



Local responses to the refugee crisis in the Netherlands

Reception and integration

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1. Asylum seekers and refugees in the Netherlands

1.1. Statistics and current trends

From the early 2000s until 2013 asylum requests in the Netherlands averaged between 10,000 to 20,000 applications annually. In recent years, however, the number of asylum applications has increased substantially; in 2014 almost 30,000 requests (first and follow up applications) for asylum were made and in 2015 a record high number of almost 60,000 applications were made. In the mid 1990's the Netherlands also received significant numbers of asylum seekers, with more than 50,000 applications in 1995 of whom many came from former Yugoslavia.

In 2015, most first asylum applications in the Netherlands were from Syrians (40%) and Eritreans (17%). For Syria, the number of applications more than doubled from 8,750 to 18,675 applications (first asylum applications). Other countries with a sharp increase of applications are Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Albania and Ukraine.

Between 2009 and 2012, the majority of asylum requests were rejected. This however changed from 2013 onwards. In fact, in 2014 and 2015 most decisions on asylum applications were positive (respectively 67% and 80%). This enormous increase of positive decisions can be explained by the fact that many asylum applications were made by Syrians and Eritreans and that most decisions for these group were positive (in 2015 98% of Syrian and Eritrean applications were granted a status). While 2015 saw a sharp increase in the number of asylum applicants from Albania and Ukraine, rejection rates for these groups are at (almost) a 100 percent. In 2015 a total of 16,450 refugees received a status in the Netherlands. The majority of refugees receive subsidiary protection status (57% of all positive decisions).

In 1986, the Netherlands has established a quota of a maximum of 500 invited refugees per year. This concerns the resettlement of refugees from UNHCR-camps in the region of origin. This quota was, however, not reached until 2005 when 517 invited refugees resettled in the Netherlands. After this year, the number of invited refugees fluctuated between 695 refugees in 2008 and 310 refugees in 2013. The number of invited refugees in 2014 was exceptionally high (790 refugees). Most of the invited refugees in 2014 originate from Syria and Eritrea. In 2015, the number of invited refugees was 450¹⁴.

1.2. Response to refugee crisis on the central and local level

As the number of asylum requests steadily increased since 2014, government agencies responsible for the reception of asylum seekers (COA; Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) and the processing of applications (IND; Immigration and Naturalization Service), responded by increasing their capacity for reception and processing. COA increased the capacity of existing reception centres and opened up new (temporary/emergency) locations. In 2014, twenty new reception centres were created with a capacity of nearly 10,000 beds. The IND attracted additional staff and expanded opening hours of their desks in order to deal with the increased inflow.

As the number of asylum seekers coming to the Netherlands continued to grow during 2015, the reception system became severely taxed. Particularly because the rapid increase of the number of asylum seekers in 2015 occurred not evenly spread out over the year, but really peaked over the course a few months starting from the Summer. Existing reception capacity (regular and emergency centres) was insufficient to receive all applicants and crisis emergency reception centres were set up all over the country. In these centres asylum seekers could stay for a maximum of 74 hours before being relocated to either a temporary reception centre or a regular reception centre. While asylum applicants were being bussed all over the country and sometimes had to be relocated several times, reception was provided for all applicants and nobody had to sleep on the streets.

In August 2015 the National government called on the municipalities and provinces to create additional (emergency) reception centres and to provide more housing for refugees who had obtained a resident status. Part of the problem of the overburdened reception system was (and still is) that municipalities were not able to keep up with providing housing for permit holders. As these refugees stay in the central reception facilities until adequate housing is provided, the reception system became clogged.

¹⁴ The source of the data presented in this section is: Klaver, J., A. Odé & B. Witkamp (2016) Dutch Sopemi report migration statistics and migration policies in the Netherlands, 2015. Regioplan:Amsterdam.

In November 2015 an administrative agreement was reached between various layers of government focusing both on the short term need of providing sufficient reception capacity and (regular) housing for permit holders and the mid-terms needs regarding integration into the work force and issues related to education and health care. This agreement forms the basis for further collaboration between the central and local government the reception and integration of refugees.

Also in 2015 a temporary ‘Ministerial Committee on Migration’ was established in response to the high influx of asylum applicants. This committee discusses measures to address causes of migration to Europe, measures contributing to a well-balanced EU policy to limit the migration and a better allocation of responsibilities within the EU, and measures concerning a rapid and careful reception of and procedure for both asylum seekers and residence permit holders in the Netherlands.

In the Autumn of 2015, following EU negotiations to reallocate refugees over Europe, the Dutch government agreed to resettle approximately 6,000 refugees (predominantly from Greece and Italy), which is approximately 4 percent of the total 160,000 refugees to be reallocated within Europe. In September 2016, the Netherlands had resettled approximately 11 percent of the established quota.

2. Asylum procedure

Currently, in the Netherlands, asylum requests can be approved on the basis of the Geneva Convention status or on the basis of subsidiary protection. In 2015, there were 9,400 decisions on the basis of subsidiary protection, 6,660 decisions on the basis of the Geneva Convention (and 390 on humanitarian grounds). The number of positive decisions based on the Geneva Convention increased considerably since 2013, from 1,150 decisions in 2013 and 2,485 decisions in 2014 to 6,660 decisions in 2015. The proportion of first decisions based on subsidiary protection also increased between 2013 and 2014 (from 3,355 to 9,290) but remained more or less the same in 2015.¹⁵

Before 2014 asylum could also be granted for compelling humanitarian reasons (for example in the case of encountered traumatic experiences). In 2014, grounds for asylum were rearranged to bring the Dutch practice in line with the EU Acquis. This means that the separate asylum permit on the grounds of pressing humanitarian reasons and collective protection (*categoraal beschermingsbeleid*) was abolished. As of 1 January 2014, there is a single asylum permit based on international and European norms.

¹⁵ Klaver, J., A. Odé & B. Witkamp (2016) Dutch Sopemi report migration statistics and migration policies in the Netherlands, 2015. Regioplan:Amsterdam.

3. Management of the integration process on the central, regional and local level

The Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) of the Ministry of Safety and Justice is responsible for the admission of asylum seekers and for processing the asylum applications. The reception of asylum seekers also falls under the authority of the Ministry of Safety and Justice, but this task has been delegated to COA which is an independent administrative body. The reception of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers is delegated to another independent administrative body (*Stichting Nidos*) which acts as a formal guardian for these minors.

