that led subsequent coalitions during successive political periods in Rotterdam each introduced integration policy changes with different approaches to targeting (Dekker & Van Breugel, 2019). In trying to adhere to the seemingly inexecutable demand to follow 'generic' policies whilst at the same time articulating a clearly focused target group, Aida struggles to formulate her support activities for Eritrean refugee status holders in a way that applies to all residents.

When grassroots organizers prepare a funding application, they are hesitant to frame their initiative in 'mono-ethnic' terms because they could, as a result, lose the opportunity to receive municipal funding. Aida is a case in point. Her initiative largely focuses on Eritrean refugee status holders, yet in public, she downplays the specificities of this target group and attempts to diversify the composition of the people she works with. For instance, in a meeting with other grassroots initiatives, Aida introduced her initiative as consisting of 'consultations, juridical advice and debt advice for the boys.' When someone inquired whether she does so 'specifically for Eritreans,' she went around the question, and said, evasively: 'sometimes also Syrians.' Aida is often urged to be on guard regarding the

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[2]   To the Rotterdam City Council, a 'status holder' is 'an asylum seeker whose claim to asylum has been approved and who has obtained a (legal) residency status' (Rotterdam City Council, 2015a, p. 7) A broader rubric under which 'status holders' are subsumed, is the category of 'migrant'. A 'migrant' is 'someone who has emigrated to Rotterdam from another country, with the aim of eventually starting a new life here'—including labor migrants, 'political refugees,' and people that seek family reunification (Rotterdam City Council, 2015b, p. 5).

framing of her initiative, particularly by Truus,[3] a woman in her seventies, who informally provides Aida with professional advice. One time, in Aida's office, Truus instructed Aida to be 'really careful' in presenting her work to others. Aida, in response, tried to reassure Truus by demonstrating that she got the point, and said: 'We do something for refugees. But in fact, for everybody. Not only for Eritreans.' Truus nods, as if to signal that she approves of Aida's caution, and adds, referring to local politics and specifically to Livable Rotterdam *(Leefbaar Rotterdam)*—a far-right party in Rotterdam—that 'The Livable virus is not gone yet.'

'Livable' is vernacular for 'Livable Rotterdam'—the local anti-establishment, anti-immigrant and anti-Islam party. When I asked Aida's advisor, Truus, some days later, what she meant with 'Livable virus,' Truus responded that: 'Livable Rotterdam never allowed target group policies. "Young Eritreans need extra attention," that is something you cannot say.' I then ask Truus what it is exactly that Aida has to watch out for. 'She has only Eritreans. And that virus of target groups, it still lurks among civil servants. So, she still should not speak of one country,' Truus said. What Truus points to here is that, even though Livable Rotterdam is not part of the coalition governing the city at that point, the initiators of grassroots initiatives need to remain cautious to a strict interpretation of policies regarding target groups that is said to have crept into the bureaucratic mindset. Truus speaks of a 'virus,' suggesting it may pop up here and there, without a pattern or logic, and be difficult to get rid of. In fact, throughout my fieldwork, grassroots organizers consistently voiced insecurities regarding what is and what is not allowed in terms of defining target groups.

In the light of ambivalent group-making practices that emerge in conjunction with both a culture of welcome and a hostile environment, this contribution speaks to the ordering of populations that underpins practices of bordering (Hess & Kasparek, 2017, p. 59). Empirically, this article demonstrates that, notwithstanding the mainstreaming of integration governance, categorizations re-appear in the municipality's conduct. It shows how this re-appearance catalyzes bureaucratic illegibility and opacity and motivates the grassroots organization at focus to give in to municipal policy preferences. Analytically, this article forwards three claims. First, when 'generic' policies collide with the composition of beneficiaries sustained by grassroots organizations, this collision produces fringe-activities that are less legible bureaucratically. Second, this bureaucratic illegibility, which urges grassroots organizers into a vacillating process of playing guessing games regarding the groups that are eligible for interventions of care, pushes grassroots organizations to preemptively adjust their goals and become entangled with the local state. Third, instead of condemning or consolidating this imbrication of grassroots responses with the local state, this imbrication is cast against the background of grassroots organizers' precariousness and struggles to secure a livelihood by turning affective labor into a life-sustaining practice.

