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"Activism Is a Good Means to Connect Things": Brokering as World-Making Against Competitive Tendering in Newcomer Support

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Abstract

Neoliberal reform of welfare and integration regimes affects service provisioning for migrants and refugees across Europe. This article studies the effects of competitive tenders (*aanbestedingen*) as a modality of such reform on the political possibilities of small-scale grassroots initiatives that support recent newcomers in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. This article studies these dynamics from the perspective of activists who self-identify as brokers and who assist the organisers of these small-scale initiatives. So far, existing research has rarely looked at the interstices of literature on brokerage and literature of neoliberal reform nor applied literature on neoliberal reform of the nexus of integration/welfare governance in cities—despite evidence that brokers have appeared as critical figures in the context of neoliberalisation and (re)politicisation. Brokerage and neoliberal reform are part and parcel of urban theorising and so are collaborative dimensions to urban governance, urban approaches to asylum and integration, and urban inequalities. Combining studies on brokerage with studies of neoliberal reform, this article shows that brokers make use of their positioning in-between the city administration and small-scale grassroots organisations to engage in a form of world-making that re-connects resistance to depoliticised elements of arrival infrastructure—while trying to help small-scale support initiatives to formalise. The main argument is that the interplay between informal and formal infrastructure gives unique insight into the political-economic dimensions of infrastructuring and to constitutive contradictions that underpin neoliberalisation. It is based on long-term ethnographic research, including a year of full-time fieldwork in Delfshaven, a classic arrival quarter.

Keywords

brokerage; competitive tendering; grassroots initiatives; informality; infrastructure; neoliberalism; newcomer support; refugees; Rotterdam

1. Introduction

"Everything is organised through tenders," Jozefien sighed when I met her in the language café she has co-founded in a grassroots library in Delfshaven, a borough in the West of Rotterdam. Jozefien is a prominent figure in advocacy for refugees who is committed to strengthening small-scale support. When I first met her, she was in her early 70s, and at that point she looked back on a career in local and national politics. Asked about her role in the city, she usually says she sees herself as a "connector," and when asked what motivates her to do so, she more than once mentioned the importance of resisting competitive tendering (*aanbestedingen*). Jozefien is concerned about the ways competitive tendering has "fragmented" (*versnipperd*) the landscape of service provisioning to newcomers. And she is not the only one. The initiators of the grassroots library are driven by a similar mission to resist tendering. In their view, competitive tendering contributes to the weakening of existing socio-physical infrastructure in neighbourhoods (van der Zwaard et al., 2018, p. 12).

Competitive tendering is a particular way of regulating and funding civil society initiatives. In competitive tendering, the municipality sets pre-determined targets and organises a competitive procedure amongst service provisioners. The service provisioner that "wins" the tender will be paid market fees by the municipality. This means that service provisioning has a for-profit character and that the criteria for success are measured by key performance indicators (KPIs) that include the number of migrants helped. In Rotterdam in the field of newcomer integration between 2015 and 2018, organisations bound to a tender for "refugee integration" included the local Dutch Refugee Council. Welfare organisations, too, are bound by tenders.

Literature exists on how neoliberal reform mediates support to migrants and refugees. Examples from urban contexts in the UK (Darling, 2016, 2024), France (Bonduelle, 2022a, 2022b), and Germany (Glick Schiller, 2023; Glick Schiller et al., 2023) bring forward what happens when asylum and integration are treated as business or industry. Other literature examines the role of brokerage in informal networks that play a role in refugees' and migrants' access to resources in arrival infrastructure (Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020; Hans, 2023; Wessendorf, 2022). However, limited research has looked at the interstices of these bodies of literature. Studies on neoliberal reform do not explicitly consider the role of brokerage activities—although studies have shown that brokers are located at the intersections of political, economic, and social systems (Xiang et al., 2012, p. 85), that they have appeared as a critical figure in the context of neoliberal reform (Lindquist, 2015), and that brokers play a role in producing and politicising migration infrastructurally (Lin et al., 2017).

This article is an anthropological study based on ongoing ethnographic research in Rotterdam, including 12 consecutive months of full-time fieldwork. I seek to contribute answers to an ethnographic question that is of interest within anthropology and beyond: How does neoliberal reform transform the in/formal urban infrastructure of resource provisioning by/for refugees and the routines of those who inhabit this infrastructure? To answer this question, I connect studies of neoliberal reform in the governance of integration/welfare to studies on brokerage. The main reason for engaging with these two strands of literature is ethnographic: The people in refugee assistance and advocacy I worked with drew on the notion of "bridge-builder," "connector," and "advisor" in their (self-)identifications and brought up the "tender trap" (*aanbestedingsfuik*) as one of their main concerns.