At the national level the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment is responsible for coordination in the field of integration policies. As integration of migrants (refugees and other migrant groups) is predominantly fostered by generic measures, the Minister of Social Affairs has an important coordinating role *vis a vis* other departments such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health Care etc. The Minister of Social Affairs is also responsible for so called specific integration policies of which civic integration policies are the most important (see section 5.6 for a discussion on civic integration policies).

While the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment has a coordinating role in the field of integration, municipalities play a crucial role in fostering integration of beneficiaries of international protection. Policies in the field of social assistance and re-integration services and social support have been delegated from the national level to local municipalities. Municipalities receive the budget to carry out these tasks from the central government.

After settlement in a municipality, most beneficiaries of international protection are dependent on social assistance and – within that framework - receive support in finding work or becoming otherwise active/integrated into the local society. Within the national legislative framework, municipalities have the freedom to shape their policies regarding (re-)integration. As a consequence of this decentralisation, there are differences between municipalities in the type of support they offer to beneficiaries of international protection. Some municipalities have implemented specific integration policies for these groups, others try to facilitate the integration of these groups with generic measures which are also available to other unemployed people.

4. System of refugees reception and pre-integration

In this section we will discuss the system of reception of asylum applicants with respect to housing, access to health care and legal assistance and language courses.

4.1. Access to housing

Asylum seekers who have submitted an asylum application in the Netherlands are entitled to reception at one of the reception centres. The first reception is at the central reception facility (*centrale ontvangstlocatie*) where registration and identity checks take place and a compulsory check on tuberculosis is carried out. Reception at this facility is for a maximum of 4 days. Asylum seekers are subsequently transferred to a so called 'processing reception facility' (*procesopvanglocatie*) where the asylum seekers can prepare for his or her asylum application. The maximum duration of stay at this facility is 12 days. At both type of reception centres only basis provisions are offered. After this period asylum seekers are transferred to a regular reception facility (AZC) where they await the outcome of their asylum procedure. At the AZC residents are provided with shelter, a health care insurance and a weekly allowance for food and clothing (the maximum allowance is € 58 per week). At the centre asylum seekers generally live in a housing unit with separate bedrooms and a shared living room, kitchen and bathroom. They also have access to computer facilities and can participate in language lessons (see also section 4.3) and voluntary activities at the centre.

The reception centres (AZC's) are spread all over the Netherlands, some are located in cities others in rural areas. Also in terms of size there are large variations to be found (from 200 to 1,200 beds); the average size of an AZC is 400 beds. The government by means of COA focusses on large scale reception facilities for reasons of easier management and control of these locations. It is however, precisely the large scale of reception facilities which have recently led to resistance from inhabitants of especially smaller municipalities (see also section 7). Studies have shown that large scale reception centres not only can have a negative impact on public support, but also are not conducive to encouraging self-help and self-reliance of asylum seekers.

While COA emphasizes the importance of self sufficiency and active participation of asylum seekers, NGO's such as the Dutch Council for Refugees have criticized the reception regime for offering limited possibilities for participation. In 2013, the Advisory Committee on Migration Affairs (ACVZ) also concluded that the 'forced' inactivity for many asylum seekers during their asylum procedure leads to passivity

and isolation which ultimately has a negative impact on their health and possibilities to actively take control of their lives.¹⁶ This is particularly worrisome when, as has happened in the past, asylum seekers have to wait for a considerable period of time on the outcome of their asylum procedure.

Recently, with growing refugee numbers and increasing processing times, new possibilities have been created to activate asylum seekers, for example by facilitating the opportunities for active involvement in volunteering (see also practice 5 in section 9) or the improvement of language classes (see also section 4.3). As the majority of Syrian and Eritrean asylum seekers (which form the dominant groups in the current inflow) receive a resident status, more emphasis is put on offering activities which are conducive for further integration in Dutch society after being granted a resident status.

4.2. Access to healthcare

The health care available to asylum seekers is to a large extent comparable to the regular health care in the Netherlands; asylum seekers can have access to a general practitioner, a midwife, a psychologist or hospital care. For access to a general practitioner the asylum seeker has to register at the national health care centre for asylum seekers (*Gezondheidscentrum Asielzoekers*). At this centre clients are subsequently referred to participating general practitioners. When necessary the general practitioner can refer the asylum seeker to specialist care. Additionally, at or in the vicinity of the reception centers there are also often so called ‘walk-in hours’ where asylum seekers can have access to a general practitioner or a nurse. Also a medical call centre is operative (24/7) for medical questions from asylum seekers.

The compensation for the costs associated with providing health care to asylum seekers is regulated through a special regulation (*Regeling Zorg Asielzoekers*), comparable to the national health care law. While access to health care is formally guaranteed, in practice there are some bottlenecks. The National Ombudsman concluded in 2013 that the current system poses barriers for vulnerable groups, as the system is too much geared towards independent and self-reliant clients.¹⁷ Another point of critique is that the available psycho-social care is fragmented over various care

¹⁶ ACVZ (2013) *Verloren tijd. Advies over dagbesteding in de opvang voor vreemdelingen*. ACVZ: Den Haag.

¹⁷ Nationale Ombudsman (2013) *Medische Zorg Vreemdelingen. Over toegang en continuïteit van medische zorg voor asielzoekers en uitgeprocedeerde asielzoekers*. Rapportnummer 2013/125

providers and is lacking in continuity due to frequent relocation of asylum seekers during their procedure¹⁸.

4.3. Access to language courses

During their stay in the reception facility, awaiting the outcome of their asylum application, asylum seekers can attend basic language classes provided by volunteers in the reception centre. This is a common practice in all reception centres. In order to facilitate the availability and the quality of language classes for these groups, the Minister of Social Affairs announced in March 2016 a plan to train 450 volunteers in teaching methods and teaching competences.

Due to the recent influx of large numbers of asylum seekers at several locations also other new initiatives sprung up to offer asylum seekers (language) courses directly after arrival in the reception centre, regardless of whether these asylum seekers will be permitted to stay in the Netherlands or not. For example the city of Utrecht is developing a reception centre where residents can from day one participate in Dutch and English language classes, follow a course on entrepreneurship or obtain assistance in finding voluntary work or follow education. These types of support will also become available for local residents from the neighbourhood. The centre will be funded by a combination of funds from the central government, the EU and the city.

