

## **Migrating knowledge**

### **Textile repair and building renovation abilities that migrants bring to the Netherlands.**

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## GMD Seedfund Blogpost - Migrating knowledge: Textile repair and building renovation abilities that migrants bring to the Netherlands.

21 Jan 2025

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**About the Authors:** **Johan** has a background in the transdisciplinary design of infrastructure with a key emphasis on engaging stakeholders from diverse disciplinary backgrounds to achieve societal impact. He has researched construction labour, building renovation, circular practices in the built environment, and social integration around construction projects. **Antonella** is a governance scholar with long experience in transdisciplinary research in different domains of sustainability, from water to energy and waste. Her research revolves around the community-state encounters, ethics/values and other drivers (like skills, knowledge and boundary spanners) that shape these relationalities. She has investigated the post-consumer textile value chain in the Netherlands.

**Mandy** is a LDE project manager focussing on transdisciplinary education. She is connecting student research with real issues from and in [The Hague Southwest Thesis Hub](#).

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**About the project:** Together, we work on an LDE research grant exploring the diversity of migrant populations in the Hague, particularly those engaged in building renovations and textile repair. Johan and Antonella are both part of a Dutch academic network with a critical perspective on infrastructure and share a common interest in transdisciplinarity and sustainability. The LDE Governance Center on Diversity and Migration offered an opportunity to combine this common interest. Antonella and Mandy have been working together in the course on Transdisciplinary Skills of the Master of Governance of Sustainability for the past three years, involving stakeholders in The Hague South West in student workgroup assignments.

# MIGRATING KNOWLEDGE: TEXTILE REPAIR AND BUILDING RENOVATION ABILITIES THAT MIGRANTS BRING TO THE NETHERLANDS.

*Can these skills work as a catalyst for hybrid, respectful integration?*

## The Overlooked Potential of Migrant Knowledge

Migration is a defining feature of today's world, shaping economies, cultures, and communities. In sectors such as construction renovation and textile repair, migrant workers contribute to sustainability practices, providing jobs that in the destination countries, citizens do not want or, more often, are not able to do. Yet, despite their contributions, migrant workers often face barriers to integration and recognition as skilled professionals. Depending on the context, migrants' skills can be exploited/underpaid, scorned, underestimated, neglected but also recognized and valued. Natasha Iskander, studying migrant workers in the building sector in Qatar, notices how "skills", as a concept, serve as a *litmus test* for the study of labour practice revealing the nature of work organisation and routines, whether of dominance or collaboration (Iskander, 2021). Skills can be the source of autonomy and creativity, a key resource that migrants bring in their "cultural baggage". However, they can also constitute a negative mark, especially when they are unrecognised or just absent (the "unskilled") or exploited when they are not associated with human rights. What role do skills like those that align with principles of sufficiency, durability and care, that inform practices of repairing/maintaining, play in democratic contexts, where labour is protected by a state of law? Do they support integration and what kind of integration? Can these skills support a process of integration that is open to pluralism and cultural hybridity or do they will just, in the best case, offer a job in the new country? These are all questions that migration studies in the Dutch contexts have not yet posed and that we want to investigate with research funded by the Leiden-Delft-Erasmus Governance of Migration and Diversity Hub.

Researching knowledge/skills coming from different countries and cultures, and their relations with sustainable practices and principles, we aim to better understand how skills support community building and social integration (Maiello et al., 2013), acknowledging the diverse experiences, and expertise of migrant workers, and reconsidering the labour-knowledge-ecology-governance nexuses (Clegg & Ninan, 2023).

In the Netherlands, the Hague South West is a vibrant and diverse urban area where over 75% of the residents have a migration background. Despite its cultural richness, the region grapples with significant socioeconomic challenges. Many residents live in poverty, with life expectancy seven years below the city average. Children in the area face learning delays, and unemployment rates remain high. The housing stock in the region reflects another challenge. With 80% of homes built before 2000, there is a need to improve energy efficiency and insulation through renovations. These challenges, however, also present opportunities triggering bottom-up, or government-led initiatives that, in some cases, leverage cultural diversity while engaging with multiple migrant communities. This blog summarises the preliminary exploration of two student groups within the course on Transdisciplinary Skills (Master Programme in Governance of Sustainability - <https://studiegids.universiteitleiden.nl/en/courses/123876/transdisciplinary-skills>) from Leiden University who conducted a four-week exploration in The Hague South West, search for people with migrant background working in construction renovation and textile repair.

## Renovation in the Construction Sector

The construction-focused group worked mapping out a strategy to reach out housing repairing professionals with a migrant background in The Hague South West. They compiled their findings in a zine titled *Roots + Roofs of The Hague South West: Stories of Migrant Knowledge in Circular Housing Renovation*.