By bringing my material in dialogue with these two strands of literature I argue that brokerage reveals constitutive contradictions between multiple forms of world-making within arrival infrastructure. Brokers

resist forms of neoliberal reform in welfare/integration governance and politicise informal refugee-led initiatives that they see as viable alternatives to market-driven infrastructure. Meanwhile, these refugee-led initiatives at times experience a pull towards formalising their position by participating in competitive tenders. This constitutive contradiction points to political-economic dimensions of arrival infrastructuring and to existing urban inequalities that surface in the interplay between in/formal actors within this infrastructure.

Although competitive market funding is a common funding structure in urban contexts across Western Europe, differences and similarities between urban and national contexts with regards to forms of economic regulation are unexplored. Few studies have been done about competitive tendering and its effects on service provisioning in the Netherlands specifically. A recent study has shown that in Rotterdam, actors in "urban networks of diversity and inclusion" are critical of the "tendering system" and the "fierce competition for funds" (Schiller et al., 2023, p. 6)—but more research is needed to identify the specificities of urban localities with regards to competitive tendering. We know that migrants in the Netherlands from the 1990s onwards have become "more exposed to market forces" (Bruquetas-Callejo et al., 2007, p. 29) but we don't know how this observation sits with other national political-economic contexts. This study is a first step to giving insight into the effects of these market dynamics on informal spaces and actors in specific urban neighbourhoods.

These dynamics are relevant for the field of urban studies for several reasons. First, urban governance is increasingly structured by the imperative for the local state to cooperate with civil society organisations (Aarsæther et al., 2011). Second, the governance of asylum and integration is delegated to the local level (Darling, 2020; Glorius & Doomernik, 2020; Guiraudon & Lahav, 2000). In the Netherlands these urban forms of asylum- and integration governance are well-researched (Doomernik & Ardon, 2018; Kos et al., 2016). Third, the two key concepts of this contribution are part and parcel of urban theorising—as several studies on brokerage (Jaffe & Koster, 2019; Koster, 2019; McFarlane, 2012) and neoliberal reform (Blanco et al., 2014; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Geddes, 2006) demonstrate. Fourth, this article advances debates about the political-economic dimensions of urban inequalities (Schinkel & van den Berg, 2011; Uitermark & Duyvendak, 2008).

Alongside its contributions to urban studies, this article engages with studies on brokerage and neoliberal reform in the context of arrival infrastructure. It adds to studies on brokerage by showing that people who operate as brokers do not merely close gaps within a given system but also participate in multiple and contradictory forms of world-making. It contributes to studies on neoliberal reform in urban integration/welfare governance by showing how people who occupy in-between positions are a fruitful ethnographic starting point to study how pressures of neoliberalisation transform in/formal urban spaces created by/for migrants and refugees. In doing so, this article brings specific political-economic context of arrival infrastructure into view.

The article develops as follows. The theoretical section examines literature on brokerage and literature on market-driven resource provisioning to refugees and migrants. The methodological section attends to the specificities of the ethnographic fieldwork and analysis that underpins this article. The ethnographic section demonstrates how situated acts of brokerage engage with neoliberal reform that affects arrival infrastructure. The concluding section suggests that neoliberal reform transforms in/formal urban spaces and the activities of people who inhabit these structures.

2. Conceptual Understandings: Brokerage and Neoliberal Reform

In this section I define and connect the two key concepts this article contributes to: brokerage and neoliberal reform. I situate how the tendencies that these concepts purport to describe play out in Rotterdam and for each concept highlight four associated notions that are of specific relevance to my findings and discussion. With regards to brokerage, relevant associated notions are in/formality, in-betweenness, small-scale support initiatives and refugee advocacy, and world-making. For neoliberal reform, relevant associated notions are competitive tendering, integration/welfare governance, infrastructure, and (de)politicisation.

2.1. Brokerage in the Context of Refugee Support: In/Formality, In-Betweenness, and World-Making

Brokers are observed to facilitate flows of goods and resources, to create connections between previously unconnected others, and to translate different rationalities, interests, and meanings (Lindquist, 2015; Mosse & Lewis, 2006; Stovel & Shaw, 2012). Literature on brokerage has demonstrated how brokers mobilise their capacities in various arenas. This includes channelling resources between NGOs, state institutions, and local communities (Koster & van Leynseele, 2018), "brokering care" between donors and people in need of assistance (Fechter, 2020), and participating in economies of advice (James & Koch, 2020). People who operate as "brokers" are seen to rely on their informal relations (Stovel & Shaw, 2012, p. 147). Studies on informality have shown how formal and informal are always connected (Koster & Nuijten, 2016; McFarlane, 2012; Smart & Koster, 2024). With regards to "arrival infrastructure" specifically (see Section 2.2), research has demonstrated the interconnectedness of formal, non-formal, and informal networks (Fawaz, 2017).