For beneficiaries of international protection who have not yet been relocated to a municipality, pre-integration (language) courses (*vooringburgering*) are available. These courses are provided by COA and participation in these courses is voluntary. Participants can start at any given moment and courses are provided at three different levels (for illiterate, for lower educated and for middle and higher educated). The programme consists of digital teaching materials which participants can continue to access after their relocation to a municipality. The pre-integration course has three components, i.e. language training, a training providing information on Dutch society and individual counselling. Regarding the knowledge of Dutch society practical information is given on topics such as housing, health care, education, work and income, democracy and the rule of law. The individual counselling sessions are aimed helping the refugees to think about future plans and possibilities in the Netherlands, including work and at assembling a personal dossier with information on prior education and work experience, competences and ambitions. Refugees can follow the

¹⁸ Arq Psychotrauma Expert Groep (2016) *Veerkracht en vertrouwen. De bouwstenen voor psychosociale hulpverlening aan vluchtelingen.*

pre-integration programme until they are relocated to a municipality. Language lessons, however, vary between 9 and 18 weeks with a maximum number of 121 hours. The aim of the pre-integration courses is to prepare refugees - while they are waiting for relocation from the reception centre - as good as possible for further integration and participation in compulsory civic integration after settlement in a municipality. Pre-integration courses have been offered to refugees since 2006. In all those years, a systematic review of the effectiveness of these courses has not been carried out. Qualitative research, however, showed positive results in increasing self reliance and preparation for civic integration.¹⁹ It is generally felt that it is important that refugees can start with language training as soon as possible.

4.4 Access to education

Minor children of asylum seekers, regardless of their status, are entitled to education. Within 3 months after arrival in the reception centre children between the ages of 5 and 17 years of age have to be enrolled at a school. Many reception centres have their own primary school but also designated regular schools receive refugee children. Generally special classes are formed at these schools for a period of one year in which the children learn the Dutch language from specifically trained teacher. After this year children are integrated in the regular school classes. Children who have to enrol in secondary education are first placed in an international intermediate class for one year before entering the regular school system.

Due to the rapid increase of asylum seekers in 2014 and 2015, the capacity of schools offering education to refugee children was strained. The national government has provided additional funding for education to refugee children.

Adult asylum seekers are formally allowed to enrol at an institute for secondary vocational education or higher education while they are waiting on the outcome of their asylum claim. However, they have to pay for the costs themselves and are charged a higher fee than regular students.

The Foundation for Refugee Students (UAF) supports and counsels highly skilled refugees in the Netherlands. Support is available for both beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and asylum seekers, who speak English or Dutch at an advanced level and have the capacity and motivation to follow higher education in the Netherlands. The foundation provides loans and gifts to students as well as counselling and support. In 2015 the UAF supported almost 2,600 refugee students.

¹⁹ Brink, M., I. van der Welle & J. Klaver (2010) Voorinburgering in de centrale opvang. Een evaluatie van de voorinburgeringsprogramma's bij het COA. Regioplan: Amsterdam.

4.5 Access to the labour market

Asylum seekers are not entitled to work in the Netherlands during the first 6 months of their asylum procedure. After that period they can look for temporary work for a maximum period of 24 weeks (within a total period of 52 weeks). Employers need to apply for a work permit if they want to employ an asylum seeker. A work permit is granted to employers in case of insufficient local labour supply. Asylum seekers can keep the first 25 percent of their income until a maximum of € 185 per month. The rest of the income has to be given to COA as a contribution to the costs of the reception.

Due to the limited number of weeks in which asylum seekers are allowed to work and the requirement of a work permit, few asylum seekers have been able to find paid employment. There is no up to date evaluation on the use of this possibility to work by asylum seekers. Experts however mention that in recent years employers have preferred to contract other temporary workers (e.g. from Central and Eastern Europe) for whom a work permit is not required. There are also signs of illegal employment by asylum seekers, however the extent in which this occurs is unknown.

During the asylum procedure, asylum seekers are allowed to carry out small tasks at the reception centre such as cleaning of (garden) maintenance for a maximum of 24 hours per week. Residents receive a small fee for these activities up to a maximum of € 14 per week.

As mentioned above, asylum seekers are allowed to do voluntary work at non-profit organizations. At the reception centre there is a coordinator available to help asylum seekers find voluntary work. The extent to which asylum seekers are involved in these activities is yet unknown, but a recent qualitative study showed a willingness among asylum seekers to become active as a volunteer as a means to become acquainted with the Dutch language and society.²⁰

4.6. Access to legal assistance

All asylum applicants are entitled to legal assistance during their asylum procedure. This assistance is provided by lawyers associated to Council for Legal Assistance (*Raad voor Rechtsbijstand*). In addition, asylum applicants receive support from a volunteer from the Dutch Council for Refugees during the different stages of the asylum procedure. The volunteer explains the legal procedure, can accompany the asylum applicant during the interview with the Immigration and Naturalization Service and

²⁰ Labyrinth Onderzoek en Advies (2016) Hoe kijken vluchtelingen aan tegen het verrichten van vrijwilligerswerk? Een verkennend kwalitatief onderzoek onder asielzoekers en statushouders in de opvang. Labyrinth: Utrecht.

meetings with the lawyer. At each reception centre the Dutch Council for Refugees organizes ‘walk-in hours’ at which asylum seekers can ask questions about their legal procedure. The Dutch Council for Refugees also offers a national helpdesk to support individual lawyers in asylum cases.

5. Integration measures beneficiaries of international protection

In the following part of our paper we would like to describe and evaluate the system of integration of foreigners who were granted one of the forms of international protection (refugee status and subsidiary protection).

5.1. Access to social assistance

After a positive decision on the asylum application is granted and the beneficiary of international protection is resettled in a municipality, they are entitled to general social assistance. The entitlements are the same as for other groups of unemployed. This assistance provides for a monthly allowance. Recipients of social assistance are expected to actively cooperate with their (re-)integration into the labour market, or if that is (for the time being) not possible, their active participation in society. As mentioned before (see section 3) municipalities offer various types of re-integration support for recipients of social assistance. Some of these measures are specifically geared towards beneficiaries of international protection, but in many instances these measures are of a more generic nature. Examples of more targeted policies are assistance provided by specialized case managers or the provision of short orientation courses specifically geared towards refugees.

When refugees are allocated a house in the municipality, they can receive a loan to cover the costs of basic refurbishing and refurnishing. As many refugees find themselves in a precarious financial situation after arrival in the Netherlands, problematic debts easily occur. Some municipalities therefore offer a remission of (part of) the loan, in order to prevent the incurrence of debts among this group.

