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A Bridge Waiting to Be Built:

Rotterdam's Entrepreneurial Elite and Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurs

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As soon as you walk out of Rotterdam Central Station, several skyscrapers greet you with logos of multinational corporations. These buildings tower the city's skyline and are emblems of the city's business successes. After bombardment in World War II, Rotterdam was rebuilt and became known for its resilience and business prowess. Rotterdam's economic status is illustrated in its current role as Europe's largest port and as one of the three major centers, alongside Amsterdam and Eindhoven, of the Dutch economy. Rotterdam is also a European nucleus for entrepreneurship and innovation. Home to the Erasmus Centre for Entrepreneurship and the Rotterdam Business School, the city of Rotterdam claims to provide a bustling and nurturing environment for both studying and starting new business ventures. Rotterdam's business community, however, puts the presence of its minority communities in the periphery. With its eyes in the distance, Rotterdam's wealthy business community has overlooked the entrepreneurial spirit of its minority communities that played a pivotal role in enabling it to be able to see so far in the first place

Just behind the massive buildings that greet Rotterdam's visitors as they walk outside central station are also emblems of marginalization and gentrification. Rotterdam is one of Europe's most diverse neighborhoods, home to a multitude of ethnicities, religious backgrounds, and cultures. These vibrant communities, however, live in the shadow of Rotterdam's entrepreneurship sector that has insufficiently addressed the needs of many of its local residents. Rotterdam's business prowess was built on the hard work of the same community that has been unsuccessful in stitching into its exclusive business fabric. The successes of Rotterdam as a port city and important transport hub made it a popular destination for all kinds of migrants. In the sixties large influxes of low-skilled labor migrants (and later their families) came from Southern Europe, Turkey, and Morocco. After the end of the Dutch colonial period, migrants from Indonesia, Suriname, and the Dutch Caribbean also arrived. Recent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, the former Soviet Union, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Somalia have led to new migration waves of asylum seekers. Since the enlargement of the European Union, migrants from Poland, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary have found their way to the port city as well.

Currently, Rotterdam is home to about 175 nationalities, comparable to global cosmopolitan centers like London and New York. Rotterdam also has the highest percentage of foreigners from non-industrialized nations in the Netherlands. According to data from the Open Society Foundations, 47.7% of the population is of non-Dutch origins or has at least one parent born outside the country. In addition, 13% of the population, including the current Mayor, is Muslim. These diverse dynamics could be a source of economic growth for the city but unfortunately they are also drivers of exclusion. In September 2014 the Transatlantic Council on Migration pointed out that the city of Rotterdam is still segregated. One of the

clearest socioeconomic and ethnic demarcations is the Maas River that divides the city in the richer northern part and the much poorer southern part. Most of the houses in the center of the city are of low quality due to the time constraints in which they had to be built in order to keep up with rapid growth. People with lower formal education and with immigrant backgrounds mostly populate the center while the higher educated native Dutch inhabitants are mostly found in the suburbs. There is a strong geographical division between the poor immigrant population and the richer native population.

This divide is reflected amongst many organizations that work in the entrepreneurship scene in Rotterdam. Many members of Rotterdamse Nieuwe, a community of Rotterdam based entrepreneurs, are unfamiliar with local entrepreneurs with non-native backgrounds. The Rotterdamse Nieuwe community would love to connect with these local entrepreneurs but they state that they cannot find and/or reach them; some even raise the assertion that ethnic minorities don't seem to have much of an entrepreneurial spirit. While exploring histories of marginalization and discrimination through the Humanity in Action (HIA) Fellowship, we found this to be an odd remark for a city where, according to a local municipality's report, foreign-born citizens run 70% of the shops.

A short walk from Rotterdam Central Station, the notorious West Kruiskade is home to many of the diverse residents mentioned above. The area has gone through several transformations in the past few decades. In the eighties the area hosted the most popular nightclub of the city and from the nineties onwards, the area was mostly known for violence, drugs and related problems. Anouk, a former Rotterdam resident and a recent graduate from of Amsterdam University College, spent her childhood growing up on a side street of West Kruiskade. Anouk was not allowed to bike alone through the street when she was young because of safety concerns. Her friends from school could not play at her house because their parents felt that her house was in a dangerous area.

A lot has changed since Anouk's childhood in Rotterdam. Ron van Gelder, a manager for the Woonstad Housing Corporation, has been responsible for the safety and attractiveness of the West Kruiskade since 2010. When speaking to the HIA fellows, Ron stated that the street used to be one of the most dangerous areas in the country. Ron has worked with the area's revival process and has been a part of multiple projects during the last couple of years. Both Anouk and Ron have seen West Kruiskade go from an unfrequented, dangerous area to a blossoming multicultural street that is now an example of successful urban renewal. This improvement is the result of the municipality, the Woonstad Housing Corporation, and local entrepreneurs combining their efforts. And so, the former crime epicenter is now is an example of how different cultures can enrich and empower each other and their surroundings by being positive

change makers. Among these positive change makers, however, we encountered several entrepreneurs who complained about a significant gap between the urban entrepreneurial community and exclusive circles like Rotterdamse Nieuwe.

