

Transnational Exchange IV field trip to the Netherlands

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The project Transnational Exchange IV aims at connecting assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) counsellors on a European level. Aside from organizing workshops and conferences the project offers field trips to European counsellors. The field trip allows counsellors to encounter and to compare a voluntary return system different from their own. In bringing counsellors from different European countries together, knowledge and best practice counselling methods can be shared and benefitted from.

In case of the field trip to the Netherlands five counsellors from Ireland, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria and Denmark seized the opportunity to learn more about the Dutch AVRR system as well as the systems of the fellow participants. On day 1, the 19th of March 2019, meetings with the Dutch Council for Refugees, IOM the Netherlands, Bridge to Better took place. On day 2, the 20th of March 2019, the group travelled to Ter Apel to visit the IND, volunteers of the Dutch Council for Refugees and COA.

Findings and interesting aspects are summarized in this report to give other counsellors an idea about the Dutch return system and to reflect on their own work. The participants contributed to the different chapters and wrote down their findings – so this reports mirrors different perspectives and references to different European AVRR systems as well.

A special thank goes to the Dutch Council for refugees /Vluchtelingenwerk for making this field trip possible by arranging the program.

1. State AVRR counselling – by Ying Yun Wang (IOM Ireland)

I participated in the Transnational Exchange IV field trip to the Netherlands. I met with AVRR counsellors from Germany, Denmark, Luxembourg and Austria. The main aim of this field trip was to explore the operation of assisted voluntary return programme in the Netherlands as well as to exchange about AVRR counselling offered in different European countries. We visited different organisations and institutions which provide AVRR counselling or which are involved in the Dutch asylum procedure. I gained good understanding of the Dutch AVRR approach from listening to various presentations and meeting with AVRR consultants. From informal discussions with other participants during this trip, I received insight knowledge of AVRR counselling in other European countries, too.

The main focus of my report is to explore the role of the Dutch government in operating voluntary return and reintegration programmes. The staff of the main states body, Repatriation and Departure Service (DT&V), cancelled its presentation last minute. Therefore, my report about the state AVRR counselling relies on the information from the DT&V leaflet and its official website.

In this chapter, firstly, I analyse the profile of the asylum applications in the Netherlands from 2015 to 2017. Secondly, I focus on the asylum procedure in Netherlands, with particular focus on the state-run AVRR programme. In the last section, in comparison with the AVRR programme in Ireland, I summarize the main characters of the Dutch AVRR programme.

The profile of the asylum procedure in the Netherlands

The Netherlands received the record number of asylum seeker of 58,900 in 2015. The number of asylum application decreased in both 2016 and 2017. According to Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND)'s Immigration Service report in 2017,¹ the total number of asylum applicants was 35,030 which included 20,540 first time and repeat asylum seekers and 14,490 relocation and resettlement program participants in 2017. The total asylum applicants were 33,570 in 2016² which included 21,760 first time and repeated asylum seekers and 11,810 relocation and resettlement programme participant in 2016. The first main trend in both 2016 and 2017 was the increased number of family reunification applicants which resulted from the increased influx of asylum seekers, particularly in 2015. Syrian applicants took up 34% of the total asylum applications in 2016. This nationality was followed by Eritreans at 9% in 2016. The second main trend was the increased number of asylum applicants coming from safe countries of origin such as Albania, Serbia Kosovo, and Morocco. Its number accounts for 25% of the total number of applications in the beginning of 2016.

The approval rate of asylum applications was 54% in 2016 – a decrease in comparison to the approval rate of 70% in 2015. The departure number of asylum seekers was 15,120 in 2017

¹ <https://www.government.nl/topics/asylum-policy/news/2018/04/30/2017-immigration-services-report-number-of-asylum-seekers-holding-steady-composition-has-changed>

² <https://www.government.nl/topics/asylum-policy/news/2017/04/10/ind-coa-dtv-present-annual-figures>

in comparison with 17,390 in 2016. Out of these 15,120 returnees in 2017, 3,400 left the country independently, and 2,700 people were forcibly returned to their countries of origin. The rest (9,020 returnees) availed of the voluntary return programmes from different organisations. The year 2017 marks the first increase in the number of enforced repatriations since 2012. I will discuss the states voluntary return assistance in the next section.

The asylum system in the Netherlands

The Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice has responsibilities for immigration matters through different state organisations. Asylum applicants submit to the Dutch government their asylum request which may result in granted asylum, a residence and work permit. work in the Netherlands. My main focus here is to explore the role of the state-run voluntary return programmes after the applicants' residence permits are refused.