5.2. Access to housing

Pursuant to the Housing Act, the central government has made agreements with the municipalities on the number of beneficiaries of international protection they have to house. The share for each municipality is based on the number of inhabitants of the municipality. Beneficiaries of international protection are thus resettled all over the

Netherlands. The targets for the municipalities are established twice a year, according to the inflow of asylum seekers. The target for the second half of 2015 was almost 15,000 persons. In the first half of 2016, the government has instructed municipalities to provide housing for a total of 20,000 permit holders and in the second half of 2016 23,000, to be allocated pro rata to the number of inhabitants. As the inflow of asylum seekers increased rapidly in 2015, municipalities were not able to keep up with the demand for housing for beneficiaries of international protection and as a consequence these persons had to stay longer in the reception centres.. At the end of 2015 the backlog was almost 16,000 persons. This backlog is due to a number of problems²¹

- the tightness in the local or regional housing market, due in part to the shrinking supply of social housing;
- the time-consuming process of verification by municipalities of personal details;
- the presence of many groups that are difficult to place, such as large families and unaccompanied minor asylum seekers;
- the existence of other special target groups with precedence for housing, such as homeless persons and persons living in women's shelters;
- the straitjacket of rules that constrain initiatives to expand the housing stock (relating to aspects such as management and essential facilities);
- the lengthy waiting lists to receive rent allowance as a result of measures taken to combat the improper use of allowances, which delay the process of housing asylum seekers because some social housing is unaffordable without an allowance

Housing has been identified as one of the most pressing problems to be solved in relation to the integration of refugees and has led to the development of new and innovative forms of (temporary) housing, outside the regular supply of social housing (see for example good practice 4, in section 9). The national government facilitates the developments of these alternative forms of (temporary) housing by allowing pilots which deviate from existing building/housing regulations and by providing building subsidies for new initiatives (*Tijdelijke regeling stimulering huisvesting vergunninghouders*).

At the same time, the precedence granted to beneficiaries of international protection to social housing under the Housing Act was abolished in 2016. While municipalities still can identify these groups as 'preferred/urgent' groups in assigning available social housing this is no longer automatically the case. The abolishment of this regulation is

²¹ WRR (2015) Policy brief 4 'No time to lose: from reception to integration of asylum migrants'. WRR: Den Haag.

part of a series of measures aimed at stimulating the housing of beneficiaries of international protection without causing displacement of other vulnerable groups in need of social housing.

Also, a specific platform (a collaboration between the national government, umbrella organisations of municipalities, provinces and housing corporations and COA) was set up to provide municipalities and social housing corporations with information and good practices on the housing of beneficiaries of international protection (see: <https://www.opnieuwthuis.nl/>).

5.3. Access to the labour market

Beneficiaries of international protection have full access to the Dutch labour market. Many studies have however indicated that the insertion into the Dutch labour market of these groups is problematic. Their socio-economic position is characterized by high levels of dependency on social assistance and by low participation rates. Refugees who do find work, often work in part time and temporary jobs. Table 1 presents data for the four largest refugee groups in the Netherlands.

Table 1: Indicators of the socio-economic position of refugee groups, in percentages

	Net participation in the labour market (2012) (*)	Persons with a social assistance benefit (2013)
Afghans	42	26
Iraqis	39	37
Iranians	60	24
Somalis	26	53
Native Dutch	70	2

(*)Net participation refers to the proportion of the total population aged between 15 and 64 with a job for twelve or more hours a week

Source: SCP (2013) and CBS (2014), cited in WRR (2015).

Up until recently there were only a few specific initiatives aimed at fostering the labour market integration of refugees. Due to relatively small numbers, in many municipalities refugees remained ‘under the radar’ and received little attention and specific support in accessing the labour market. In many municipalities, efforts towards re-integration were only taken up after the refugee had learned the Dutch language and passed the compulsory civic integration exam; a process which can

easily take two to three years. As a result of this sequential approach valuable time was lost in active assistance in finding work.

A report published by the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy²² in December 2015 served as a wake-up call for many municipalities and created a new sense of urgency to avoid persistent integration backlogs for the recently arrived refugees. The study showed that the labour market situation of the refugees who had come to the Netherlands during the 1990's was still precarious and that particularly in the first three years after receiving a resident status valuable time was lost. Several recommendations were made by the Council to improve this situation, such as making use of the waiting period in the asylum centre before relocation to a municipality and to accelerate the housing process. They also called upon municipalities to adopt a parallel approach in which language/ civic integration and re-integration activities are taken up together. Another important recommendation was to improve the assessment of competences, needs and goals of refugees and to develop more tailor made approaches geared to individual needs and possibilities (avoid a one-size fits all approach).

In 2016 several new approaches to improve the labour market integration of refugees were developed in line with the recommendations made by the Council such as:

- Experimentation with language and labour market orientation in reception centres;
- Collaboration between public and private partners (such as job agencies) to improve the placement of refugees in jobs;
- The development of parallel and integrated approaches in municipalities, specifically geared towards refugees;
- Increasing possibilities to participate in (higher) education while receiving social assistance;
- More active involvement of municipalities in civic integration.

These new practices are expected to contribute to more effective approaches to support the integration of refugees in the labour market. These practices are currently being implemented in municipalities and various pilots are being conducted all over the Netherlands to experiment with more effective methods to facilitate labour market integration of refugees. As most of these new approaches were only implemented this year, it is too early to establish the results of these approaches.

²² (WRR, 2015) Policy brief 4 'No time to lose: from reception to integration of asylum migrants'. WRR: Den Haag.

5.4. Access to education and training

Several studies have shown that a Dutch diploma greatly contributes to the successful integration into the Dutch labour market. Refugees who want to study in the Netherlands have to meet entry requirements, e.g. proof of prior education and sufficient command of the Dutch (or sometimes English) language.

All refugees are entitled to have their foreign diploma assessed free of charge. While diploma assessment is available, the process is not without problems. The diploma assessment is an advice which is not always acknowledged by the institute for higher education. After admission, refugees generally start in the first year regardless of their background.

To ease the entrance into the Dutch educational systems, several universities have set up special 'preparatory years' after which students can follow the regular curriculum. Also at several institutes for higher education buddy programmes are set up in which refugee students are assisted by their Dutch peers.