One defining characteristic of brokerage is the liminality and moral ambiguity that is ingrained in brokers' structural position (Bräuchler, 2019; Koster & van Leynseele, 2018; Walther, 2021). These studies show that brokers typically occupy positions between groups, persons, rationalities, interests, entities, and logics, and that the field they are situated in is oftentimes characterised by competition, friction, and divergent logics and demands. Research on reception and support for newcomers in the Netherlands for instance appreciates the connective role of people who occupy a liminal position (Ghorashi, 2023; Ghorashi et al., 2023; Larruina & Ghorashi, 2016). These studies have drawn attention to the "insider-outsider position" and "in-between positioning" of people who work as volunteers in asylum seekers' centres (Larruina & Ghorashi, 2016, p. 234), and to "in-between persons" (*tussenpersonen*) whose role is considered in relation to the gap between citizens and the government (Ghorashi, 2023, p. 272). In Dutch neighbourhoods, these persons are called upon to bridge the boundaries between informal support networks that succeed in providing support to groups seen as "hard to reach" and formal organisations that are met with suspicion by such groups (Ghorashi et al., 2023, p. 99).

In Rotterdam specifically, brokerage facilitates exchanges between civil society organisations in the field of diversity and inclusion and the municipality (Schiller et al., 2023). Small-scale minority-led organisations rely on connectors and gatekeepers to get out of "peripheral positions" in an urban system in which "power is unevenly distributed" (Schiller et al., 2023, p. 10). In the wake of the asylum governance crises across Europe in 2015 and 2016, the role of small-scale support initiatives for migrants and refugees specifically gained visibility across Europe (Feischmidt et al., 2019). These initiatives include refugee-led organisations (Larruina et al., 2019; Rast, 2024; van der Veer, 2021). Small-scale support initiatives present opportunities but also challenges for refugees (Larruina, 2023; Rast & Ghorashi, 2018; van der Veer, 2019). A variety of roles,

strategies, positionalities, and stances can be identified among refugees and their advocates in the way they relate to policy (Ponzoni, Ghorashi, et al., 2020; Ponzoni, Mars, & Ghorashi, 2020).

Recent literature on brokerage has cast brokers against the ethical horizon of brokering for a better future and has shown how they hope to make a difference in the lives of others (Bräuchler, 2021; Fechter, 2020). I see this as a shift to attend to the "world-making" potential of brokerage and of the systems in which brokers operate writ large. I define world-making as the capacity to shape new practices and forms of subjecthood within a wider social order by enacting specific projects or visions of political and socio-economic organisation. Other literature has drawn attention to the world-making capacity of phenomena such as resistance (Walters, 2022, p. 133) and the world-making capacity of socio-material infrastructure (Carse, 2007, p. 31). The notion of world-making can be traced down to Dewey (1927) as the creative capacity of humans and nonhumans (Dijstelbloem & Walters, 2021, p. 510). As scholars in science and technology studies who draw inspiration from Dewey's pragmatist philosophy have outlined, "world-making" occurs in making and remaking links between partially connected goods (Law, 2004, p. 151).

2.2. Neoliberal Reform in Integration/Welfare Governance: Competitive Tendering and (De)Politicised Infrastructure

Urban studies research has contributed to understandings of how neoliberalism unfolds in local governance networks (Blanco et al., 2014; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Geddes, 2006). With regards to the neoliberalisation of resource provision to migrants and refugees in urban localities, case studies have drawn attention to the emergence of urban "asylum markets" (Darling, 2016) and "integration business" (Glick Schiller, 2023; Glick Schiller et al., 2023). Through the logics of market competition, economic efficiency, and public–private partnerships, neoliberal reform reshapes sites of service provision (Bonduelle, 2022a, 2022b).

The Rotterdam City Council has entered into partnerships with organizations in the field of civic integration (*inburgering*) and welfare (*welzijn*) that provide services to newcomers. These organizations assist the municipality in fulfilling quotas it receives from the national government. These quotas determine for each Dutch municipality the number of refugee status holders that should be provided with housing and integration programs. The City Council determines the specific KPIs that tendered organisations in integration/welfare governance are bound by—including the number of migrants helped. Thematic priorities in partnerships that the city of Rotterdam has set in recent years include job market orientation, courses in Dutch norms and values, and buddy programs. Just like in similar European localities, services that contracted organisations deliver to migrants and refugees in cities of settlement include navigating bureaucratic barriers, providing psycho-social support, and encouraging social participation (cf. Glick Schiller et al., 2023).

Such partnerships in which governments contract NGOs are part and parcel of neoliberal reform. In these calls for tender, local governments set out specific procurement orders in service provision. NGOs can respond to these calls for tender by putting in a bid. The bid with the most efficient approach to the procurement order "wins" the tender and contractually commits itself to KPIs that the local state identifies to measure the success of the project. Competitive tendering contracts ensure that local states can procure specific services from selected organisations and that contracted organisations can make a profit in ways that are supported by public funds.