All asylum seekers in the Netherlands must register and apply for asylum in the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) in Ter Apel first. The IND is part of the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice and is the only central authority to process all asylum applications. We visited the IND office during this field trip and the IND staff members demonstrated how they verify applicants' identity through modern technology. The Dutch Alien Act decides whether asylum seekers fulfil the conditions for a residence permit or not, which then obliges them to return to their countries of origin. In light of the influx of asylum seekers from 2015, the IND processes those applicants from the list of safe countries of origin (track 2) and those who already received international protection in another European state (track 1) in a simplified and accelerated procedures in Ter Apel. The applicants from safe countries of origin usually do not qualify for protection. All rejected asylum applicants are also given a re-entry ban.

During the whole asylum procedure, the state organisation Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seeker (COA), is responsible for the accommodation requests from asylum seekers. We visited one of the COA centres besides the IND in Ter Apel. Accommodation in this particular centre is available for migrants in their first days of the asylum application procedure or rejected applicants at the end of their application who are cooperating on their return to the country of origin. The rest of asylum applicants who are waiting for their asylum decision live in centres all over the Netherlands.

Those migrants who did not receive a residence permit, or those who are found to reside illegally by the police, receive a so-called Return Decision. This is a decision which states that the foreign national has to arrange their departure from the Netherlands within a certain term (usually 28 days), sometimes it could be up to 3 month or longer. The DT&V encourages migrants who do not have residence permits to leave the country voluntarily and supports them during this return process. Migrants who do not leave the Netherlands voluntarily will be forced to leave the Netherlands by the DT&V. They receive the files of those who have to leave the state from the police or the IND. They assess the options and conditions for departure on a case-by case basis and they provide AVRR counselling. They also ensure that the returnees possess the right travel documents and medication if needed. They also offer reintegration assistance on a case by case basis. Returnees from the list of safe countries of origins are not entitled to reintegration assistance in the AVRR programme.

I did not receive first hand official statistics from the DT&V staff directly in this field trip. Based on the figures from different organisations, I assume that DT&V still handles the majority of voluntary return cases and all forced return cases. One leading NGO (Vluchtelingen Werk, it also known as The Dutch Council for Refugees) counselled about 800 clients and 31 persons returned voluntarily in 2018 and IOM Netherlands assisted 2,149 applicants to return to their countries of origin in 2018. In total 3,610 persons returned voluntarily in 2018. However, the total number of AVRR returnees in 2017 is 3,400.

There is an intensive cooperation between the IND, COA and DT&V during the different stages of the asylum application. We were told that a major asylum procedure policy and procedure will be implemented from July 2019 in order to shorten the process time of the entire asylum procedure.

Personal reflection from the field trip

Compared with my own working experience as AVR consultant with IOM Dublin, I identify the following main features of the AVRR programme in the Netherlands.

Firstly, the Dutch government does not have a nationalised central approach for AVRR. Along with the DT&V, there are different NGOs and IOM offering AVR counselling and providing reintegration support. Hence asylum seekers in the Netherlands have more choices in deciding which organisation to ask for assistance regarding voluntary return. In Ireland, there is only the Irish Department of Justice and Equality and IOM Dublin operating AVR. There aren't any NGOs in Ireland involved in AVRR. Meanwhile in Luxembourg AVRR counselling is only offered centrally. The government is the only provider of both voluntary return and forced return. IOM Luxembourg/Brussel assists with booking flights.

In my opinion, this Dutch AVR approach which combines organisations of different nature, on the one hand, ensures that each organisation works in the best interest of the migrants and it does give migrants more choices. On the other hand, it could also confuse asylum seekers, especially those who are new to Dutch asylum system because different organisations are providing similar AVRR programmes.

Secondly, the NGOs in the Netherlands are more involved in the whole asylum procedure. For example, one of the major NGOs, VluchtelingenWerk, provides asylum support from the beginning of asylum application, legal advice during the asylum application and AVRR counselling for rejected asylum seekers. Opposite from the Dutch system, no NGO in Ireland provides AVRR counselling and the NGOs only refer concerned asylum seekers or irregular migrants to IOM Dublin.

Thirdly, the reintegration grant in the Netherlands is higher than in Ireland. One adult may receive in-kind 1500 EUR and 500 EUR in cash in the Netherlands. The in-kind reintegration grant in Ireland is 600 EUR per individual and 1000 EUR per family. There is a variety of reintegration assistance available in the Netherlands. NGOs such as the VluchtelingenWerk will work with their own NGO network (ERSO) and their country of origin advisers to provide reintegration assistance.

2. IOM's role in AVRR from the Netherlands – by Natalie Wachowski (ZRB Southern Bavaria Germany)

IOM, the International Organization for Migration, was established in 1951. Since 2016 IOM has become the UN-Migration agency and runs offices in 172 member states around the world. This huge network works on human and orderly migration for the benefit of all. It does so by providing services and advice to governments and migrants.