The material collected for this article originates from 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Rotterdam in 2018. During that year, I accompanied grassroots organizers who were in the process of setting up initiatives to provide support to migrants who had ar-

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[3]   In launching her initiative, Aida receives advice not only from Jozefien, the earlier-mentioned co-founder of the You Are Welcome platform, but also from Truus. Truus stages herself as 'retired professional' and an 'active resident.' During her career, Truus has worked at educational institutions, in local politics, and in trust funds. Truus advises Aida what funds to apply for and helps her to write funding applications.

rived in Rotterdam after 2015. These organizers provided an ethnographic starting point to investigate how grassroots initiatives try to find their way in the field of actors engaged with refugee support and reception in Rotterdam. I studied the networks of actors that these initiatives interacted with by joining aspiring organizers in their daily activities and by participating in events they organized. I also followed aspiring organizers in their endeavors to find collaborations, and accompanied them to meetings with advisors, with other initiatives, with funding organizations, and with civil servants. In addition, I conducted a range of open interviews with the organizers of these grassroots initiatives, as well as with policymakers, NGO personnel, civil servants, people who worked for funding organizations, and people who worked at the reception center. I use pseudonyms for all research participants and organizations mentioned in this article.

2   Context and background: Ambivalent group-making at the intersection of hostility and welcome

Whereas local discourses regarding diversity are usually more 'positive' than national discourses, Rotterdam is 'the only exception to that rule'—a comparative research between fourteen European cities found (WRR, 2018, p. 59). In Rotterdam, the second largest city in the Netherlands, a political shift to the right can be traced back to 2002. In this year, the politician Pim Fortuyn, and his party Livable Rotterdam, rose to power. Until then, the Labor Party had been the largest political party in Rotterdam. Fortuyn positioned himself as anti-establishment, and 'shot up like a rocket out of the Dutch political landscape' (Lucassen & Lucassen, 2015, p. 72). Fortuyn gained popular support for his fierce criticism of Dutch integration policies and for his attacks on Islamic culture and religion (Van Ostaaijen, 2019, p. 87). More generally in the Netherlands, the idea that immigration would be harmful is widely[4] shared (Lucassen & Lucassen, 2015; Lucassen, 2018; Kešić & Duyvendak, 2019), and immigrant integration is framed in a negative way (Van Breugel & Scholten, 2018, p. 144). This specific political landscape affects the organizers of grassroots initiatives that support refugee status holders, who are cautious in framing and exposing their endeavors. As the organizer of one grassroots initiative expressed it, refugee-related initiatives are under a 'magnifying glass.'

   In their attempts to foster a culture of welcome within a hostile environment, grassroots responses in Rotterdam are an interesting case to study bottom-up practices and imaginations. Grassroots initiatives thrive in Rotterdam; in city-branding, the alleged hands-on mentality of its residents is emphasized, as well as their capacity to self-organize. Less attention has been paid to the newly emerging grassroots initiatives in Rotterdam that seek to help refugee status holders. These initiatives are often initiated by people with a forced migration background. Various refugee support initiatives in the Netherlands' capital city, Amsterdam, have received scholarly attention (Rast & Ghorashi, 2018; Boersma et al., 2018; Rast et. al, 2020), and in Rotterdam academic attention concentrated on a large-

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[4]   Restricting immigration has been a prominent theme in consecutive election campaigns. In 2017, the *Freedom Party* (PVV), that profiles as anti-establishment, anti-immigrant and anti-Islam, received the second highest share of votes in national elections. In that same year, the leading candidate of another party (FvD) compared 'mixing with people from all over the world' to 'homeopathic dilution' (Kešić & Duyvendak, 2019, p. 456).

scale municipal-supported housing and language program aimed at Syrian families (Van der Linden & Dagevos, 2019).