To learn more about this gap, we conducted interviews to explore the connection between the business community and urban entrepreneurs. We spoke with Rotterdam based entrepreneurs from different ethnic minority and marginalized backgrounds. Our conversations over coffee, tea, and international cuisine enabled us to gain intriguing insights into the peaks and valleys of urban entrepreneurship along with the many hurdles that still impede the potential success of Rotterdam's urban entrepreneurs. We learned that Rotterdam's divides have exacerbated significant entrepreneurship barriers, especially for underprivileged communities. Many local entrepreneurs live in the shadows of Rotterdam's towering business offices that house entrepreneurs from around the world yet ignore the ones residing in their own backyard.

Our first interview was with a prominent local DJ, Damoon Faroutanian, who has worked part-time on an entertainment start-up for the past five years. Damoon and his friends started their company without external funding which enabled them to figure out their business's strengths and weaknesses without having to consider debts or the interests of investors. Damoon felt that the lack of funding in the primary stages of the start-up was a facilitator of creative flexibility and experimentation. He also mentioned that the limited requirements allowed his team to figure out which members were willing to put in the hard work and make sacrifices to go from an idea to an actual business. The early phases also built a bond between Damoon and his team members whom he referred to as his brothers.

Five years removed from the first phases of his start-up, Damoon mentioned that now his company could benefit from a cash investment that would allow his start-up to scale its market reach and provide more entertainment services for his local community. He added that without consistent funding, his company has had periods of inactivity and he has not been able to concentrate fulltime on the business. It is remarkable that Damoon and his team members have had significant success without investment; there could be huge potential for his company if investors took interest. Although Damoon's company is poised to expand, he mentioned that he has no clue on where to seek funding since there are not many individuals or organizations, both public and private, that invest in entrepreneurs in his local community. Damoon said that many similar entrepreneurs from his community also don't know anyone to reach out to in order to gain support for business ventures. These issues are highly frustrating for entrepreneurs like Damoon who reside in a city with a reputation as a prominent entrepreneurship hub.

Identity politics was an additional obstacle that Damoon mentioned. He felt marginalized because of his Iranian heritage and interests in the hip hop genre. He mentioned that there is little to no funds to subsidize cultural events in the hip-hop genre because of negative stereotypes. Damoon also felt that entrepreneurs that are of non-Dutch origin are often discriminated against when seeking support from government officials or the private sector.

In Rotterdam, a city where almost half the population is of non-Dutch origin, discrimination is a significant problem for minority communities. Mahasin Tanyaui, a Dutch entrepreneur and consultant of Moroccan descent, also shared Damoon's perspective on funding obstacles for minority entrepreneurs. Mahasin's first entrepreneurial success came when she founded a blog, titled "Girls of Morocco", that is now followed by over 12,000 people. After creating her blog, Mahasin went on to participate in Rotterdam's Enterprize Competition for funding to create a swimming pool and community center for local Muslim women. Although she was not ultimately successful in the competition, Mahasin gained some valuable perspectives. Mahasin was the only Dutch-Moroccan competitor at the competition and she mentioned that it was rare for anyone, especially women, from her community to compete in local business competitions. It is unfortunate that little to no residents of minority backgrounds were at Rotterdam's Enterprize Competition, or had even heard about it.

Despite its lack of diversity, the competition enabled Mahasin to process her expectations and evaluate her business idea. For example, she learned that it would be hard for her to maintain the long-term sustainability of the community center even if she was able to attain funding. She also realized that she was not fully vested in the idea of becoming the manager of the center. Mahasin left the competition with lessons learned that eventually lead to a highly successful business venture less than two years later. Mahasin went on to create an event based on *Jemaa el-Fnaa*, a square in Marrakech, Morocco that is frequented by thousands of tourists, artists, and business owners from around the world. The idea for the event came from Joost Maaskant, a prominent Rotterdam businessman and entrepreneur, and Mahasin worked with him to turn it into a huge success. Mahasin re-created the square in downtown Rotterdam by opening up 70 food stands and events related to Moroccan culture. The event attracted over 12,000 attendees who enjoyed several days of Moroccan food and festivities. Mahasin was able to use her connections in the wealthy Rotterdam business community to make her idea a reality.

Both her blog and the event launched Mahasin into the spotlight as a well-known female entrepreneur of Moroccan descent. When reflecting on important lessons from her success, Mahasin emphasized that entrepreneurs from minority backgrounds must use their identity as an asset and not as a limitation. Dutch

Moroccans are often marginalized based on their identity but Mahasin advocated to change these stereotypes through expressing and celebrating Moroccan cultural backgrounds. Mahasin's businesses are co-lead by other Dutch-Moroccan women who have collectively broken down stereotypes of their communities. Mahasin's experiences also reflected the importance of exposure to business competitions. She was unable to win the Enterprize Competition but she gained valuable advice and went on to act upon what she learned. Mahasin expressed the need for more minority women to get the chance to compete in business incubators and funding competitions. It is crucial to note that once she was able to bridge the funding gap and access Rotterdam's business community, Mahasin experienced remarkable success.