IOM the Netherlands works closely with government and non-government organizations in the field of migration. Key activities of IOM in Netherlands are voluntary return and reintegration, resettlement, family reunification and diaspora engagement. IOM the Netherlands currently employs approx. 75 people. Far more than half of all employees work in the field of voluntary return.

IOM AVRR (Assisted voluntary Return and Reintegration) staff in Netherlands is divided in three teams. The biggest team includes 24 staff members and is responsible for flexible counselling of potential returnees in reception centres or IOM offices in the cities all over the Netherlands. The counselling is free of charge, voluntary, unbiased and confidential. The interested person can contact IOM by using a hotline or visiting one of the IOM offices. All communication will be done in the language of the potential returnee. For that IOM can make use of interpreters if necessary. The questions, doubts and worries can be discussed in one or in several personal consultations. Depending on the situation of the client IOM will be able to offer financial support on return. Very special attention will be given to returnees with medical issues to enable them to return and to provide additional medical support. If needed IOM will assist clients with obtaining all travel documents and pay for the travel expenses to the embassy. When everything is prepared and the client is ready to go, IOM will book the flight ticket.

That will be the job of the second IOM AVRR team in the Netherlands which includes 11 people who are in charge of booking the flights for returnees. In addition to this task they also offer assistance during departure at Schiphol Airport including check-in support, handing out the travel documents and paying out the cash-amount on site. For the migrants who arrive in the Netherlands due to resettlement or family reunification and for those who are on transit, IOM will offer assistance as well. The IOM team at the Schiphol Airport does not only book tickets for IOM colleagues but also for other players in the AVRR field in the Netherlands, if requested.

IOM works closely with the Dutch Council for Refugees (VluchtelingenWerk) and government organization DT&V. In cases of vulnerable returnees who need extra support after arrival in the country or origin returning, IOM staff will refer interested clients to Dutch Council for Refugees for better reintegration support upon arrival. Good examples are potential returnees who plan to return to one of the countries of the ERSO network. The ERSO network is European network of NGO's in more than 45 countries that focus on return and reintegration. Dutch Council for Refugees is longstanding and committed part of that network. The partnership includes better exchange of information and in following a more

suitable preparation of the return including reintegration support by a partner organization in the home country.

The forwarding of clients also works in another direction. The Dutch Council for Refugees doesn't offer counselling to clients of some countries which they define as not secure countries. One of the examples is Afghanistan. Returnees to Afghanistan can be supported by IOM, but not by Dutch Council for Refugees.