Outsourcing to organisations contracted through competitive tendering disperses service provision. There are several reasons to characterise these dispersed provisioning practices as infrastructure. The notion of infrastructure lends itself well to studying the interlinkages of technologies, institutions, and actors (Lindquist & Xiang, 2018, p. 154; cf. Xiang & Lindquist, 2014), and brings into view interconnected practices that facilitate migrant arrival—including practices by informal actors in urban neighbourhoods (Schrooten & Meeus, 2020). Among actors in migrant support in the Netherlands it is common practice to use the word "infrastructure" (*infrastructuur*). An influential government agency for instance speaks of "*aankomstinfrastructuur*" (arrival infrastructure)—including formal organisations (such as the city administration and tendered organisations like the Dutch Refugee Council) and people (such as neighbours; SCP, 2020, p. 19). And as mentioned in the opening paragraph, the initiators of the grassroots library use this word when they claim that competitive tendering "weakens existing socio-physical *infrastructure* of neighbourhoods" (van der Zwaard et al., 2018, p. 12, emphasis added). In all these iterations, "infrastructure" is not just a material non-human configuration but includes human actors.

Infrastructure has particular political ordering capacities and potentials (Lin et al., 2017; van der Veer, 2019). Studies show that the outsourcing to (contracted) NGOs has depoliticising effects on service provision by the state generally (Clarke, 2012) and to asylum seekers and refugees specifically (Darling, 2016). Depoliticisation works alongside processes of neoliberalisation in turning asylum into an economic concern (Darling, 2016). Scholarship has long been concerned with the depoliticising effect of migrant support. Interventions aimed at refugees are observed to "work to establish the refugee phenomenon as a non-political occurrence" (Nyers, 2006, p. 29; cf. Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017, p. 21), while Miriam Ticktin speaks of an "antipolitics of care" (Ticktin, 2011, pp. 14–15).

Combining studies on brokerage with studies on neoliberal reform, in this article I show that brokers make use of their positioning in-between the city administration and small-scale grassroots organisations to engage in a form of world-making that re-connects resistance to depoliticised elements of arrival infrastructure—while trying to help small-scale support initiatives to formalise. I propose that brokers' arrival infrastructuring gives unique insight into the pressures of competitive tendering on small support initiatives for newcomers that are affected by neoliberal reform in integration/welfare regimes.

3. Research Methods

This article is based on ongoing long-term ethnographic field research in Rotterdam. It includes 12 months of full-time field research in 2018. During this time, I lived in Rotterdam, in the borough of Delfshaven. Delfshaven is a classic arrival quarter (Gidley et al., 2018, p. 155). In this borough, 70 percent of the residents have a migration background (Rotterdam City Council, 2016). The borough is recognised for its superdiversity as well as its residents' participation and engagement (IDEM Rotterdam, 2018, p. 12).

Data were collected in accordance with the ethical standards of the Radboud Institute for Social and Cultural Research, the Research Ethics and Review Committee of the Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Research, and the Humanity Ethics Committee from Leiden University. During interactions with my interlocutors, I kept detailed notes of conversations and observations, sometimes in a little booklet, sometimes on my phone, sometimes directly on my laptop. Every evening, I worked on these notes and

added reflections. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data are stored in an encrypted folder secured with a password.

Fieldwork activities included shadowing refugee advocates who acted as brokers as well as grassroots organisers who I accompanied to meetings with other organisations and with public administrators. Refugee advocates were over 70 years of age and were born and raised in the Netherlands; organisers were of differing ages under 40 years of age and had a refugee background. Fieldwork also included engaging in volunteer activities—in the grassroots library, but also in small-scale support initiatives by and for refugees—and spending leisure time with these organisers and with advocates who acted as brokers. I conducted numerous ethnographic interviews with public administrators, funding experts, and people working for migrant reception facilities. I attended many events that were initiated by my interlocutors, including community engagement activities and brainstorming sessions.

The exploratory goal of my study made necessary an inductive research process. The analysis involved several phases of sorting and labelling ethnographic material in accordance with thematic and descriptive categories that emerged in the iterative process of identifying connections and patterns. I discussed these thematic and descriptive categories with my interlocutors during informal fieldwork conversations—which refined my understanding of the dynamics they shared with me.

Contact with most interlocutors was initially established at an event that took place in January 2018 at a "market of initiatives" where more than 30 initiatives that relate to refugees were showcased. The arrival infrastructure in Rotterdam is a rather coherent network that converges on one advisor in particular, Jozefien, who sustained its cohesiveness and functioned as a key informant and gatekeeper. Although I intended to approach scale as an emergent characteristic of this network—that is, to not predetermine a locality that is cut off from any links (Latour, 2016, p. 317; Salter & Walters, 2016, p. 6)—Delfshaven was a key site. More than half of my interlocutors lived and/or worked there.