To pay for the tuition fee and to have a minimal source of income during their study, students between 18 and 27 years can qualify for a student loan. For older refugees this possibility is not available. In some municipalities refugees can follow higher education while receiving social assistance and are thus able to finance their studies. Alternatively, as discussed above in section 4.4, they can apply for financial support from the UAF foundation.

In 2015 a Taskforce Refugees in Higher Education was set up to find solutions for bottlenecks which refugees encountered in accessing the Dutch higher educational system. The Taskforce is a collaboration between the Ministry of Education, UAF, Nuffic and umbrella organisations of universities and other institutes for higher education. The activities of the taskforce are, amongst others, focussed on increasing the availability of language and preparatory courses, stimulating initiatives aimed at coaching before, during and after the study, and improving the assessment of diplomas and the acknowledgement of competences.

5.5. Access to language courses

In the Netherlands, refugees are required to pass a civic integration exam within three years after being granted a resident status. This exam includes a language exam. Further details on civic integration (including the language courses) will be discussed in the next section.

5.6. Access to guidance and counselling

All refugees are entitled to social counselling after resettlement in a municipality. This social counselling is organized by the municipality and is generally carried out by volunteers from the Dutch Council for Refugees or from other social work organisations. Counselling starts from day one after arrival in a municipality. It involves assistance with practical issues, acquainting the refugee with local society and supporting their social self-reliance and providing advice and information on the compulsory civic integration. Municipalities receive a fixed budget from the central government pro refugee to organize the social counselling. While all municipalities offer social counselling to refugees, there are significant variations between municipalities in the intensity and duration of counselling. Some municipalities offer basic social counselling for approximately six months after which refugees have to rely on the services of general social work organisations. Other municipalities offer specialised social counselling services for a period up to two or three years. In the latter cases municipalities provide additional funding to the budget received from the central government.

As a result of the administrative agreement of November 2015 between various layers of government, the funding for social counselling by the central government has been increased (from Euro 1,000 to Euro 2,370 per new refugee) as of January 2016. Many municipalities had complained that the available budgets were insufficient to provide adequate counselling services. Within the increased budget for social counselling, municipalities now also have to organize a so called 'declaration of participation' trajectory (*participatieverklaringstraject*). In this trajectory information is provided about the values that underpin Dutch society, such as freedom, equality and solidarity. The end result of this trajectory is that the refugee signs a declaration of participation stating that they will help publicize these important values and will actively participate in Dutch society.

Compulsory civic integration has been at the core of integration policies in the Netherlands since 1998. Until 2013, municipalities played a crucial role in providing civic integration courses for free to all new migrants (refugees and other migrants) who fell under the scope of the law. These courses consisted of language training and civics (knowledge of Dutch society). Municipalities contracted educational institutes (public and private) to supply civic integration courses to new migrants.²³ Civic integration

²³ In the period 1998-2006 compulsory civic integration only applied to new migrants. In the period 2007- 2013 resident foreigners (i.e. migrants who had come to the Netherlands before 2006 and had not acquired Dutch

courses offered varied in duration and intensity depending on the educational background of the participant and goals with respect to the level of language proficiency to be obtained.

In January 2013 a drastic change in civic integration policies was implemented. Since that date municipalities no longer play a role in civic integration, i.e. civic integration courses are no longer offered for free to new migrants. Complying with the civic integration requirements has become the sole responsibility of the individual migrant, meaning that they have to organize their own preparation for the civic integration exam and finance the costs for a civic integration course (including language training and civics). The central government has provided for a loan facility with very low interest rates, of which migrants who are not able to pay for the costs themselves can make use. For refugees the conditions are somewhat more lenient as the loan will be turned into a gift when the civic integration exam is passed within 3 years. The maximum loan facility is € 10,000.

The minimum level of language proficiency to be obtained is A2 of the Common European Framework for Languages, however candidates can pass a language exam at a higher level.. In total there are 6 tests which a candidate have to pass: 4 language tests (speaking, listening, writing and reading), a test on knowledge of Dutch Society and a labour market orientation module. These tests do not have to be taken simultaneously. Migrants are obliged to pass the civic integration exam within the stipulated timeframe (3 years).²⁴ Noncompliance can result in administrative fines and may have consequences for the resident status. Naturalisation is, for example, not possible without passing the civic integration exam. For migrants, other than beneficiaries of international protection, noncompliance can ultimately lead to having a temporary residence permit revoked. This sanction is not possible for beneficiaries of international protection. For these groups non-compliance, however, bans the possibility for obtaining a permanent resident permit. As barely 3 years have passed since the implementation of the new civic integration law, these sanctions have not yet been put into practice.

When the new civic integration law was introduced municipalities and other stakeholders warned that the new system could be detrimental for certain groups of vulnerable migrants, such as refugees. Above all, the new system supposes a large

citizenship) were also compelled to pass the civic integration exam. As of 2013, compulsory civic integration is again only for new migrants.

²⁴ The law however provides for 'hardship-clauses' for persons who will evidently never be able, despite efforts, to pass the exam.

degree of self-reliance in organizing civic integration, starting on time and choosing the right integration course. While the social counsellors can assist the refugee to a certain degree in this process, this is still a daunting task for many refugees. Results of the first cohort of migrants who fell under the new civic integration law, indeed shows that refugees are less likely to pass the civic integration exam within three years than other groups of migrants. These results have led to a renewed call by municipalities on the central government to allow for greater involvement of municipalities in civic integration.

At present municipalities have few instruments to ascertain whether or not a refugee has started with civic integration and has chosen a course at the right level. As civic integration has become an individual responsibility, possibilities for municipalities to combine civic integration trajectories with re-integration have also become limited. Past experiences have shown that so called dual trajectories in which language training is combined with re-integration activities is more effective both in terms of acquiring language proficiency and active participation. Due to the experienced bottlenecks, municipalities are now lobbying to once again obtain a more prominent coordinating role in civic integration.

5.7. Access to healthcare

Refugees have access to regular health care available to all residents. Health insurance is compulsory which pays for the costs incurred for medical treatment. In addition, municipalities play a role in the prevention of (public) health problems. They can do so by for example stimulating the establishment of a network of care providers and improving the infrastructure for signalling of health issues of refugees, informing refugees about the organisation of health care in the Netherlands, providing information and support on parenting in the Netherlands.

Attention for health problems is important as studies have shown that refugees experience more health problems than the native Dutch population and that their health situation negatively impacts integration in other fields such as learning the Dutch language and finding paid employment.