Housing corporations own most of the area's housing and were identified as key players in the construction sector. However, in the limited timeframe of their research, students could not find any direct link between housing corporations and housing renovation workers with a migration background. While doing field work and visiting neighbourhood events, they found stakeholders, such as Buurtmoeders (Neighbourhood mothers), active in the promotion of social cohesion and interested in migrant-related research. The group created a problem tree, as shown in Figure 1, covering the causes, core problems and consequences of the outreach strategy by reflecting on their in-field observations.

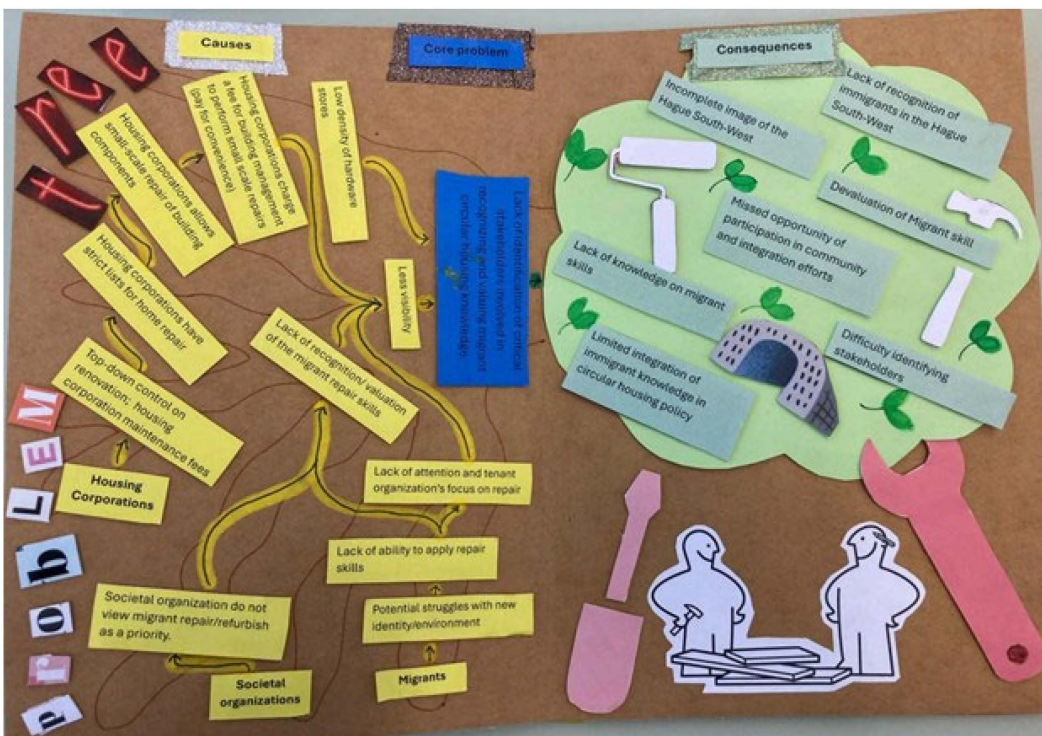


Figure 1: Problem tree of migrant knowledge integration in the building renovation sector

Reaching out to migrants working on housing maintenance proved difficult. This category is not structured into initiatives or groups but is made up of individual or small-medium company workers who cannot be easily identified through a fieldwork approach. One of the findings from the exercise was the need to develop a different approach to reach out to people with a migration story and working in the building renovation sector.

## Repair in the Textile Sector

The textile-focused group documented their findings in a zine titled *Threads Without Borders*. They began their exploration with a powerful example from the Vrederust neighbourhood, where Moroccan weaving techniques were used to repurpose plastic waste into bags, carpets and plant pots. This initiative showcased how traditional skills are used as a means of community building and creatively applied to address a sustainability challenge like plastic waste.

The group's research revealed a dense network of stakeholders in the textile reusing and repairing sector, including social hubs, sewing teachers, and swap initiatives. Civil institutions, like the municipality and *Stichting Escamp voor Vrouwen*, also play a critical role in facilitating integration and funding. The sector faces significant barriers like high rental costs for workspace, and reliance on informal relationships but also shows the social integration and non-monetary economic value (Gibson-Graham, 2008) of know-how brought from a different culture and country. Students mapped the links between these stakeholders in the form of participation, funding, and customers as shown in Figure 2 below.