I use pseudonyms for some participants and organisations to offer privacy and plausible deniability for my interlocutors. The main reason for doing so is that studying the relations between actors—including actors whose social position is under threat—came with expressions of jealousy and suspicion vis-à-vis other actors. These expressions are a valuable epistemological tool in a competitive landscape, yet they could be used against someone in securing alliances. Knowing that people make statements in private they would not make in public, delinking people's names from their words and opinions was an effort to assess future risk and prevent public criticism or abuse (cf. McGranahan, 2021).

Some interlocutors have established scholarly credibility themselves, and in these cases the use of a pseudonym would disregard their contributions. This holds particularly true for the initiators of the grassroots library: one of them has worked on a doctoral dissertation on residents' participation and the other has done anthropology-like research in Rotterdam (de Boer & van der Lans, 2013). Together they have published a book on grassroots organising (Specht & van der Zwaard, 2015) and with four others they wrote the aforementioned report that discussed the impact of competitive tendering (van der Zwaard et al., 2018). This report resonates well with my findings. This article builds on their report by giving the themes it discusses a more contextualised meaning for arrival infrastructure for migrants and refugees specifically.

4. Ethnography

This section unfolds the ethnographic narrative that is at the heart of this contribution. It introduces the interlocutors and their concerns around competitive tendering, situates local alternatives to competitive tendering, and provides a contextualised understanding of the pull of competitive tendering on small-scale organisations that lays bare constitutive contradictions of arrival infrastructuring.

4.1. Retired Professionals With Activist Aspirations Who Operate as Brokers

The professional histories of the three most prominent brokers in this study give insight into the professional networks they nurture. These histories provide context to the world-making these brokers engage in, explains the meaning they attribute to resistance, and helps to understand how they seek to politicise elements of urban arrival infrastructure. Truus, Henk, and Jozefien look back on a career in refugee advocacy, local politics, social work, and trust funds. Born at the end of the 1940s and early 1950s, their careers flourished halfway through the 1970s during a progressive left-wing cabinet, in the heydays of the "community development work" (*opbouwwerk*) and when the market forces that would gain traction in the 1980s were not a concern yet. They have retired but are still committed to strengthening the position of small-scale refugee-led initiatives in the city in the face of welfare retrenchments and competitive tendering. Mourning over welfare drawbacks—that take shape in the form of "disappearing infrastructure" and "dwindling expertise"—is a vital force that motivates them to provide backing for refugee-led support initiatives in Rotterdam.

"There's an activist under every paving stone," Jozefien once said to me about Delfshaven, the borough she has lived in for decades. She is vice-president of the resident-led neighbourhood council in Rotterdam's borough of Delfshaven and is affiliated with the Socialist Party. In Jozefien's words, the language café is a "meeting ground between refugees and volunteers" that helps people to "settle into the neighbourhood." What is "of chief importance" in her work, she once told me, is to "revitalise the knowledge, experience, and talents" of refugee-led organisations. Next to running the language café, Jozefien assists refugee-led initiatives to access resources from the local government. Resources include influential people and financial assets.

Truus, another prominent advisor, is driven by a similar set of affects. Having worked as a lecturer in "welfare work" (*welzijnswerk*) in education programs for social workers, she more than once exclaimed to me that "this is not how I trained them!" usually in the context of the public sector (*maatschappelijk middenveld*) "simply executing" procurement orders (*inkoopopdrachten*) instead of having "a vision of their own." Like Jozefien, Truus is also committed to boosting the talents of people with a forced migration background. And for Henk, a former director of the local Refugee Council who is worried about the "dissolving" of support organisations for refugees, things are no different. The advisors are thus concerned by the dismantling of previously existing "infrastructure" and are personally committed to helping people with a refugee background to flourish in the face of the liberalisation of welfare provision.

All three brokers believe in resistance and disobedience. Truus more than once called for "the public sector" to "resist" (*zich verzetten*) and Henk regularly called out the "obedience" (*braafheid*) of people who accept "problematic policies." Jozefien is confident that "activism [*actievoeren*] is a good means to connect things."

4.2. Assisting Refugee-Led Initiatives

By assisting people with a refugee background to set up refugee support initiatives and by "connecting status holders to different initiatives in the borough," to use her terms, Jozefien works directly with and for the people affected by the developments she denounces. She introduces newcomers not only to the language café she co-founded but also to other small-scale support organisations in the city. This includes for instance Aida's initiative and Luciano's initiative. In order to shed light on the coordination between the brokers and the small-scale refugee-led initiatives they give advice to, it is relevant to know some details about these two initiatives and the organisers that started them.

Both organisers came to the Netherlands as refugees themselves and over time came to use their migration background as a form of capital to help newcomers with learning the Dutch language and navigating the Dutch bureaucracy. "It would be so good if people like Aida and Luciano would be given more credit," Jozefien told me one morning in a conversation when she generously praised the competences of these two organisers. "Luciano really is a key actor," Jozefien added, and remarked that "the municipality and the Refugee Council should make use of his position."

