

## the Connection: giving young immigrants a community

Wien, AutricheWien, Autriche  
Valerie Muehlenburg



Year Founded:  
2011

**Organization type:**

nonprofit/ngo/citizen sector

Project Stage:

Scaling

**Budget:**

\$10,000 - \$50,000

Website:

<http://www.theconnection.at>

**Facebook:**

<https://www.facebook.com/The-Connection-123042744439668/>

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### Project Summary

#### Elevator Pitch

**Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.**

We tackle youth unemployment and lacking social integration of young immigrants in Europe. Through our coffee-house and an open learning space, we offer young immigrants in Austria 3 re-enforcing elements of integration: education, employment and community contacts.

**WHAT IF - Inspiration: Write one sentence that describes a way that your project dares to ask, "WHAT IF?"**

What If... all young immigrants were given the chance to find a job, speak the local language and interact with the local community?

#### About Project

**Problem: What problem is this project trying to address?**

We aim to tackle the root causes of poverty and lacking integration of young immigrants, caused by unemployability, lack of language skills and connections to work-related networks. This problem arises due to insufficient "integration-enabling" platforms where education, employment and exchange can take place.

**Solution: What is the proposed solution? Please be specific!**

Since four years we run a coffee house in the heart of Vienna, and recently set up an additional learning-space in a former factory. In our learning-space we provide German classes, career development workshops, vocational training and a mentoring program with locals. We also offer a six-month internship in our Café. During this time young immigrants can earn their first salary, learn necessary skills, practice their German and build up their CV. We also bring them in contact with Austrian companies so they discover first-hand what future employers are

looking for. But now more needs to be done; the number of refugees coming to Austria and Europe is rising. We hear and see it everyday. Our work is needed and we need to grow.

### Awards

Intercultural Achievement Award 2015 - Austrian Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs | European Social Innovation Competition 2014, Semifinalist - European Commission | Ideen gegen Armut 2012 - Coca Cola | Social Impact Award 2011

Impact: How does it Work

### Example: Walk us through a specific example(s) of how this solution makes a difference; include its primary activities.

Kaenat, from Afghanistan, 19, came to us, with poor German skills and no family and no network that she could rely on. She started working at our cafe, took German classes and attended our career workshop. Together with her mentor, Kaenat managed to find out that she would really like to become a nurse. So with the mentor's help she got a 2 weeks work-experience in a nursing home. Following her six month at the Café, preparation from the German teacher and with the help of her mentor, Kaenat recently passed her entry exam for the nursing school.

### Impact: What is the impact of the work to date? Also describe the projected future impact for the coming years.

For 4 years the Connection has successfully trained 75 young immigrants from Afghanistan, Syria, Ethiopia and Turkey, to name just a few countries. Their work-experience at the Café resulted in 12 of them being hired for an apprenticeship, 13 enrolling in higher education, 30 going back to school to graduate, 15 finding a work-placement and 5 dropped out of the program. The result of a recent „Social-ROI“ - Study conducted by the Economic University of Vienna indicates the diversity of our social impact is and identified our SROI with 3.28: Not only do the youngsters benefit from our program but also the mentors and the guests who are being sensitized for the topic. As youth unemployment is not just a preserve of Austria, but sadly something which afflicts the EU in general, our idea has pan-European relevance and could have an impact throughout Europe.

### Spread Strategies: Moving forward, what are the main strategies for scaling impact?

We want to roll out our successful concept to 3 main cities in Austria and 2 in Germany through joint ventures, franchises and partnerships. Through our best practice, we also aim to provide inputs to and initiate a policy dialogue on how to combat youth poverty among migrant populations. Finally, we hope to complete our vision with an incubator for migrant entrepreneurs. In 2020 we aim to be benefiting 1000 migrants per year throughout our network. The impact of our activities will of course be multiplied through the spill over into the migrant's family and community.

Sustainability

### Financial Sustainability Plan: What is this solution's plan to ensure financial sustainability?

Since opening the Café four years ago, the project and concept has proven to be workable. We have successfully increased our income and are now capable to pay our employees, the young immigrants, through the revenues of the Cafe. The manager's income as well as the rent is covered by sponsorships and financial support from corporate partners. Through the rental of our space for events and workshops we have an additional income.

### Marketplace: Who else is addressing the problem outlined here? How does the proposed project differ from these approaches?

There are several institutions in Vienna that provide specific, non-holistic services for young immigrants. e.g.: Wuk Monopoli, Spacelab, Amandas Matz. By bringing together language education, employment opportunities, career development workshops, a self-learning space & a mentoring program we are able to tackle many root causes of non-integration and youth unemployment. This holistic approach allows for synergies between activities and therefore ultimately higher impact. We offer first work-experience in a safe & supportive environment and meet locals without fear of prejudice.

Team

### Founding Story

Four years ago I started the Connection - out of necessity. Young immigrants, especially young refugees in Austria, do not have many possibilities to integrate in our society and to build a network. The Connection helps these youngsters to get out of their isolation and into our society. For many it is the first time they speak German with a native speaker. My friend Mosco from Nigeria was the one person to inspire me to found the Connection. For seven years he lived in a refugee housing, with out the possibility to become part of our society. Not having the possibility to speak German and getting an education, lead him to giving up on himself. How could our society let this happen?