By starting a refugee support initiative, the grassroots organizers in this study enter the sector of welfare and social services. In the Netherlands, this sector is affected by decentralization programs (SCP, 2020), and Rotterdam specifically is said to move 'away from a rationality based on conceptions of welfare' (Van Houdt & Schinkel, 2013, p. 63). Generally, the provision of welfare and social services is plagued by privatizations and relies on 'unpaid voluntary and care work' (Harvey & Krohn-Hansen, 2018, p. 13, cf. Newman & Tonkens, 2011 and León, 2014). Such care work typically weighs on the shoulders of 'marginal populations,' who 'bear the burden of providing such labour' (Muehlebach, 2011, p. 68). In several European countries, both 'the neoliberalisation of the state' and the 'illiberal and authoritarian turn' (Cantat & Feischmidt, 2019, p. 396) played a role in the rigorous cutting in care services for vulnerable groups and the shifting of responsibility for the provision of these services to non-state actors.

In this context, what the organizers of the initiatives I studied share is that they scrabble for funds and at some point hope to secure a livelihood—and make ends meet without depending on welfare allowances. Importantly, I do not imply that my interlocutors would directly employ funding to make ends meet. Rather, they hope for municipal actors to notice the value that underpins their affective labor (Muehlebach, 2011). They generally aspire toward being remunerated accordingly in the form of funding, and to feel 'employable' (Bloom, 2013). Beyond a mere wage-relationship, they dream of being recognized as (self-)entrepreneurs—a figure widely promoted by activating states as vehicle to 'escape the shame of depending on state benefits' (Narotzky 2018, p. 39; cf. Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020, p. 497). Other features that the grassroots initiatives in this study have in common is that they are de facto bottom-up initiatives that emerged in response to the mass migrations of 2015, that they are supported by Rotterdam's solidarity platform, and that they focus on people who experience types of vulnerability in part produced by the EU's exclusionary politics of asylum (cf. New Keywords, 2016, p. 17). Another shared characteristic is that the initiatives I studied are in the start-up phase, and as such are still in the process of fine-tuning their focus and applying for subsidies. Focus areas, albeit transitory, include language support, empowerment, access to work, juridical counseling, administrative advice, and cultural exchange.

The City Council in Rotterdam motivates NGOs and civil society initiatives to take part in the implementation of refugee reception policies. It notes to 'smartly use already existing procured products' as well as 'private initiatives for refugees and volunteer work' and states that the executive 'believes in the added value of civil society' and 'encourages such initiatives wholeheartedly' (Rotterdam City Council, 2015a). 'Creative and innovative initiatives from volunteer organizations give new energy and help integration,' the City Council maintains. The Council explicitly attaches criteria to laudable organizations: municipal subsidy to 'mono-ethnic/cultural organizations' is 'not desirable' (Rotterdam City Council, 2015b, p. 7). The City Council states that 'mono-ethnic and/or mono-religious activities will not be financed, unless there are substantive reasons to do otherwise,' because activities should be 'focused on participation[5] and integration' (Rotterdam City Council,

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[5]   The 'Declaration of Participation' that all 'status holders' have to sign, was initially developed for Polish and Bulgarian migrants (De Waal, 2017). In this declaration, the status holder confirms to be 'aware of

2015c, p. 15). In addition to these criteria, from 2018[6] onwards, the City Council in Rotterdam explicitly encourages people with a forced migration background to act as a 'role model' for those who were recently granted refugee status—via the idiom of 'oldcomers for newcomers' *(oudkomers voor nieuwkomers)* (Rotterdam City Council, 2018, p. 26). Despite this idiom, however, the shift away from targeted 'mono-ethnic' policies and toward generic policies that apply to all residents remained a decisive criterion, too. Although the Netherlands has a track record of targeted policies, this shift toward generic policies has been a political priority since the 2000s (Simon & Beaujeu, 2018, p. 33). As a result of this shift, there is evidence of a 'declining consciousness of migrant integration concerns' (Scholten & Van Breugel, 2018b, p. 238), because generic policies often fail to incorporate 'immigrant integration priorities in the "mainstream"' (Van Breugel & Scholten, 2020, pp. 10–11).