The three brokers try to make visible to local administrators what is the added value of Aida's and Luciano's initiatives. Truus once explained to me that what she admired so much about Aida's initiative is the "personal involvement" of the organiser—while contrasting this approach with organisations that are (in Truus' words) "more formal." In helping these organisers, Jozefien seeks to strengthen an informal infrastructure that is grounded in what she calls "solidarity"—not only via Rotterdam's solidarity platform, but also by fostering personal connections between resident-led initiatives and promoting the work of such initiatives on social media platforms.

4.3. "Where Are All the Small Foundations? The Entire Social Domain is Tendered!"

To make tangible the effects of neoliberal reform in integration/welfare governance, it makes sense to add detail to the frustrations with competitive tendering that grassroots organisers and their advisors reported to me. The ascendancy of competitive tendering is something the brokers fiercely disapprove of. "They have to stop with these tenders immediately!" Truus told me over tea at her home. When I asked her why, she explained that "civil society should do the agenda setting." What she means is that with competitive tendering, the municipality predefined targets that NGOs only respond to. "Resistance" is Truus' solution to counter these dynamics. Henk has a similar view, and considers organisations with a competitive tender as an "executive organisation of the government" (*uitvoeringsorganisatie van de overheid*). And Jozefien, too, is concerned about the fact that (in her words) "organisations have become keen on the numbers," referring to KPIs. "I don't like that," she added.

The grassroots organisers, too, are concerned with how the municipality spoils the spirit of small initiatives like theirs. Aida repeatedly grumbled to me that, as a result of competitive tendering, "all money goes to big foundations." In a conversation Aida had with the founder of a funding organisation, Aida felt that her impressions were confirmed: She nodded heavily when this founder said, rhetorically and with agitation, "Where are all the small foundations? The entire social domain is tendered!" And more often I heard how grassroots organisers would denounce competitive tenders. "The question is: Do competitive tendering

contracts help the people?" Luciano once rhetorically asked me. He began, "These market dynamics…" before trailing off and shaking his head instead. And one afternoon, when I was drinking tea with her and a volunteer who works for her initiative, Aida said about tendered organisations that they "do control, control, control." "Everything that's concerned with the municipality, for us, is the government," Aida added.

4.4. Clashes Between Resident-Led Initiatives and Tendered Organisations: "These People Are 'Neighbours,' not 'Clients'"

The following vignette further illustrates the effects of competitive tendering and gives insight into how brokers occupy a position of in-betweenness vis-à-vis formal and informal infrastructure. At times when tensions between tendered organisations and grassroots initiatives were palpable, I have seen how the refugee advocates operated as mediators. One afternoon, a meeting was convened between small-scale welfare initiatives in the borough of Delfshaven and a welfare organisation with a competitive tender to see how they could collaborate. Together with eight others, Truus and Jozefien were there alongside Aida.

One woman who works for a small-scale welfare initiative, Hannah, got into an argument with the representative of the tendered welfare organisation. Hannah's initial point was that she finds it "disturbing" that tendered organisations refer beneficiaries to small initiatives that are largely run by volunteers and thereby "pass on difficult issues to a network of volunteers." Hannah added that "if I make a mistake, I am liable myself, whereas you [the representative from the contractually tendered welfare organisation] would be backed up by your organisation." At that point Aida joined the discussion too, emphasising that "organisations like mine bear a lot of responsibility, but we don't have the capacity." The representative of the tendered welfare organisation responded by saying that she "simply has one pair of hands," and that the organisation she works for is "just more policy-oriented." What this meant, the representative explains, is that she does not have a lot of room to manoeuvre and that she has to represent "her client's interests." Something in the representative's response seemed to infuriate both Aida and Hannah. Hannah said: "So you, the institutional side, get all defensive now? This conversation is getting out of hand!" Aida snapped: "And by the way, these people are *neighbours*, not 'clients.'" After taking a deep breath, Hannah cried out: "My heart is pounding right now! This is just not right!"

The advocates encouraged all present to "express their grievances," and complimented the participants by saying, "You all are doing fantastic work!" In addition, they tried to highlight the importance of the current conversation in itself by saying, "The restructuring of the welfare sector is happening today, right here right now!" The representative of the welfare organisation, however, became impatient: "I don't have time for this. What can I do *now*?" Jozefien suggested to organise "a fair discussion about what we all stand for, and work towards a collaboration of formal and informal parties." The topic was closed, but grievances resurfaced after the meeting. About the argument, Truus said, "We have been having this discussion for years already!" And about the contractually tendered welfare organisation, Truus said, "They are not listening! They are always defending themselves! They are not asking questions!" Truus turned her attention to me and added: "This is going terribly wrong."