Our conversation with Mahasin was followed by the story of another inspiring Dutch-Moroccan female entrepreneur, Alia Azzouzi. Along with her husband and her brother, Alia founded Espresso Dates, a healthy café frequented by Rotterdam's diverse residents. Alia opened her business two years ago without a loan from a bank or any other form of financial assistance. Alia avoided outside financial assistance because she did not want to be in a large debt. Alia didn't know anyone else from her community that obtained bank loans to start their own businesses. She mentioned that many Muslim women who wear the hijab are often discriminated against when seeking loans or business advice.

Despite limited external assistance, Alia and her family gathered their savings and opened a café in the West Kruiskade neighborhood. Alia named the café Espresso Dates and it was an instant success. After two years of working in a rented space, she was unexpectedly evicted by the landlord and had to look for a new space on the same street. She essentially had to find a new location while worrying about losing her clientele. Alia created an online social media campaign and was able to gain the support of many former customers. With the power of public campaigning, Alia was able to relocate and bring her old customers with her. The new location became even more popular than the initial café. Moreover, Alia used her café's popularity to market scrumptious baked goods created by fellow women from her community. Alia also partners with another Dutch-Moroccan who holds sessions on healthy lifestyles and sells his superfoods that can be added to smoothies at Espresso Dates. Alia's business was financially sustainable while serving as a source for community entrepreneurship. Alia has also employed about ten locals in her current café. The jobs she has created are especially important since unemployment rates among ethnic minorities are not only a significant issue in her neighborhood but also across The Netherlands.

The café is a popular spot to grab a coffee or tea and share a story; the atmosphere also formed a magnet to attract different ethnic groups that lived separately with members of their own ethnic community. While interviewing Alia in her café, we saw customers from all age groups and ethnic backgrounds and

we heard people speaking Arabic, Dutch, and English. The café even attracted a visit from the mayor and, at times, there is nowhere to sit because of large crowds. In fact, the municipality approached Alia and asked her to create another café in the city and she is now planning for her second location.

Despite her success, Alia mentioned that she still faces problems in receiving support from a bank or the municipality. She has been unsuccessful in getting external financial and logistical support to create her second café location. There is great irony in Alia's story since the municipality of Rotterdam is trying to present itself as an entrepreneurship driven community that invests in local business. To date, the only financial support Alia has received is in the form of a subsidy to upgrade her storefront window. Alia has decided to involve herself in the municipality so that she can voice the concerns of local entrepreneurs. She is currently serving as a community advisor for the municipality and hopes to pave the way for greater local entrepreneurship and community cohesion in her neighborhood.

After hearing Alia's story, we left her café and went to a Turkish restaurant with our host, Malique Mohamud, who kindly arranged our interviews in less than a day. Within a few minutes of walking in Rotterdam, we noticed that Malique was a well-known figure in his community. During a short five-minute walk from the café to the restaurant, several people greeted Malique. He had a charismatic aura and a *joie de vivre* that was contagious. As a cultural entrepreneur, Malique was reforming the way many local ethnic minorities view their individual identities. Malique's work as a stand up comedian and television personality has impacted local multiculturalism through a grassroots approach. For example, Malique works to bring together talented spoken word artists from around the city to share their art and connect with many who share their narratives. Malique's work is especially critical for children of migrants who are struggling to discover or balance their cultural identity in Dutch society. Malique is working to put on cultural events at local theaters to showcase Rotterdam's talent and multicultural identity.

Malique has also encountered many gaps between his local community and the business and government sector. Malique has struggled to get his projects financed. Although multiculturalism is big business, he feels that he is still not able to fully capture the attention of Dutch government officials who claim to value increasing outreach in ethnic minority communities. For example, Malique mentioned that Refugee Awareness Day is well known amongst government circles yet many of his friends who are children of refugees are unaware of the day. There seems to be a lack of communication between governments and cultural entrepreneurs like Malique and their communities. Malique has worked hard to bridge these gaps by exploring innovative ways to reach out to his community and to the municipality to bring forth more

culturally relative events. When speaking with Malique, we also learned that local entrepreneurs face similar challenges but come up with different ways to tackle them. Mahasin, for example, has taken advantage of the opportunities provided to her by joining existing institutions, organizations and networks. She participated in the Enterprize Competition, a contest for start-ups, worked with Joost Maaskant, a well-known entrepreneur, and is part of Rotterdamse Nieuwe, a Rotterdam based entrepreneurial platform mentioned above. Malique, on the other hand, has a more external approach and chooses not to follow the beaten path. In promoting urban entrepreneurship, there are many roads to Rome and several approaches seem to work out for the empowerment of entrepreneurs with an ethnic minority background.

Through our interviews, we discovered a common narrative of gaps between groups, such as funders, the government, and business incubators, and urban entrepreneurs of ethnic minority backgrounds. The dynamics of this gap were not limited to simply finances. There seems to also be a gap in communication, outreach, and understanding. In a city that has bounced back from war and implemented successful urban regeneration, many bridges in the entrepreneurship community have yet to be built. The spirit, success, and positivity we witnessed amongst Malique, Mahasin, Damoon, and Alia makes us hopeful that these bridges are in the making.