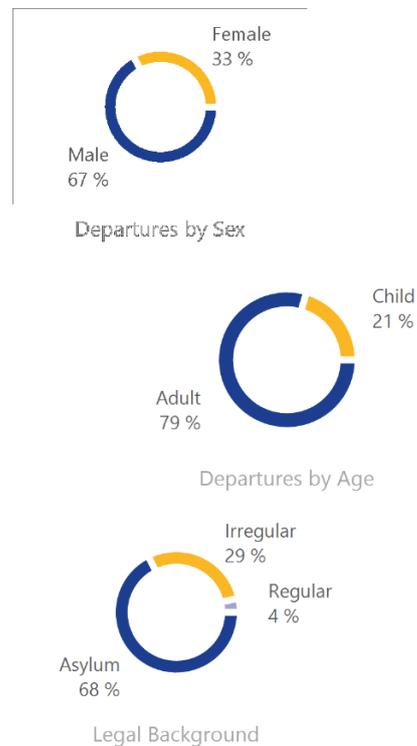
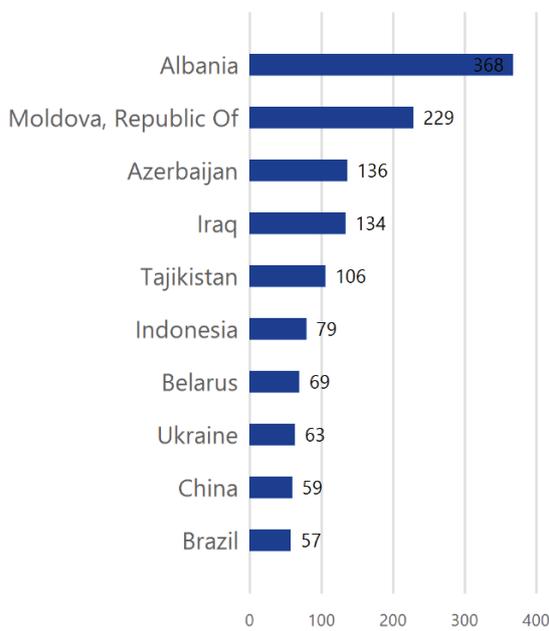
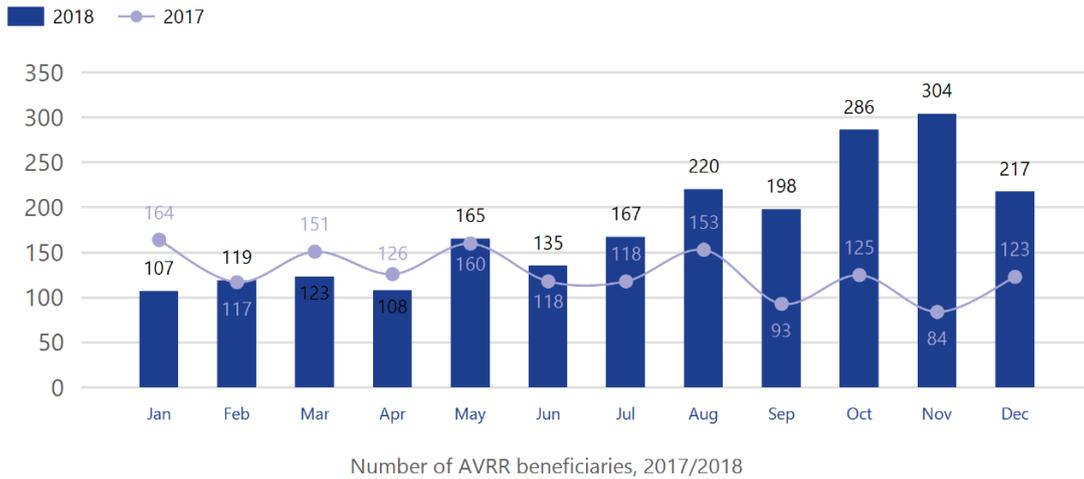
The third IOM AVRR team is located in The Hague and includes 17 staff members. They are not involved in counselling returnees and form a special background team for their colleagues all over the Netherlands. They focus on pre-departure assistance for vulnerable migrants and coordination of post-arrival reintegration assistance. When dealing with medical cases, they will inform their colleagues in the reception centres or cities offices about necessary documents for sick returnees and acquire information regarding medical treatment in the country of origin by contacting IOM offices in targeted states. They will also organize medical flight escorts for returnees if necessary. In cases when clients need a new travel document, the The Hague team will provide assistance with information about the required documents to the colleagues in counselling process, make appointments at the embassies or consulates and in some special cases even accompany clients to their appointments. IOM the Netherlands invests a lot of time in diplomatic relations and can confidently confirm its positive experience with this approach. This special focus on building trust and positive relationship with embassies and consulates is very interesting point from the German perspective. There is no comparable activity on the side of IOM Germany.

In conclusion, IOM plays a huge and very important role in AVRR field in Netherlands. In my opinion, they successfully cooperate with government and non-government players regarding return, but also offer their own independent assistance for interested people. IOM can provide assistance from the first contact to the actual return and even for the reintegration process. That might be the most important difference to IOM Germany that doesn't offer counselling to clients at all except for one counsellor in Berlin (who only counsels clients living in Berlin). The next positive difference to IOM Germany is the comprehensive help offered by IOM Netherlands to clients at the airport on the day of return. In my experience this kind of assistance is very often requested by returnees in Germany which is understandable. Many of my clients fly for the first time in their lives when they leave Germany. This is usually the reason for the feeling of uncertainty and nervousness. Knowing that IOM staff will support the returnee at every step at the airport is a huge ease for returnees. IOM Germany can offer the assistance during check-in and security check only upon request and for an additional fee. At the moment it is not clear who can cover these additional costs.

In the end I am very impressed with the variety of different services and support available in the AVRR field in Netherlands. There are many stakeholders with their own focus and approach to counselling process of potential returnees who work together very closely and try to offer tailor-made solutions. However, this diversity can also be confusing and overwhelming for interested people, especially if they have not been in the Netherlands for long and the structures are unknown to them.

IOM figures for voluntary return in 2018³

2,149 MIGRANTS ASSISTED with AVRR in 2018



³ <https://iom-nederland.nl/en/statistics/voluntary-return-in-2018-a-year-in-numbers>

3. AVRR counselling offered by NGO's and volunteers in the Netherlands – by Nadine Schumacher (Luxembourg state) and by Salome Maxeiner (Transnational Exchange IV)

AVRR counselling is offered by several NGOs. The main NGO which offers AVRR counselling is the Dutch Council for Refugees (DCR, VluchtelingenWerk). Some NGOs even offer a combination of counselling and professional training such as Bridge to Better, Goedwerk Foundation, Wereldwijd, Solid Road, ROS.