4.5. Meanwhile in the Grassroots Language Café: "We Are Just Talking…and Listening. It's Good"

Alongside urban spaces in which resident-led initiatives clash with tendered organisations, there are also spaces that deliberately resist neoliberalisation. One such space is the aforementioned grassroots library. Jozefien operates as a gatekeeper of this space. The following vignette offers an example in which control and ownership became unsettled and where different target audiences coexist.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let's get started again!" (*dames en heren, we gaan weer beginnen*!), Fadi playfully announced to the four fellow participants who were seated at the round table. As he tried to get everybody's attention, he chuckled to himself and beamed with pride. Fadi is one of the participants of the language classes that are organised in a grassroots library in the West of Rotterdam. It was his idea to take the lead in kicking off the class today, and by the looks of it he enjoyed it. For this short moment he in fact took over my role as teacher—by keeping order and managing the class—but also took the floor in Dutch, a language that he is not yet proficient in. Fadi was born in Syria and was in his early twenties when I met him.

During classes, Dutch-speaking residents would volunteer to help people who wanted to improve their Dutch. In fact, it was me who introduced Fadi to the language class. I did so because he once said to me that the "formal" language and integration courses that he took were—in his words—"a bit odd" (*een beetje raar*). Fadi said to me, about these formal classes: "They focus a lot on how you present yourself. About how you sit, how you walk, how you talk, that you shouldn't move your hands too much." Hoping to offer him a more informal space to practice his Dutch, I encouraged him to go to the language café.

One participant characterised the cafe to me as "we're just talking. No homework. No exercises. And listening. It is good." Indeed, the set-up of the classes was spontaneous, and so was the door policy: Everyone who wanted to learn the Dutch language was welcome. Participants I conversed with included an engineer whose mother tongue is Serbian, an architect from Portugal, and a historian from Syria. These three men would not be likely to meet each other: Being labelled as an "economic migrant," an "expat," and a "refugee status-holder," respectively, they would flow through different bureaucratic channels. The language café is one of the rare places where people whose asylum procedures reached different outcomes gather.

The language café is located in a building that operates as a grassroots library since 2013. From the start, the initiators insisted on not receiving municipal funding: Because such funding is coupled with "shifting policy targets," such funding would compromise their "autonomy" (van der Zwaard et al., 2018). Also, the library does not participate in "professional networks in the social domain" because instead it cherishes its "close connection to the direct surroundings and other self-organisations in the city" (van der Zwaard et al., 2018, p. 51).

4.6. The Pressure to Formalise: "Self-Sufficiency Is an Illusion That Should Be Readily Abandoned"

The constitutive contradictions that underpin the world-making that brokers in refugee advocacy engage in could be grasped by considering the pressure to formalise and the pull of competitive tendering on small-scale organisations—despite reasons to resist neoliberal reform at the same time.

Although the organisers are critical of the way competitive tenders regulate support for newcomers, they could also be a means used to secure the work that they envision doing. Every now and then the organisers

did express ambitions to draw on these instruments themselves. This most clearly happened in the case of Luciano's initiative. Instead of regular complaints about "market dynamics," he more often came to speak about "customisation" (*maatwerk*) and "alignment" (*stroomlijning*)—terms that have a rather formal sound to them. He also changed the focus of his initiative to better match the pre-determined targets of competitive tenders set by the municipality at that time, invited a policy advisor who decides on competitive tendering contracts to an event he organised, and mentioned to this policy advisor that he was open to "collaborate."

In the face of short-lived funding from subsidy regimes, Luciano reckoned that his initiative could become more durably embedded within the support infrastructure through tendering. As demonstrated elsewhere (van der Veer, 2021), most organisers struggle to secure a livelihood, work hard to turn their initiative into a life-sustaining practice, try to negotiate for themselves a legitimate social position, and attempt to bring their initiatives into congruence with what they think is considered remunerable and valued by the local state.

The advocates who support refugee-led initiatives, on the one hand, are committed to helping organisers with a forced migration background to establish such a legitimate social position. On the other hand, they diametrically oppose competitive tendering. This tension points to differences in positionality between the organisers and their advisers. While the advisors use their positioning in-between formal and informal infrastructure for brokering against competitive tendering, the organisers are positioned differently and have different concerns and aspirations.

The initiators of the grassroots library who wrote the report that discussed the impact of competitive tendering recognise this tension. Although they themselves insist on remaining what they call "autonomous" and "informal," they recognise this pressure on grassroots initiatives to "formalise" (van der Zwaard et al., 2018, p. 11). The municipality plays a role in supporting most informal initiatives in Rotterdam (p. 51), the authors write, and this is not something to denounce per definition: "The feasibility of self-sufficiency is an illusion that should be readily abandoned" (p. 59), they argue. Support by "the institutional world" is pressing for "reasons of continuity" (*de continueringsvraag*; p. 5): because applying for short-lived project funding consumes a lot of time and energy for small-scale informal organisations, the increased formalisation of initiatives renders them eligible to competitive tenders—which are seen to offer relative durability. Participating in competitive tenders can be a way to fix structural financial problems caused by short-lived subsidy regimes (p. 18).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