6. Cooperation of key local public institutions and organizations involved in the refugee integration

At the local level various stakeholders are involved in the integration of refugees. Municipalities who are primarily responsible for these new inhabitants collaborate

with NGO's, social work organisations, housing corporations, schools, public health organisations and civil society activities to facilitate the integration of refugees in various domains of life. Particularly during the recent refugee crisis, municipalities became the focal point of coordination for all the local activities that were spontaneously developed in response to the arrival of so many new refugees.

At a national level information on local activities and good practices on housing and integration is actively shared on several digital platforms such as:

- Platform Opnieuw Thuis (<https://www.opnieuwthuis.nl/>),
- OTAV (<https://vng.nl/onderwerpenindex/asiel/asielbeleid-en-integratie/otav>)
- en Werkwijzer vluchtelingen (<http://www.werkwijzervluchtelingen.nl/>).

A recent poll among municipalities showed that 50 percent of Dutch municipalities want to develop policies to promote the labour market integration of refugees. However, municipalities also perceive bottlenecks in doing so, primarily due to limited funding.²⁵ Some municipalities have, however, already begun to actively reshape their (re-) integration policies for refugees. The city of Amsterdam is an example of a very active municipality in this respect.

The city has embraced the recommendations of the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy and has started with early assessment of refugees 'assigned' to Amsterdam. During their stay in the reception centre refugees assigned to Amsterdam, while waiting available housing in the municipality, are assessed on their labour market potential. For refugees with good prospects in finding a job intensive language training (language boost) is available and all refugees receive a basic orientation course aimed at preparing them for life in Amsterdam. Refugees with good labour market potential are matched with employers and receive coaching after placement in a job.

The majority of refugees will however not be able to directly integrate into the labour market. The city of Amsterdam has therefore also adapted their re-integration services for those who need more support to participate and integrate into Dutch society. Dedicated case managers provide intensive coaching to support refugees in finding employment, education or other activities. These case managers cooperate closely with the social counsellors to provide integrated support.

The city is very committed to providing refugees with a better start in Amsterdam. In addition, the city has invested in keeping better track of these new residents by careful monitoring of these groups in terms of – amongst others - demographic composition,

²⁵ Razenberg, I. & M. de Grijter (2016) Vluchtelingen aan het werk. Een enquête onder gemeenten over arbeidstoeleiding van statushouders. Kenniscentrum Integratie en Samenleving/ Divosa.

work, income, education and health. The information thus provided can guide further policy developments.

Generally the somewhat larger municipalities, who receive larger numbers of refugees, tend to be more active in designing specific policies for refugees. The implementation of specific integration policies is however not only determined by the number of refugees but also by the political coalition of the municipalities' administration.

7. Perception of refugees and raising awareness at the local level

The rapid increase of the number of asylum seekers coming to the Netherlands has caused an increasing polarization in the debate in relation to the reception of refugees in this country. Several (sometimes violent) incidents have occurred over the past 18 months, particularly in relation to the establishment of new reception centres to accommodate to the growing number of asylum seekers. In several cases local governments were forced to withdraw their plans after fierce resistance from the inhabitants. Opposition to (large scale) reception centres was often motivated by fears about social safety, rising crime and the possible presence of Islamic terrorists among the asylum seekers. Protesters felt that their fears were not taken seriously and that they were being confronted with a *fait accompli*. Several local administrators received personal threats because of their efforts to contribute to a solution to the shortage of the reception capacity.

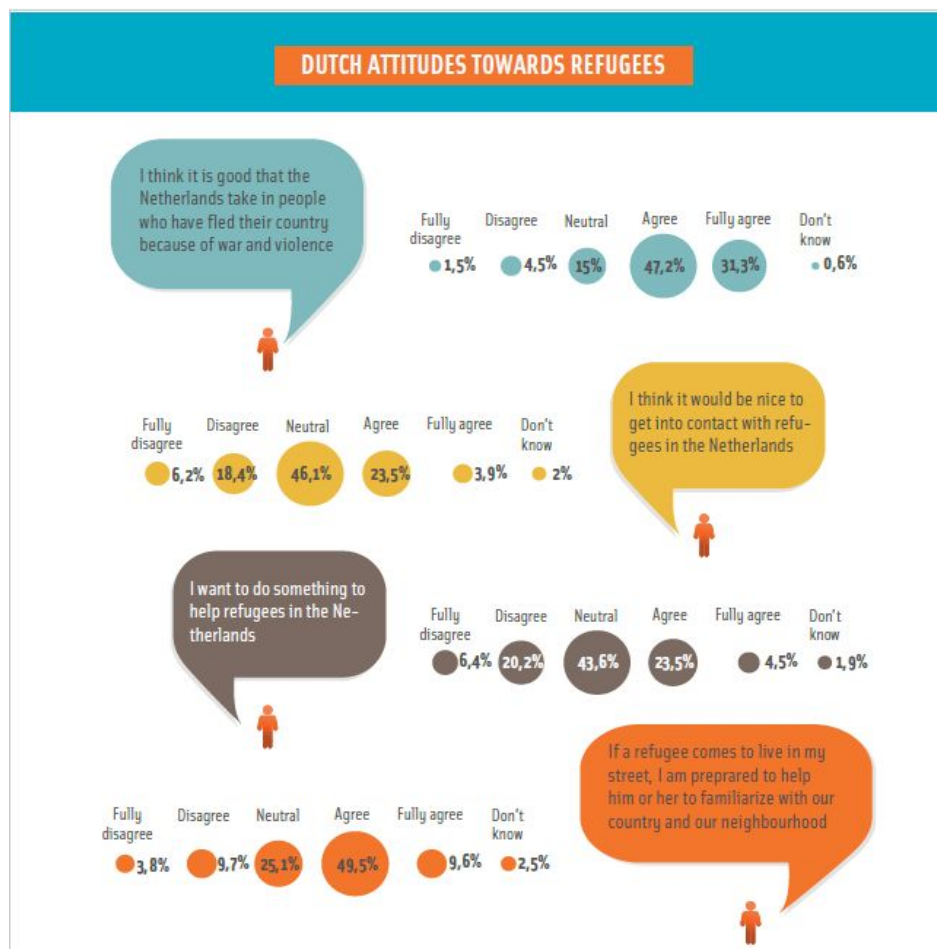
At the other extreme, the Netherlands witnessed a growing group of thousands of volunteers willing to help with the reception and integration of refugees. People donated clothing and blankets to the crisis reception centres which sometimes had to be organized overnight and were involved in organizing various activities for the temporary residents at these locations. Many people volunteered to become a language buddy or to offer social guidance to recently settled refugees. From civil society many initiatives sprung up to provide support to refugees and also numerous employers showed a willingness to contribute to the integration of refugees by offering jobs and internships.