This proven difficulty to effectively address migrant concerns via policies that target all citizens alike is a continuous source of my interlocutor's frustration. What similarly leads to confusion is that, for decades, the City Council in Rotterdam worked with shifting attitudes regarding the desirability of targeted policies. These shifts can be explained by shifts in the make-up of the city executive and City Council during successive political periods, in which different political parties that led subsequent coalitions each introduced different approaches to targeting (Dekker & Van Breugel, 2019). Other factors that render the admissibility of targeted interventions unclear for my interlocutors, is that 'migration-related issues in the Netherlands still tend to be framed in group-specific terms' (Van Breugel & Scholten, 2018, p. 133), and that reports (De Boom & Van Wensveen, 2019) that monitor the achievements of 'people with a migration background' run contrary to generic policy assumptions. Lastly, the municipal resolution in 2015 that resulted in the approval of interventions targeted at people from Somali descent, as well as the publication of consecutive reports (KIS, 2017; The National Ombudsman, 2018; SCP, 2018) that call for targeted interventions for people from Eritrean descent, give rise to mixed signals—that result in profound insecurities.

3   'Have more focus!' but 'not only on Eritreans': A fringy grassroots initiative

Aida used to work flexible hours for the Dutch Refugee Council. She knows the drill of refugee integration policies. After the City Council contracted the Refugee Council in 2015—and later extended its competitive tendering contract and mandate—the organization's contract was reduced substantively in 2018. For Aida, because of these re-organizations, establishing her own initiative felt like a move toward better job security. Although her expertise and motivation largely concern Eritrean status holders, Aida really tries to be 'diverse.' She organizes dinners for long-term Rotterdammers with little money, stresses

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the norms and values within the Dutch society, is willing to enforce these [norms and values] and will actively contribute to the society in the Netherlands and in Rotterdam' (Rotterdam City Council, 2015a, pp. 15–16). When it became clear that, because of the principle of free movement for EU-citizens, this declaration could legally not be enforced on Middle and Eastern European migrants (De Waal, 2017), it became mandatory for status holders only.

[6]   In March 2018, during the year of fieldwork, municipal elections took place in Rotterdam, which resulted in a changing make-up of the city executive and in the publication of new policy memoranda.

that she helps homeless people of all backgrounds, and cherishes the fact that people who fled from Syria increasingly seek out her help. All in all, she works hard to not be accused of focusing only on Eritreans. Her core business, however, is helping young Eritreans, who were allocated to Rotterdam between 2013 and 2015,[7] with their paperwork. The help Aida offers includes accompanying beneficiaries to their appointments in the town hall. 'Sometimes I almost cry,' Aida said to me once about these encounters. Aida certainly feels genuine compassion for her beneficiaries and goes to great lengths to help them. For instance, when one of her beneficiaries could not meet the municipal workfare measures he had to abide by, she temporarily appointed him as a volunteer in order to creatively relieve him from one of his administrative worries. She feels shaken when confronted with the lack of perspective that the people who turn to her for help have—and affectively refers to them as 'my boys.' In addition to her professional trajectory in the refugee support sector, Aida's own im/mobility trajectory also is a form of capital: she speaks relevant languages, knows Eritrean history, and is well informed about the country's contemporary challenges. Word of mouth proved effective in having Eritrean youngsters find her.