How does neoliberal reform transform in/formal urban infrastructure of resource provisioning by/for refugees and the routines of those who inhabit this infrastructure? This has been the central question of this article. What I showed is that tendering exerts pressure on informal infrastructure. Some of my interlocutors are concerned that neoliberal values and logics that have been adopted in formal infrastructure deteriorate informal support infrastructure in neighbourhoods. The rhetorical question "Where are all the small foundations?" is on the minds of people who have long been working in Rotterdam's "social domain." The question is rhetorical because the consensus among the interlocutors in this study is that small-scale neighbourhood-based initiatives have "dissolved" as an effect of competitive tendering. Pressured by a high "responsibility" (for "difficult issues"), a high "liability" (without "back-up"), and insufficient "capacity" (as they are volunteer-led), small-scale organisations "disappear." Instead of a logic of "solidarity," a logic of

"numbers" is said to gain traction, "neighbours" transform into "clients" that contribute to tendered organisations' KPIs, and a logic of "control, control, control" springs up. In the ongoing arrival infrastructuring, civil society initiatives have lost their "agenda-setting" function and have become "simply executive"—the advisors claim.

This pressure on informal infrastructure shows that formal and informal infrastructure are entangled in the sense that values and logics from formal infrastructure get to circulate in informal networks. The refugee advocates in this study are uniquely positioned at the interface of informal and formal infrastructure: They nurture contacts with activist movements, resident-led task forces, and neighbourhood-based spaces, but also with political parties, the city administration, renowned civil society organisations, funding organisations, and higher education institutes. In the view of some of my interlocutors, formal infrastructure is experienced as "the institutional side" and civil society organisations that are part of this infrastructure are seen to be "executive organisation[s] of the government." Informal infrastructure, on the other hand, is seen to be grounded in "solidarity" and includes urban spaces in which control and ownership between refugees and volunteers are unsettled and where different target audiences coexist.

This positioning in-between formal and informal infrastructure equips the refugee advocates well to mediate between representatives of formal organisations with a competitive tendering contract and more informal neighbourhood-based resident initiatives (including refugee-led organisations). This in-betweenness also equips these advocates well to connect informal initiatives to resources distributed by formal organisations. Given the informal contacts these advisors nurture with people in various local arenas of power, they can engage in advocacy work on behalf of refugee-led initiatives that struggle to receive "credit" from formal organisations. By helping the organisers to access influential people as well as funding possibilities, advisors further weave together the formal and informal infrastructure. Their in-betweenness is an asset that allows them to translate between different rationales.

Given the structural entanglement of formal and informal infrastructure it is not simply that the advocates close some kind of gap. This entanglement in and of itself is also not something the advocates denounce. As we have seen, the "self-sufficiency" of initiatives is an "illusion" and support from "the institutional world" is pressing for "reasons of continuity." Rather than closing a gap, the advocates are on a value-driven mission to "revitalise" informal infrastructure. They do so by being a gatekeeper of spaces that resist the values and logics of formal (tendered) infrastructure, but also by translating the added value of small-scale initiatives (and particularly refugee-led initiatives) to local administrators and by helping informal initiatives access formal resources.

They do so by putting up what they call "resistance," by engaging in "activism," by encouraging others not to be "obedient" and to have a "vision." Incited by this explicitly political goal, they counterwork the depoliticisation that—in the context of competitive tendering in migrant support infrastructure specifically—is observed to go alongside neoliberalisation. Combining the brokers' capacity to shape the circulation of resources with their explicit vision about socio-economic organisation and their commitment to helping organisers with a forced migration background, the world-making capacity of the kind of infrastructuring they are a driving force of becomes manifest. Noting that previous studies define world-making as the making and remaking of links, world-making seems to be an intuitive yet largely under-explored dimension of brokerage.

In this study, the three advisors are driven by a similar vision to resist tendering. This resistance is one of multiple strategies but there are also others—depending on positionality and context. As we have seen, some organisers with a refugee background who are critical of neoliberal reform at the same time experience a pull from competitive tendering. They are tempted to yield the values and logics of competitive tendering as this carries the promise of securing a position of relative durability in Rotterdam's arrival infrastructure. Apart from differences in positionality and relative privilege between the three advocates on the one hand and the grassroots organisers they support on the other, this points to contradictory forms of world-making that are constitutive to arrival infrastructuring. It is worth recalling here that tendered infrastructure in itself is world-making—but in ways that the brokers in this study diametrically oppose. What this shows is that arrival infrastructuring is not univocal but is grounded in a diversity of practices and ongoing negotiations between differently positioned actors who play various roles. Situated encounters this article unfolded—between advocates, welfare organisations, neighbourhood-based organisations, and beneficiaries—revealed just that.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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