

An innovative approach to refugee support and integration in the Netherlands

Dr. Leendert de Bell

CARe Network event, Prague 21 May 2026



De Bell, L. (2025). Plan Einstein. Een innovatieve aanpak voor de integratie van vluchtelingen. In: Wilken, J.P., & Den Hollander, D. (eds). Handboek Steunend Relationeel Handelen. Werken aan herstel en kwaliteit van leven. Uitgeverij SWP, 3d ed., 440-450.

- Refugees often experience prolonged periods of uncertainty
 ➡ before, during and after the flight
- Coping with disruption requires time and effort
 ➡ from the individual AND from the community
- The longer the uncertainty lasts, the more difficult the integration becomes

“Living together, Learning together, Working together”

- a) creating spaces for interaction where newcomers and residents of Utrecht can connect
- b) actively supporting the development of social networks
- c) fostering personal development and building a new future from the moment of arrival



Impact

Positive approach towards forced migration and an inclusive society

Outcome

Plan Einstein offers the space and opportunity to people to immediately start working on a new future from the moment of arrival, even if this future is not in the Netherlands.

Output

Space for encounter

Building a social network

Personal development & building a future

Feeling welcome

Contribute to wellbeing

Expanding the social network

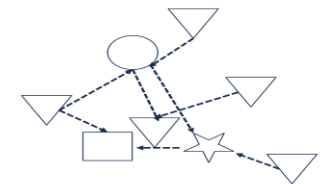
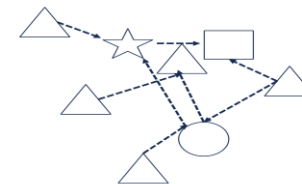
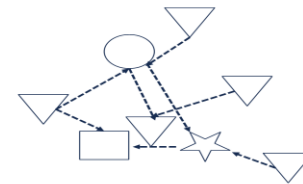
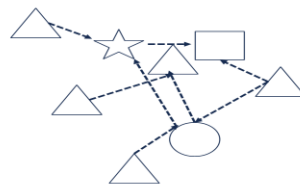
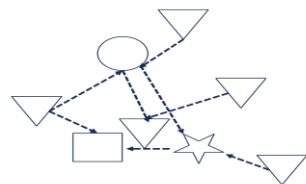
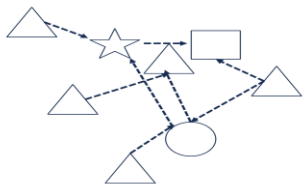
Being/ feeling informed