These varying responses (negative and positive) show that the reception of refugees in the Netherlands is by no means an uncontested area. A continuous poll by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research among the Dutch population shows a growing concern regarding issues of immigration and integration. As of the final quarter of 2015 this issue is actually perceived as the largest challenge/problem facing the Netherlands.²⁶

²⁶ SCP (2016) Continue onderzoek burgerperspectieven 2016, 1. SCP: Den Haag.

Public opinion polls, nevertheless also indicate that there is still significant support for the reception of refugees. A recent poll (June 2016) carried out on behalf of the Dutch Council for Refugees showed that more than 75 percent of the population agrees with the general statement that the Netherlands have to take in refugees who have fled their country because of war and violence. The same poll also noted substantial willingness among the population to help familiarize refugees with the neighbourhood in which they come to live (see also Infographic 1)

Infographic 2: Dutch attitudes towards refugees



Source: KIEN/Dutch Council for Refugees (2016) PR onderzoek juni 2016 VluchtelingenWerk Nederland.

In order to gain or maintain public support for the reception of refugees, local governments have invested in dialogue with the local population about plans on the opening of new (crisis) reception centres. Especially, in the Summer and Autumn of 2015, these facilities sometimes had to be established on very short notice. This called for a careful management of the process in which local administrators engaged in conversation with local residents addressing questions and fears. This strategy often was successful in gaining local support for the establishment of a (crisis) reception centre.

Other initiatives geared at awareness raising and influencing public perception are aimed at providing information on refugees by showing the ‘person behind the refugees’. For example, the Dutch Council for Refugees collects and disperses personal stories of refugees and a special facebook group was initiated dedicated to share positive experiences with refugees.²⁷ In addition, COA in collaboration with the Dutch Council for Refugees, the Immigration & Naturalization Service organizes open days at which interested persons can visit a reception centre. In September 2016 approximately 40,000 persons visited one of the 70 participating centres. The aim is to provide information on life in a reception centre and an opportunity to meet its residents.²⁸ With these, and other initiatives, organizations try to counter the general adagio ‘unknown makes unloved’ and to foster public support for the reception of refugees.

Conclusions

As our research showed, both local authorities and local communities are very important actors in the refugee preintegration and integration process. In case of the Poland according to current legal framework, the preintegration and integration policy is not a part of local governments’ general remits with the exception of education of asylum seeking children in public schools. Therefore, the role and tasks of local governments and local communities with regard to refugee pre-integration and integration are still unspecified. Only some local governments, in cooperation with non-governmental organisations, play an active role in this area and take their own actions addressed at asylum seekers, refugees and other foreigners settling in their local communities. For example cities like - Gdansk, Warsaw, Lublin, are recently actively involved in shaping and implementing integration measures for the refugees always in close cooperation with non-governmental organizations. What should be underlined is that non-governmental organisations have great expertise and experience in providing professional support in terms of psychological, educational and vocational advice. Apart from assisting newcomers, non-governmental organisations in Poland are very actively involved in awareness raising activities in the local communities. Various social campaigns, workshops, intercultural are of great importance especially nowadays when negative sentiments towards asylum seekers and refugees also on the rise in local communities.

²⁷ See: <https://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/persoonlijke-verhalen> and <https://www.facebook.com/positieveervaringenmetvluchtelingen/>

²⁸ <http://nos.nl/artikel/2134207-meer-dan-40-000-bezoekers-voor-open-dag-azc.html>

Our research shows that in case of Poland, strengthening the role of the local governments in preintegration and integration of asylum seekers and refugees would be of a great value. Decentralisation of integration policy could be viewed as a tool to improve local governance. By bringing decision-making closer to where the actual problems and affected individuals are, decentralisation facilitates the coordination of integration policy with local social inclusion initiatives, the adoption of policies to local conditions and the involvement of civil society and the private sector in the undertaking of integration measures. On top of that, there is a big need for strengthening cooperation between public institutions at all administrative levels involved in the asylum seekers and refugees' integration. In Poland there are two institutions (Office for Foreigners and the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy) responsible for shaping and implementing of the integration system of asylum seekers and – later on – that of refugees. The main obstacle in this system is that the two central government institutions and local institutions supervised by them operate on the basis of two different Acts and therefore do not cooperate extensively. There is also insufficient provision made for cooperation between the Office for Foreigners and local institutions such as Powiat Centres for Family support which are responsible for providing integration assistance for refugees in a form of the Individual Integration Programme.

In case of the Netherlands, due to recent decentralisation, municipalities have become responsible for policies in the field of (re-)integration, participation and social support and - as a consequence - are also responsible for the integration of newcomers into Dutch society. The mandate and accompanying budgets have been shifted from the central government to the local government. As integration takes shape, in villages, cities and neighbourhoods, the local level indeed seems to be the logical level for effective integration policies. Recently we have seen that in response to the recent refugee crisis many municipalities, such as Amsterdam, Leiden, Utrecht and Eindhoven, have stepped up their efforts at successfully integrating refugees in society and preventing integration backlogs as witnessed among previous refugee cohorts.

However, as several issues concerning refugee integration go beyond the possibilities of individual municipalities (e.g. impeding legislation concerning building requirements or civic integration, the system of distribution and relocation of refugees, available budgets etc.), involvement of other levels of government are equally important. With the outbreak of the refugee crisis over the summer of 2015, several layers of government joined forces in an administrative agreement in order to find solutions for the challenges accompanied by the arrival of so many asylum seekers.

This agreement formed the basis for continuous dialogue on how to solve integration bottlenecks and to stimulate coordination and cooperation between different stakeholders. The division of responsibilities and active cooperation between various layers of government (and other stakeholders) with respect to refugee integration seems to provide an adequate framework for tackling the challenges related to the integration of these groups in Dutch society.