Yet despite Aida's efforts, several of her attempts to apply to funding from the central municipality were denied. To challenge these decisions, she requested a series of meetings at the municipality with the policy advisors involved. Truus, one of Aida's informal advisors, joined Aida at these meetings, and so did I. One of the policy advisors Aida spoke with, in explaining why she had rejected Aida's funding applications, said, regarding Aida's envisioned initiative, that she was 'a little shocked with how broad it is,' and that, at the same time, she was 'worried' when she 'read about the homeless group' in Aida's applications. The other policy advisor confirmed that, although she considered Aida's initiative 'very sympathetic,' the primary reason to reject Aida's applications was 'the target group.' Specifically, the target group was considered 'too difficult' and 'too diverse.' Indeed, in Aida's project proposal, Aida had written down that the people that turn to her for help include people who risk eviction and irregularity. But, as said, based on earlier conversations with Aida, I know that she had purposefully provided a rich and multifaceted description of her target group in her funding applications because she feared that her activities could appear to predominantly help 'Eritrean people' and thus to be catering to a mono-ethnic target group.

Later, when I spoke with this policy advisor, she confirmed that she understands Aida's fear to be accused of failing to live up to the 'generic' policy approach,' and said that the municipality had 'warned' Aida to 'not only focus on Eritreans.' When I asked the policy advisor why she declined Aida's applications, she repeated what she had said to Aida earlier, and highlighted the fact that Aida included 'homeless people and illegal people.' She said: 'Then I think: "Aida, please limit yourself, have more focus! You'll run into a wall if everything is so mixed up".' At the same time, the policy advisor told me how, for her, the assessment of grassroots initiatives is a balancing act as well: 'I have to make sure that I can account for how the money is spent. There are all these boxes! Even for me, it's a challenge to keep an overview of all the boxes that are there.' She then gets back to Aida's case, and points out that: 'The Aidas of this world, they are in some fringe area.' She adds: 'Aida is

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[7]   People who were allocated to Rotterdam before 2015 initially fell outside of Rotterdam's integration policy framework—a framework emerged in the context of the 'long summer of migration' (Kasparek & Speer, 2015). Inclusion of this 'group' only happened after the local elections in 2018.

doing so much that it's not easily put in a box. I think that Aida tries to be an all-rounder.' In concluding, the policy advisor confesses that 'it's quite a quest when drafting new policies to not create new boxes.' Paradoxically, Aida's target group is thus considered 'too broad'—because it includes the alleged 'groups' of 'homeless people' and 'illegal people'—while on the other hand it risks being mono-ethnically targeted—because it primarily consists of Eritrean people. And given the complexity of accountability mechanisms—boxes to tick—and the ongoing bureaucratic imperative to classify—boxes to categorize—categorizations re-appear, despite a 'generic' policy approach (see discussion in next section).

As a result of the encounters with the policy advisors, Aida would repeatedly ask the policy advisors at the city hall to 'drop by' her initiative. In one meeting at the city hall, Aida explicitly requested for initiatives to be 'monitored from time to time'. Aida added, a little provokingly, that: 'Don't you [the policy advisor] want to know how all these beautiful initiatives work out in practice?' At the same time, Aida kept on trying to adjust the framing of her target group to what she thinks is considered bureaucratically desirable. By the end of 2018, when the idiom of 'oldcomers for newcomers' (Rotterdam City Council, 2018: 26) was introduced, Aida felt that emphasizing her own forced migration background could be helpful in producing legitimacy for her endeavors without having to play guessing games with target groups. In collaborating with some other NGOs and the You Are Welcome platform; Aida continues to support Eritrean refugee status holders. Still, however, she does not publicly accentuate the mono-ethnic composition of her target group and goes to great lengths to be somehow diversify. She plays safe to preemptively shield against a strict interpretation of policies regarding target groups that is said to have crept into Rotterdam's bureaucratic mind-set. And, in addition, Aida started to do other work, outside of the sector of welfare and social services, in an attempt to diminish the unsteadiness in her life in a way that is less likely to be affected by re-appearing categorizations.