Introduction of the DCR

The Dutch Council for Refugees is an independent, non-governmental organisation, founded in 1979. With more than 13.000 trained volunteers and 900 paid employees they offer refugees practical support during their asylum procedure and help them rebuild their lives in the Netherlands. With one National Office in Amsterdam, 5 regional departments, and 300 local branches (municipalities) they are active in 80% of the municipalities. The work of the DCR is funded by the state and the municipality as well as the national postcode lottery, private donors and project funding (EU, ministries, and private funds). The DCR focuses its services on three main areas:

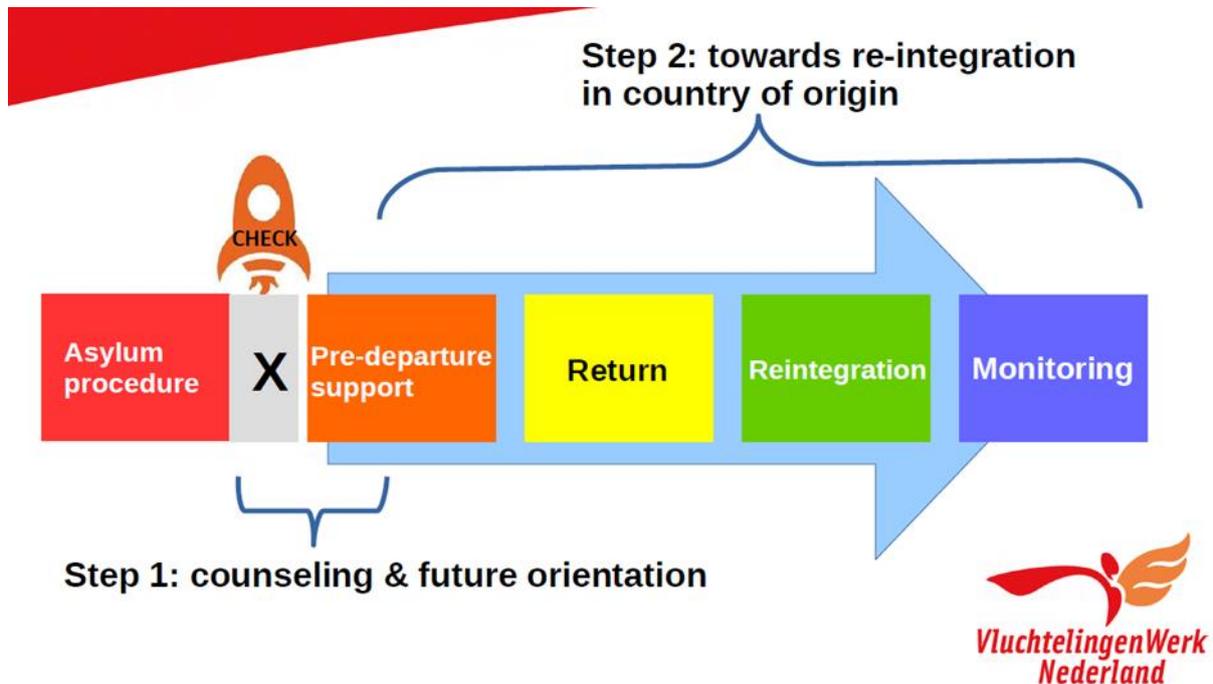
- Asylum: access to territory & fair asylum procedure
- Integration: becoming part of Dutch society
- Lobby & Advocacy: promoting the rights of asylum seekers and refugees

AVRR counselling by the DCR

AVRR counselling is only a small part of all asylum support services offered by the DCR – making sure that rejected asylum seekers receive adequate information and coaching when thinking and deciding about return. The aim is to further acceptance of the asylum decision and to facilitate an independent and sustainable return decision. The DCR offered until 2015 AVRR counselling (project based) in reception centres and cities with a focus on accepting the legal status and renew the mind-set. The organization of the plane ticket and financial assistance (200€ per adult, 40€ per child) is taken care of by IOM only, to whom the DCR refers its clients. From 2015 onwards the DCR has been offering AVRR counselling funded by the AMIF. AVRR counselling as well as reintegration assistance in countries of origin (ERSO Membership) is now offered and organized by the DCR in reception centres and cities. The return of clients from centralized and decentralized care is assisted by DCR volunteers and by partner organizations in the countries of origin and supervised by country advisers. The goals of the 2019 AVRR counselling project “Return with Dignity” are to support 800 (almost) rejected clients in municipalities and reception centres in their pre-departure process, of which at minimum half opt for return after a period of maximum a year counselling, to apply a nationwide, uniform methodology for counselling clients on the subjects of future and

return, to strengthen the network and to improve the cooperation with reintegration organizations in the Netherlands and the countries of origin.