To conclude, desk research analysis and interviews with experts and practitioners in Poland and the Netherlands, enabled us to identify three factors influencing the success of integration at the local level: a favourable legal framework and budget for local/powiat government which could be specifically used for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees (e.i. allocated budget for providing refugees with housing), coordination and information exchange among the key institutions, non-governmental organisations and informal networks, involved in the process of refugee integration, in particular representatives of public institutions both at the local and powiat level and positive sentiments towards newcomers and a willingness of local communities to voluntarily help asylum seekers and refugees to get involved in the community life.

GOOD PRACTICES IN THE NETHERLANDS:

ELDERLY CENTRE 'SALEM'

Initiator: Elderly centre Salem in collaboration with the municipality of Katwijk and COA (Central Organisation for the reception of Asylum seekers)

Implementation period: 01/07/2015 – 01/02/2017

Innovative project including housing, working and nursing education

- 10 apartments: The elderly centre offered 10 apartments inside for 10 refugees with a residence permit (still in one of the COA reception centers).
- Dual program: a vocational nurse education and working with a salary at the same time
- Learning the Dutch language: before starting the dual program the first 8 months the refugees are learning the Dutch language intensively to prepare them for the Integration Exam.
- Volunteer Work: while still learning the Dutch language the participants are doing volunteer work in the elderly centre. Once they pass the exam, their job contract and nursing education starts (this will be around 01-02-2017).

Target group:

- Refugees with a residence permit living in one of the reception centers in the Netherlands.

- Motivation to follow a 3 year intern dual program: working and learning at the same time.
- Affinity with the elderly care and willing to live, work and learn in the elderly center.

The refugees are being guided by volunteers that help them to orientate and participate in Katwijk.

More information can be found at the following (Dutch) website:

<http://www.werkwijzervluchtelingen.nl/initiatieven/zorgcentrum-salem.aspx>

DUTCH WEBSITE 'WERKWIJZER VLUCHTELINGEN (EMPLOYMENT POINTER FOR REFUGEES)

Initiator: the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands

Description of the mission and the main aim:

Werkwijzer Vluchtelingen ('Employment pointer for Refugees') is the Dutch website for information on employment, education and integration of refugees in the Netherlands. This website aims to help employers, non-governmental organizations and professional institutions by collecting, presenting and linking to information on immigration law and policy, supporting organizations and best practices in the field of integration. The information on this website is solely in Dutch, as it is primarily targeted at Dutch organizations.

Target group:

- Refugees living in the Netherlands for better understanding the labour market,
- Employers, non-governmental organizations and professional institutions in order to understand the policy of working with refugees,
- Organizations focused on social participation and integration of refugees in the Netherlands.

More information can be found at the following (Dutch) website:

www.werkwijzervluchtelingen.nl

<https://www.ser.nl/nl/actueel/nieuws/2010-2019/2016/20160512-werkwijzer-vluchtelingen-gelanceerd.aspx>

HOOST MAURITSKADE/ BOOST RINGDIJK

Initiator/coordinator: Initiative of Gastvrij Oost; a collaboration of citizens and business owners in Amsterdam Eastside

Description of the mission and the main aim:

The idea of HOOST is to give a group of about 30 people a few months the chance to settle down and live in a more independent way. HOOST is a citizens' initiative and not a formal reception center. HOOST Mauritskade is an initiative of a group of citizens from the east of Amsterdam, emerged from personal contacts with a group of refugees who arrived at the sports facility at the Polderweg. The idea shows that there is another way; that small-scale local reception with support from society can be a viable alternative. With such a small reception centre, at the initiative of local residents, the municipality can gain experience with this type of relief. The municipality and the district see the initiative Gastvrij Oost also as a wonderful opportunity to give the Amsterdam approach further shape and content. The temporary reception facility was ended in 2016.

Gastvrij Oost continued with another initiative: Boost Ringdijk:

Boost Rindijk is a temporary work and meeting space for refugees and local residents to get to know each other, and work together to develop activities that advance integration and inclusion. Among other things, Boost Ringdijk organises language classes, sports activities, and informative workshops.

Target group:

Third country nationals and beneficiaries of the international protection are the main target group of this initiative. Currently, there are about thirty people from various areas in Syria - about two families with children, couples and a few single men, some with a family that are left behind in Syria. All these persons are currently in the asylum procedure.

More information can be found at:

<http://gastvrijoost.amsterdam/en/huisvesting/>

www.facebook.com/groups/hoostmauritskade/

www.facebook.com/groups/gastvrijoost/

STARTBLOK RIEKERHAVEN

Initiator/coordinator: Collaboration between two social housing corporations (De Key and Socius Wonen) and the City of Amsterdam

Description of the mission and the main aim:

Startblok Riekerhaven is a housing project for young refugees who have recently received a resident status and Dutch students and recent graduates. In June 2016, a new facility opened for temporary housing of 585 youth. The aim of the project is to give all residents a good start for integration into Amsterdam society. Community building is an important aim of the project, in which residents are expected to participate actively.

Each living units consists of individual facilities (kitchen, toilet, bath) and communal living spaces. The residents themselves are made responsible for the social management of the living units. Per living unit there are two social managers (one refugee and one Dutch student/graduate). Together they are responsible for the enforcement of house rules and the social activities and social cohesion within the group. These social managers receive a small monthly fee for their activities.

Target group:

Young refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection between the age of 18 to 27 years of age and Dutch students, recent graduates and working youth are the target group for this project. 282 units are available for young refugees and 283 units for Dutch youth.

More information can be found at:

<http://www.startblok.amsterdam/over-het-project/wat-is-het-startblok/>

<http://www.socius-wonen.nl/startblok-riekerhaven.html>

NEWBEES

Initiator/coordinator: Foundation NewBees in collaboration with COA, the municipality of Zaanstad, Stroom Nederland and others

Description of the mission and the main aim:

NewBees aims at facilitating volunteer work by asylum seekers at Dutch non-profit organization while they are waiting for the outcome of their asylum procedure. The aim is to help asylum seekers (and refugees) to participate in the Dutch community as soon as possible. Through an online platform, NewBees helps refugees find voluntary positions with local non-profits. This supports social integration and adaptation to the labor market at their destination.

NewBees has run four pilot projects on its own account in collaboration with COA Zaanstad between April and September 2016. Of a total of 200 people that signed up with NewBees, 30 people received certification outlining the skills and talents they used and developed during their time volunteering.

Target group:

Asylum seekers and refugees.

More information can be found at:

<http://www.werkwijzervluchtelingen.nl/initiatieven/newbees.aspx>

<http://www.new-bees.org/>

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Safe harbour

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