4   'The difference of no difference':[8] publics, preemption, and livelihood

By virtue of seeking to incorporate immigrant integration priorities in interventions that apply to all residents (Van Breugel & Scholten, 2020), 'generic' policies have the potential to foster imaginations that unite long-term Rotterdammers with so-called newcomers; they could be seen as an attempt to imagine 'forms of political communities and subjectivities that bring together refugees and citizens' (Cantat, 2016, p. 13; cf. Rozakou, 2016) and to attend to 'sites of overlapping struggle between refugees and diverse groups of citizens' (Cabot, 2018, p. 21, n. 20). Troublesome, however, is that imaginations of sameness may leave us with a grammar of indifference that allows for categories to re-appear (Haraway, 1997)—'the difference of no difference' (ibid., p. 265). Aida, much like the other community organizers I studied, is caught in a paradox: The municipality demands that clear groups are identified, yet it should be *particular* groups—not homeless people, not people without a residence permit. Aida, however, fears that narrowing down her focus would do injustice to the very existence of people with intersecting problems and aggravated living conditions produced by irregularity and homelessness. Importantly, she meant to evoke these characteristics to provide a description of the 'generic' problems her beneficiaries face—and to prevent those status holders who, for example, become homeless or lose their favorable

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[8]   Cf. Haraway, 1997, p. 265.

immigration status, would be beyond the mandate of her initiative. These characteristics, however, then turned into 'reappearing' categorizations.

The ongoing bureaucratic imperative to classify—that resurfaces despite a 'generic' policy approach—collides with the public[9] (Dewey, 1927; Marres & Lezaun, 2011) Aida sustains. The persistent 'groupism' (Brubaker, 2004, p. 2) that underpins this bureaucratic imperative renders the public Aida sustains as fringe-activity that is less legible bureaucratically (cf. Das, 2004). Aida's target group is considered 'too broad'—because it includes the alleged 'groups' of 'homeless people' and 'illegal people'—while on the other hand it risks being mono-ethnically targeted—because it primarily consists of Eritrean people. According to the policy advisors, Aida's initiative is not 'easily put in a box' and therefore, it does not tick the right boxes. Rotterdam's bureaucracy, in its hesitance to 'create new boxes' that could render endeavors like that of Aida's more legible, consolidates existing bureaucratic categories of 'homeless people' and 'illegal people,' and invokes these categories to decline Aida's funding applications. Aida, however, in these applications, only meant to provide a processual account of beneficiaries who risk eviction and irregularity to emphasize the 'generic' nature of the problem. What makes these dynamics particularly enigmatic is that 'generic' policies, as among the very instruments of bureaucratic legibility, de facto produce and mediate illegibility[10] and opacity (Hull, 2012, p. 166). As a consequence, grassroots organizers have difficulty understanding the illegible and opaque municipal policy frameworks and funding schemes regarding bureaucratically desirable framing of 'groups' eligible to be relieved from their position of vulnerability by the aspiring initiatives. For Aida, this ambivalence means that she strikes out blindly and has to 'second-guess' funders' expectations to grapple for 'elusive funds' (Eliasoph, 2011, pp. 57–63).

One may object that grassroots organizers who miss out on funding may simply have written unconvincing project plans and ineffective funding applications and that the only thing that urges them to play guessing games is their alleged lack of inexperience. There are, however, several factors (see section 2) that strengthen the interpretation set out in the preceding—i.e., that illegibility and opacity are produced by the collision of emergent

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[9]   Regarding the identification of categories of difference, scholarship has long focused on practices of classification (cf. Bowker & Star, 1999)—and problematized the possibility of the existence and knowledge of clear-cut separations. Inspired by the work of Frederik Barth (1969), since the late 1990s and early 2000s onwards, scholars on borders and boundaries study the 'properties and mechanisms of boundary processes, including how these are more fluid, policed, crossable, movable, and so on' (Lamont, 2014, p. 815). Brubaker (2004) pointed out that 'the tendency to take bounded groups as fundamental units of analysis (and basis constituents of the social world)' is prevalent and allows for a situation in which 'ethnic and other groups continue to be conceived as entities and cast as actors'—a tendency he calls 'groupism' (Brubaker, 2004, p. 2). What these approaches share, is that they are committed to 'work out the trouble' (Haraway 1997, p. 230) in group-making, and attend closely to the processes that assemble—and claim to represent—'publics.' The concept of 'publics' (Dewey, 1927; Marres & Lezaun, 2011) does exactly that. It highlights how institutional and political changes, for instance, mediate how forms of action are 'convened,' 'sustained,' 'called into existence,' 'summoned' and 'assembled' (Mahony et al., 2010; Walters & D'Aoust, 2015). All these practice-oriented present perfects have one thing in common: they try to highlight a process of becoming (Mahony et al., 2010, p. 8) that results in the production of 'groups'—that are yet 'contingent' (Braun & Whatmore, 2010), 'impermanent', 'fluid,' 'mobile' and 'ambiguous' (Mahony et al., 2010).