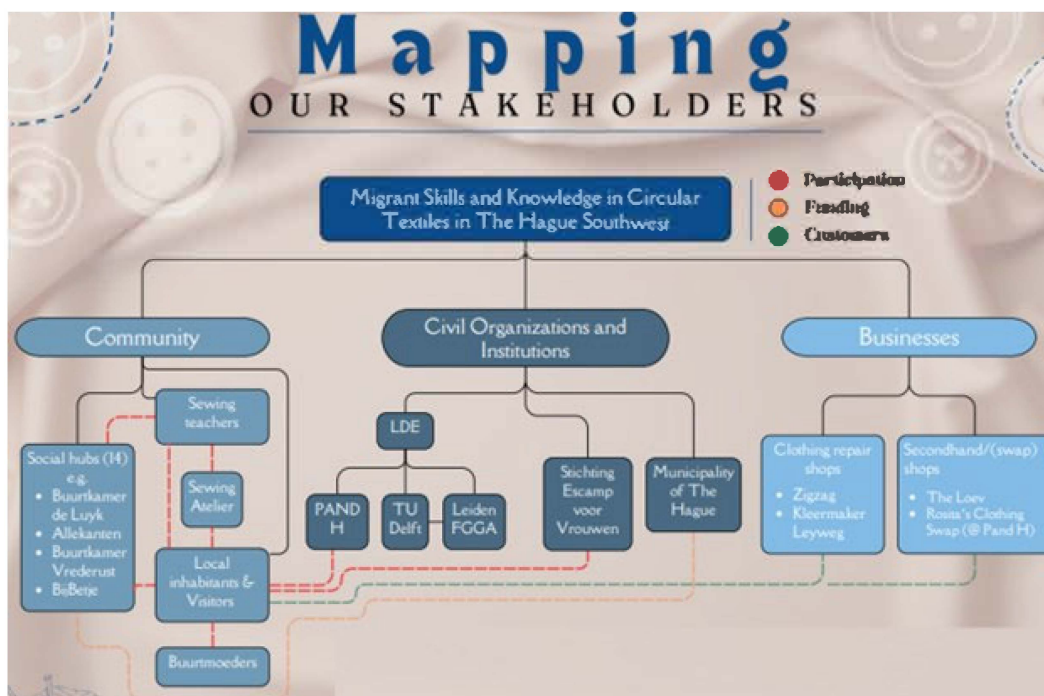


Figure 2: Stakeholder map of migrant knowledge integration in the textile repair sector

Their research highlighted the transformative potential of textile circularity not only for sustainability but also for community building and cultural exchange.



## Cross-Case Comparison

Both projects revealed shared patterns, such as common networks, challenges, and opportunities, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Comparing insights from construction renovation and textile repair

Aspect	Construction renovation	Textile repair	Key Takeaways
<b>Stakeholders</b>	Housing corporations, social organizations, and community groups.	Social hubs, sewing teachers, micro-businesses, and civil institutions.	Civil institutions and community groups are key players.
<b>Challenges</b>	Limited visibility of migrant skills, and lack of recognition.	High rental costs, informal partnerships.	Both sectors face integration barriers, but they are quite different and not yet observed for the construction sector.
<b>Solutions</b>	Knowledge-sharing spaces, bilingual training, and stakeholder collaboration.	Certifications, micro-grants, access to resources.	Recognition, policy changes and capacity-building initiatives are crucial across both sectors.
<b>Opportunities</b>	Circular housing renovation with energy-efficient practices.	Community-building, through textile repair and cultural exchange.	Migrant knowledge integration can drive sustainability goals while promoting a diverse economy of social integration.

Thus, it was seen from the study that the skills and knowledge of migrants align closely with the principles of the circular economy, which emphasises reuse, sufficiency, and environmental stewardship.

## We would like to hear your story!

We are excited to advance this research and hear the stories of individuals with specific skills, particularly those acquired through their migrant background and brought to the Netherlands. If you are reading this blog and either identify as one of these individuals or know someone skilled in building renovation or textile repair with a migrant background who might be willing to share their story, we would love to hear from you. Sharing these stories - we believe - can work already as a meaningful practice of integration. Additionally, we see this as an opportunity for knowledge and cultural exchange, especially as two of us are migrants ourselves. If you are interested in learning more about our findings or contributing to this initiative, we encourage you to reach out to us using the email contacts provided. Of course, we abide by research ethics rules and protocols; henceforth, the stories will stay anonymous, and all data will be safely stored.

We want to thank you and acknowledge the impressive work done by our two student groups - building renovation (Thom Berkenbosch, Anouk van Balen, Shawn Liu, Maxime Leger, and Charlene Tai); textile repair (Lucia Causape Bueno, Thom Makkink, Angela Verocai, Lukas Lehner, and Ronja Englund)

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