The following picture shows the newly developed methodology:



The DCR sets its focus on providing solid reintegration counselling and to plan the new life after return as detailed as possible. The counselling includes giving information about the project and current information about the country of origin, preparing a return plan with supervisor and advisor, offering practical support on return, contacting the partner organization together with the client and applying for in-kind €1500 assistance (spending in country of origin) and €300 cash. Children can apply for up to in-kind €2500 reintegration support and €300 cash. The DCR aims at supporting the returnee for one year after return and to do monitoring in order to learn more about the reintegration process. The DCR only offers reintegration counselling to clients who return to countries in which the DCR has a partner organization.

The volunteer concept of the DCR

The DCR staff works with approximately 13.000 volunteers. Working with volunteers has several advantages: the volunteer has a lot more time than a professional to spend it with the (rejected) asylum seeker and can create, therefore, a much stronger relationship of trust; the volunteer usually accompanies a client throughout the entire asylum procedure and is aware of the client's needs; volunteers with all types of professional backgrounds give new perspectives; and additionally to that working with volunteers is cheaper than hiring more paid staff. The volunteer concept comprises that the paid staff prepare and oversee the AVRR counselling of trained volunteers. The paid staff does normally not stand in direct contact with the client. In difficult or complex cases, however, the paid staff steps in and

takes over the case from the volunteer. Before volunteers start counselling returnees, they need go through several (online) trainings (offered and organized centrally by the DCR) such as the Dutch legal system, counselling methods, etc.. All volunteers are working for free in their spare time for the Vluchtelingen Werk.

The work with volunteers is based primarily on trust. The organization DCR trusts the volunteer that he or she is doing the job at his or her best. The asylum seeker has only one direct caregiver, who is first the volunteer. So on the other hand the volunteer is working with the client and this is also based on trust. One volunteer for one client – always under the close supervision of a paid staff member.

In Luxembourg, the counselling of AVR is done by the government. The AVR is also done by the government in cooperation with IOM. Volunteers are not involved in the counselling process – also in Germany, Austria and Ireland (the countries participating in the field trip) volunteers are not directly counselling clients. This seems to be a very unique approach in the Netherland.

4. Accommodation for asylum seekers in the Netherlands – by Irina Kauzova (Caritas St. Pölten Austria)

Types of accommodation

Ter Apel is the first address for every foreign national seeking asylum in the Netherlands: it is the central reception location (COL in Dutch). There are three other types of reception locations in Ter Apel: the process reception location (POL), the freedom-restricting location (VBL) for rejected asylum seekers, and the reception centre for unaccompanied minors (AMV). The asylum seekers are housed in eight-people units and on average remain there three to four weeks.

For the duration of the asylum process, the asylum seekers from not safe countries of origin get accommodation, pocket money and medical care in the centres, which are distributed across the country. They are allowed to work for 24 weeks per year, if they are staying in an asylum seeking centre or a community for a minimum of six months and no deportation is planned.

Each adult receives €20 to €45 for food weekly and an additional €13 for other needs. In addition, asylum seekers are allowed to accept a job at the asylum centre, earning an additional €14 per week.

Asylum seekers who received / got refugee status granted with the refugee status receive a residence permit for 3 or 5 years. They are then 'permit holders' or 'status holders'. The COA will link them to a municipality in the vicinity of the reception centre. That municipality will provide housing. Until then, the permit holders are entitled to reception by the COA and can stay in the centre.

Asylum seekers placed in a number of special reception centres are only entitled to medically required care. These are the following types of reception centres: a central

reception centre (col), a process reception centre (pol), a freedom-restricting centre and a family centre (for the residents over the age of 18) and a reception centre with extra guidance and supervision (ebtl).

Accommodation stages

The asylum seekers first arrive to the COL. Asylum seekers are given at least 6 days to recover from their journey. The asylum procedure does not begin until after this period

Then they are moved to the POL during the current asylum procedure.

Accelerated asylum procedure and rejection of asylum:

If an asylum seeker comes from a country on the list of safe countries of origin, or already received protection in another EU member state, his or her application can be declared manifestly unfounded in an accelerated asylum procedure. This asylum procedure takes 8 days.

In such case the asylum seeker is not given time for rest and preparation and is interviewed immediately. At this interview the asylum seeker can explain why he or she is not safe in the country of origin. But the arguments must be more convincing than for asylum seekers from countries that are not on the list of safe countries of origin. The interview by the IND usually takes place without a lawyer present. After the interview, the asylum seeker is allowed to consult a lawyer and send the IND additions or corrections to the report.