[10] Also see Karakayali and Rigo (2010) and Casas-Cortes (2015) on the categorization of groups in relation to forced migration regimes that have the goal to make people 'intelligible.'

publics with 'generic' policies and catalyzed by the re-appearance of categories of differ-ence. These factors include: the proven difficulty to effectively address migrant concerns via policies that target all citizens alike (Scholten & Van Breugel, 2018b, p. 238; Van Breugel & Scholten, 2020, pp. 10–11); 'subsequent policy changes' that 'each introduced their own problem definitions and matching models and instruments for integration' (Dekker & Van Breugel, 2019, p. 129); the fact that 'migration-related issues in the Netherlands still tend to be framed in group-specific terms' (Van Breugel & Scholten, 2018, p. 133; cf. De Boom & Van Wensveen); municipal resolutions such as the 'Somali-motion' in 2015 that resulted in the approval of interventions that target people from Somali descent; and reports that call for targeted interventions for people from Eritrean descent KIS, 2017; The National Om-budsman, 2018; SCP, 2018). These factors inform the argument that bureaucratic illegibility and opacity cannot just be explained by grassroots organizers' supposedly questionable performance.

And even beyond the factors that account for the *origins* of opacity and illegibility, the *effects* of this opacity and illegibility are real: they allow for profound insecurities for grass-roots organizers. These insecurities, in turn, push grassroots organizations to preemptively adjust their goals toward municipal preferences. Scholarship commonly discusses such en-tanglements between grassroots organizations and the (local) state. Van Dam et al. (2014), for instance, have shown that governmental organizations in the Netherlands tend to give support and permission only to those resident initiatives that look 'well organized' and have established legal entities. And resident initiatives learned that 'governmental organi-zations express their preference for those initiatives that operate in an organizational form that feels "sound" and "familiar"' (Van Dam et al., 2015, p. 172). Therefore, they 'institu-tionalize themselves in foundations or associations' and 'adapt themselves to the wishes and images of governmental institutions and play along' (ibid.) to make cooperation with institutional partners more likely. Boersma et al. (2018), in the context of grassroots move-ments that assist refugees in Amsterdam, show how some of these movements 'developed a conscious mode of professionalization' (ibid., p. 73). And regarding German hospitality, Fleischmann and Steinhilper (2017) similarly highlight how welcome initiatives 'are en-tangled with governmental actors' (ibid., p. 22). These dynamics also apply to Aida's case.

But in line with scholarship highlighting grassroots' potential for political innovation (Vandevoordt, 2019; Feischmidt & Zakariás, 2019), I argue that solidifying this entangle-ment as something that should simply be denounced would downplay the complexity of grassroots organizers' attempts to care for their surroundings—and for themselves. To at-tend to this complexity, I propose to shed light on organizers' efforts in rendering legible their endeavors to the local state in order to turn affective labor into a life-sustaining prac-tice that allows them to overcome vulnerability (cf. Muehlebach, 2011; Harvey & Krohn-Hansen, 2018; Narotzky, 2018). As a woman of color with a forced migration background who often proves to be emotionally attached to the care she provides, the value that un-derpins Aida's work typically remains unremunerated—yet she hopes that the affective labor she provides at the same time is a route toward reducing precariousness. Like most of the founders of the initiatives I studied, Aida has long been on social benefits, and at some point, she hopes to secure a livelihood without depending on welfare. This paradox is also identified in the work of De Jong (2019), who found that, despite the fact that peo-ple with a forced migration background regularly gain access to front-line positions in the