Expanding professional network

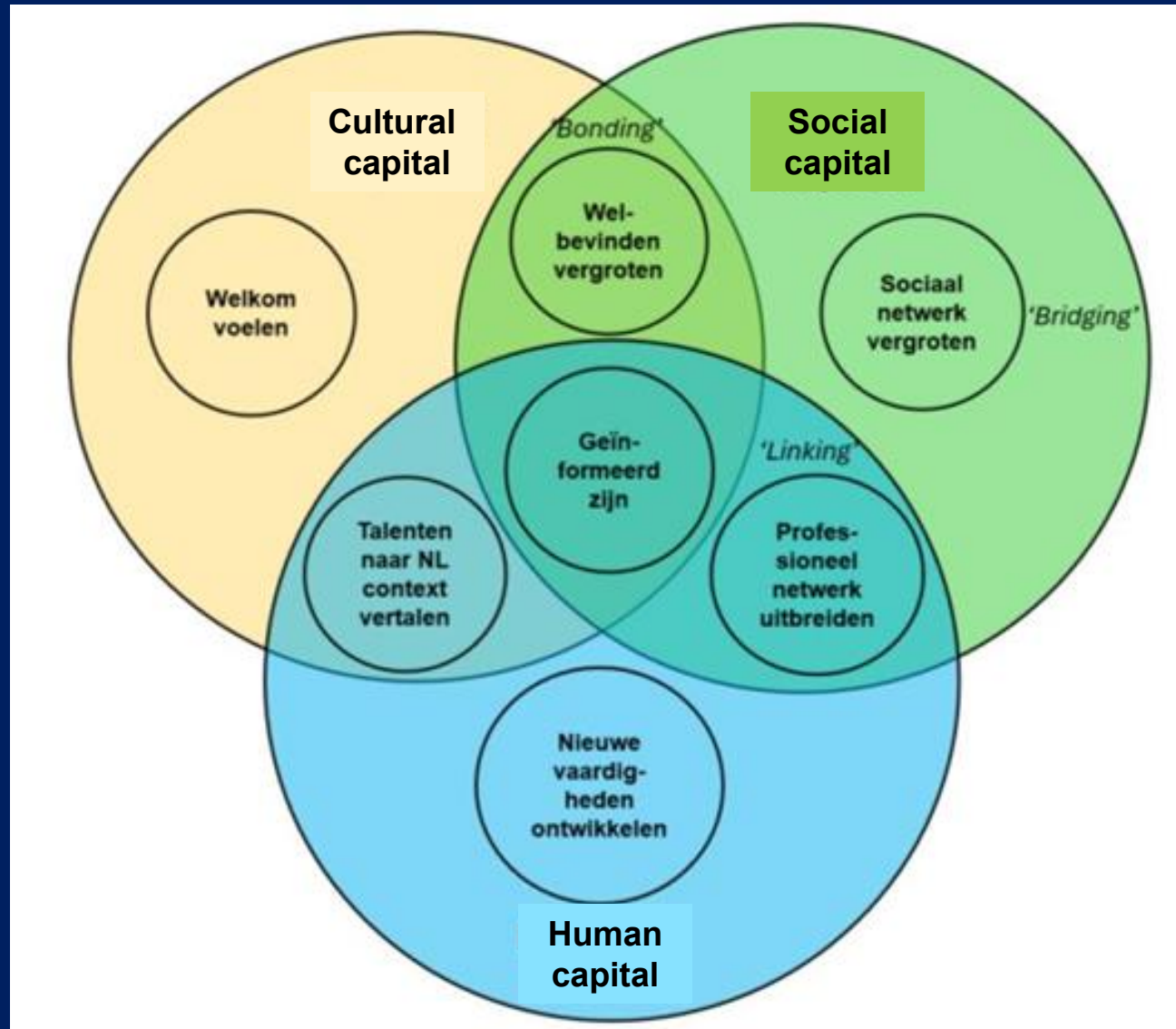
Translating talents to NL

Developing new skills

Activities



Focus areas Plan Einstein





- A physical space where people can meet (e.g., “living room, community garden”) *“People come and go. You have many different kinds of conversations there.”*
- Activities in which meeting others is central (e.g., language cafés, women’s evenings, cooking together, or making music) *“There are many different people, cultures, and dishes here—we help each other.”*

- Non-verbal activities can play a valuable role in processing traumatic experiences and social vulnerability. *“I have exercised, I have danced... I actually feel very light. And also tired—physically tired—but when I started, I was mentally exhausted, and now I am physically tired”*





- Social safety; special attention is given to specific groups (e.g., women and children)
- Transparent information
“I really appreciated being taken seriously.”

- Focus on enhancing well-being and building self-confidence
- (Re)discovering talents
- *“It feels good that in this country I can explore life and myself more freely together with others.”*



Plan Einstein

- An environment-oriented approach; providing a safe setting with a wide range of activities; participation in activities is voluntary and without obligation
- The approach is collective in nature (no formal client–care provider relationships)

Challenges

- Activities are offered by many different partners—some on a structural basis, others periodically or as one-off events—how to maintain a clear and continuous overview of an individual's development over time?
- Constantly changing population makes it difficult to offer activities that consistently match participants' current needs



Contact



leendert.debell@hu.nl

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/leendertdebell/>