If the application is declared manifestly unfounded or inadmissible the asylum seeker is supposed to leave the Netherlands immediately.

Normal asylum procedure and rejection of asylum:

Asylum seekers who have been refused asylum may remain at the asylum seekers' centre for a maximum of 4 - 12 weeks. During this period, they are prepared for repatriation to their country of origin. These former asylum seekers are responsible for their departure from the Netherlands. However, there are exceptions to this rule, for example when former asylum seekers are unable to travel for medical reasons. The Repatriation and Departure Service (DT&V) and the COA will support them in this process.

If the preparation for a return takes longer, foreign nationals can go to a freedom-restricting centre for a maximum of 12 weeks after the departure period expires. At that centre, the guidance of the residents is focused on their return.

After the departure period, the benefits will be discontinued, and the accommodation will be terminated. If foreign nationals refuse to leave the reception centre, the COA can ask the Aliens Police (AVIM) to start eviction. It is possible that a foreign national will be detained. If the foreign national fails to cooperate in his departure from the Netherlands, the DT&V can and may put the foreign national in short term detention. It may also happen that a foreign national who does not want to cooperate in his departure, will leave the reception centre 'for an unknown destination' and his whereabouts will be unknown. He usually lives on the streets then and becomes homeless.

In the Netherlands, the status of suspension of deportation does not exist. If the application for asylum is rejected, then the migrant must leave the country within 28 days. The period for departure preparations can be extended for up to 12 weeks as mentioned above. At the end of this period, the declined is considered illegal and loses all rights to accommodation or food.

Then they can only - for a previously undetermined number of weeks - receive a minimal supply. It is called "bed, bath and bread". After a night in the dorm and breakfast, they have to go back to the street. Those who do not agree to return to their homes will also lose this support.

In principle, families with underage children may not become homeless. If they are no longer entitled to reception, they will be transferred from the asylum seekers' centre to a family centre. The level of facilities in a family reception centre is moderate. The guidance is fully focused on return. Families will become homeless if they refuse the accommodation offered in a family reception centre.

The number of asylum seekers, who are on the streets without any documents and rejected applications is unknown. The unofficial number is 6000. Some receive food and accommodation in churches. In larger cities volunteers take care for the asylum seekers. Many of these asylum seekers submerge or go to other countries.

Rejected asylum seekers have the option to go to various return counseling centers, if they want to leave the Netherlands voluntarily and return home. There are VWN (Vluchtelingen Werk Nederland), IOM (International organization for Migration), Stichting Bridge to Better Foundation in Amsterdam (Offering support and training for undocumented refugees, intending to return to their country of origin voluntarily to start a small profitable business for a sustainable future there).

Refugees with residence permit:

Asylum seekers who have received a residence permit (permit holders) move to their own accommodation. The task of accommodating these permit holders lies with the municipalities. A permit holder moves as soon as possible after obtaining a residence permit. The COA links the permit holder to a municipality and the municipality starts looking for a suitable accommodation.

Unfortunately, in most cases the municipalities nowadays do not have a home available immediately. For this reason, permit holders also have the opportunity to make use of accommodation with family or friends via the lodge scheme. In this way, the flow through the asylum seekers' centres can also be accelerated.

Permit holders move to different types of accommodation, for example a single-family home, an apartment or a two-room apartment in a village or town. For single people, a shared accommodation is also a possibility. They share certain facilities, such as the kitchen, the shower, the toilet or the living room.

In most cases, a permit holder comes to live in the region to which an asylum seekers' centre is linked. In some cases, a permit holder comes to live outside the region. For example, if the

permit holder has a first-grade family (parents, children) or a partner in another region or if the permit holder follows a training course or has work in another municipality.

The permit holder is obliged to accept the offer of a house by the municipality. This also applies to temporary non-regular living space via the municipal acceleration scheme. The right to reception ends after obtaining the residence permit.

Other social benefits for asylum seekers aside from accommodation in the Netherlands

The COA makes sure that asylum seekers provided with a place to stay, meals and the necessary healthcare. COA staff supports asylum seekers when they are making choices that have an impact on their future.

Asylum seekers receive weekly living allowance for food and clothing. The level of the living allowance depends on the family composition and the income of the residents if they have any. Residents with their own income or capital are to contribute to the costs of the shelter. The COA gives a one-off allowance for household items and, if necessary, provides incidental allowances for, for example, travel expenses or baby articles.

The medical care provided to the residents of an asylum seekers' centre is as close as possible to the regular care in the Netherlands. Like everyone else, the asylum seekers can go to a general practitioner, midwife or hospital. COA employees inform asylum seekers about how the healthcare is organised in the Netherlands.