### Team

Our team consists of 6 people (1 full-time, 2 part-time and 3 voluntary workers) with different professional and cultural backgrounds: a multilingual team with skills in business, social work, psychology, teaching and coaching. Managing director: Valerie Muhlenburg (Austria) founded the Connection in 2011. She has more than 6 years experience in working with young immigrants in Austria and Eastern Europe. At Concordia ([www.concordia.or.at](http://www.concordia.or.at)) she was working with street kids in Moldova and participated in setting up a children's village. Valerie is a trained logotherapist and has a diploma in gastronomy management. She manages the coffee shop, trains the young immigrants and is responsible for our partnerships with youth associations and corporate organisations. Mentoring Program: Elisabeth Schoenburg (Germany) is coordinating the mentoring program at the Connection. She holds an MA of journalism and communication sciences of the University of Vienna. Elisabeth manages to always find the perfect mentor for each of our youngster. She supports the mentorship-couple throughout their journey and organizes regular support meetings for our mentors and mentees. Social Worker: Tanja Wilmink (Germany) has a background in social work. Since 5 years Tanja works as a social worker with young people in Austria and abroad. Currently she is working in a refugee house for unaccompanied minors. At the Connection, Tanja coordinates first interviews with the young immigrants, checks their legal status and helps them with legal questions. German Courses: Iunia Martin (Romania) teaches one of our German classes since September 2012. She holds a PhD in German philology and is a self-employed German teacher for immigrants, linguistic teacher at the University of Vienna and a Journalist. She has more than 10 years of experience in working with children, youngsters and adults. With her alternative teaching methods she brings more creativity, empathy, autonomy and responsibility in the life of our youngsters. Hemma Thaler (Austrian) developed the concept for our German classes in 2011. She is a trained German teacher for immigrants and holds an MA in German philology. Besides teaching for at the Connection, Hemma Thaler is working at a

Language school training adults and children. Co-founder: Diana Kyd-Rebenburg (Austrian) is the co-founder of this project and holds a Masters degree in Business Management and Marketing. She gained work experience as a project manager for the German Development Service in Namibia and at an Austrian NGO. Today she works in the finance sector. Diana is consulting the project in strategic planning and is responsible for marketing and public relation matters.

#### Background

**Please confirm how you heard about the Unilever Awards:**

through Ashoka Austria

**Please confirm your role in the initiative (eg Founder/co-Founder) and your organisational title:**

Founder

**Which of the 8 UN Global Goals (Sustainable Development Goals) pre-selected for this competition does your solution relate most closely to? [select all that apply]**

No Poverty, Decent Work and Economic Growth.

#### Leadership and the Unilever Awards

**Please provide examples of any previous entrepreneurial initiatives you have pioneered.**

Before the Connection I worked in the Republic of Moldova with street children. I was part of a team that built a village for those children. Soon I realized how high the rate of tuberculosis infected children was - more than half of our children had to spend months in an hospital due to tuberculosis before they were allowed to stay with us. And the hospital was in a horrible condition (no heating, broken windows...) I knew that I had to address this problem. I contacted a Viennese pediatrician and asked him to come and visit our street children project. After showing him around I presented my idea of creating a kind of outpatient clinic for these children so that they could return every evening after treatment to their families or our village. We then found support for this idea and started planning such an outpatient ward in the hospital. But after some consideration we had to abandon the plan partially realising that some parents preferred their children to stay in hospital for longer as the living situation at home was worse. So as my initial idea of an outpatient ward did only work for street children coming to live in the village, we re-adjusted and instead renovated and modernised one floor in the hospital. I could convince the AKH in Vienna to train the staff in cleanliness so as to prevent further infections and our village volunteers were also trained to inspect and control contiguous hygiene.

**Beyond your existing team, who else are you working with to achieve your objectives, eg partners, advisors, mentors?**

Beside our great team, there is a wide variety of stakeholders that helped the Connection to become what it is and will play an essential role in its growing process.

- The mentors: professionals from diverse backgrounds that are happy to spend their time and pass on their knowledge to the youngsters. Without those volunteers the Connection would not be running. To find highly qualified people who are willing to give their time is hard, but we managed to create a pool of committed mentors who are having an immense impact on the youngsters and serving as role models. Those mentors are also multipliers that are currently helping us to enlarge our pool of mentors.
- The Youngsters: the project would not be successful without their curiosity and enthusiasm to learn. But of course we often have to deal with lack of motivation, no previous learning experience and a high drop out rate. Therefore we continuously develop our program together with the youngsters.
- Partner Youth Organisations: To build confidence and trust in our work is a very important but hard task. Only through the work of our partner organisations are we able to gain the trust of the youngsters. School social workers, youth coaches and supervisors from refugee homes are sending us the young immigrants. Those partner organisation encourage us to grow.

**Source URL:** <https://www.changemakers.com/globalgoals2015/entries/connection>