migrant support sector, they run into a wall. Because their competences—linguistic and cultural—are often 'regarded as "natural" skills or experiential knowledge' (ibid., p. 324), career mobility in the sector of welfare and social services is 'inadequate.' Former refugees' labor often remains 'hidden, devalued, and unremunerated,' (ibid., pp. 334–335), and disillusions are likely (Van der Veer, 2020). Indeed, it is Aida's im/mobility background that got her into working for the Dutch Refugee Council, yet reorganizations compelled her to start a refugee support initiative herself. For community organizers like Aida, uncertainty and instability are motivations to calibrate a self-entrepreneurial project with municipal values. As they feel that their professional future is unpredictable, they pursue a form of participation that is legible to the local state – and it is in this sense that they yearn for the state, long for their recognition, desire its intervention, and crave its financial backing (cf. Jansen, 2015).

Importantly, however, this yearning for recognition does not imply that initiatives like Aida's are 'simple "instruments" and "transmission belts" of state [...] agencies' (Pries, 2019, p. 13). By virtue of sustaining a public that is bureaucratically fringy, Aida de facto—and without deliberately seeking to—redefines, destabilizes, and challenges conventional boundaries that normally define and represent communities of beneficiaries (cf. Cantat & Feischmidt, 2019, p. 394). In helping Eritrean refugee status holders that were allocated to Rotterdam before 2015—and who therefore initially did have access to the support schemes that emerged in the context of the 'long summer of migration' (Kasparek & Speer, 2015)—yet who risked evacuation, indebtedness and irregularity, Aida's work in a way made up for the local governments' initial inertia regarding these beneficiaries. At the same time, Aida is concerned with reducing her own precariousness: she wants to secure a livelihood and hopes to be off benefits someday.

5   Conclusion

This contribution studied grassroots organizers' struggles over bureaucratic classifications regarding target groups in the field of refugee support in Rotterdam—the second largest Dutch city where a culture of welcome coexists with migrant hostility. It analyzes how grassroots initiatives are affected by the trend to implement 'generic' policies that target the population in general without assuming ethno-racial differences. In Rotterdam, the implementation of these policies is associated with and promoted by the local anti-establishment, anti-immigrant and anti-Islam political party. 'Generic' policies have the potential to foster imaginations that bring together the struggles of refugee status holders and long-term Rotterdammers. However, grassroots organizers strike out blindly with regard to how they should characterize the profile of their beneficiaries without risking eligibility to municipal funding. Grassroots organizers are hesitant to frame their initiative in mono-ethnic terms and have difficulty interpreting municipal policies with regard to group-making. The story of a particular grassroots organizer is evoked to demonstrate how the convergence of solidarity and xenophobia may translate into illegible bureaucratic classifications, and results in profound insecurities for grassroots organizers with a forced migration background who yearn for the value that underpins their affective labor to be noticed and remunerated. I showed that, notwithstanding a 'generic' policy approach, categorizations re-appear in the municipality's conduct, analyzed how this re-appearance

catalyzes bureaucratic illegibility and opacity, and demonstrated how this motivates grassroots organizers to adhere to municipal preferences. I forwarded the observation that, when 'generic' policies collide with the 'emergent publics' sustained by grassroots organizations, this produces fringe-activities that are less legible bureaucratically. This bureaucratic illegibility, which urges grassroots organizers to play guessing games with target groups, allows for grassroots organizations to preemptively adjust their goals and become entangled with the local state. Instead of consolidating this imbrication of grassroots responses with the local state, I cast this imbrication against the background of grassroots' organizers precariousness and struggles to secure a livelihood. Rather than disregarding grassroots' efforts to render legible their endeavors to the local state, I argued that these responses can be understood as attempts to reduce precariousness.

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