As of 1 January 2018, the asylum seekers can get General Practitioner care at Asylum Seeker Healthcare (GZA). The GZA is a national GP practice. A reception centre does not open before the GZA is operational.

Children in reception centres

About a quarter of the residents of a COA facility are younger than 18 years. They live with a family or alone (unaccompanied minors) in reception centres. Children are far from home and do not yet speak the language when they arrive in the Netherlands.

Of course, the parents are responsible for their children. But the COA also has responsibilities: children need a safe place to live, learn and play. The children lead a life that is as 'normal' as possible.

The reception areas have playgrounds for children and there are regular activities for children. Some of these activities are made possible through the subsidies from the European Asylum, Migration and Integration funds (AMIF).

For all children in the Netherlands it applies that they have the obligation to go to school, so the children in an asylum seekers' centre also go to school. A primary school is linked to each centre, but parents may also choose a school for their child. Upon their arrival in the Netherlands, the children between the ages of 12 and 18 go to the international transition class. As soon as they speak enough Dutch, they are referred to a suitable form of education.

The COA is aware of the impact that a move has on children. That is why they limit the number of moves for children and young people as much as possible.

COA work together with other organisations in the interest of the children in the shelter. For example, the Dutch Council for Refugees provides information on the asylum procedure and children's rights in the Time4You project. The Happiness foundation organises creative and musical activities at a number of locations. Warchild, Unicef and Save the Children offer sports and games activities for children and young people in the Team Up project.

5. Bridge to Better – by Tahmina Salik (Danish Refugee Council)

Bridge to Better was founded in 2011 and is a non-profit organization that assists undocumented asylum seekers with voluntary return and reintegration to their country of origins.

They started out as an NGO that offered reintegration support and counselling for voluntary return. But through their work they discovered a need for counselling the undocumented asylum seekers living in the Netherlands. They, therefore, made a proposal to the government to assist the undocumented asylum seekers with trainings as an option rather than detention. The proposal was accepted.

Aim and mission

The primary focus of the NGO is to empower asylum seekers through training and coaching while they are in the Netherlands so that they can provide for themselves upon return.

They train and coach people without a legal status to return to their country of origin with some skills and renewed self-confidence.

The training and coaching programs

The program is created for a duration of three to four months. It contains of three parallel programs.

- The empowerment program: Here the asylum seekers learn in workshops how to protect themselves upon return. They also develop self-awareness and develop the confidence to set realistic goals for themselves. The program seeks to bring into light the forgotten resources within everyone. They learn to identify who they are and what are their strengths and weaknesses.
- Business training program: In the business program the participants are trained in risk management. They get training to write a business plan and identify risks that are involved when planning a business.
- Computer training: The third program which runs parallel with the first and second program is computer training. Here the participants are trained in using a computer. The basic steps about a computer: how to start a computer; use of Microsoft word; how to design a small business blog, etc.

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of the program is to prepare the participants to be able to stand on their own feet and to provide for themselves and their families upon return.

The main difference between Bridge to Better and other organizations who offer return and reintegration counselling in the Netherlands is that Bridge to Better focuses and concentrates more on training, coaching and preparing the asylum seekers for their return while they are in the Netherlands, while other organizations concentrate more on the country to origins.

Aside from this, Bridge to Better has more individual contact with the asylum seekers upon return. They mentor the returnees and support them in the process of building up their business through individual coaching and guidance by phone, email and at times personal visits.

Additionally, the organization monitors the programs in the country of origins. Through this process they observe and check the progress and quality of their program over a period of one year. The monitoring happens through direct contact with the returnee and through monitoring trips.

There are other organizations in the Netherlands which share the same concept as Bridge to Better such as WorldWide/Wereldwijd and Solid Road.

After counselling and training with Bridge to Better, a client might decide to return to the country of his/her origins. Bridge to Better then contacts IOM, which takes care of the travel arrangements.

Bridge to Better has up until now helped 365 people towards a successful return. More than 600 people have attended the program at Bridge to Better.

6. Links

www.dtenv.nl

www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl

www.bridgetobetter.org/nl/home

www.iom-nederland.nl/en

www.coa.nl/en

www.goedwerkfoundation.nl/en

www.solidroad.nl/

www.ind.nl/en



Diakonie
Augsburg

Bayerisches Rotes Kreuz 
Kreisverband Augsburg-Land



Dieses Projekt wird aus Mitteln des Asyl-, Migrations- und Integrationsfonds kofinanziert. Dieses Projekt wird aus Mitteln des Bayerischen Landesamtes für Asyl und Rückführungen gefördert.