

# Summary Annual Report 2011

*Dutch Council for Refugees*



## Who we are and what we do

The Dutch Council for Refugees is an independent organisation that defends and represents the interests of refugees and asylum seekers. We campaign for just and fair treatment to be given to these people, who find themselves in a vulnerable position. They have fled from their homes because of war, political violence, their sexual orientation, race, or religion. The Council for Refugees helps them to make a success of their new lives in the Netherlands. With a widespread network of branches, paid staff, and volunteers, the Council for Refugees is the only organisation in the Netherlands that supports refugees throughout all the stages of their settlement in this country. In 2011, our services were delivered by around 7,000 volunteers and 640 employees spread over 14 regional associations. We are active in 375 local council districts.

## What went well in 2011?

- Our *IntegrationBarometer* received a lot of attention in the media. The findings in relation to poverty and employment were published first.
- So-called "*family transit centres*" have been set up for asylum seekers and their families who have been definitively refused refugee status. They have a very sober regime, strict reporting obligations, and limited medical care. Our open letter about these transit centres to Minister Leers of Immigration, Integration, and Asylum had an effect. Following this letter, the Minister promised to improve the situation.
- 'Countries that send asylum seekers back to Greece violate human rights.' This was a milestone judgement of the European Court of Human Rights. The Dutch Council for Refugees supported the lawyer in this case. This will end the deportation of asylum seekers to Greece, where they end up in overcrowded and unhygienic prisons.
- In November, our volunteers came together in our first *Community Congress*. We exchanged experiences, information, and inspiration with each other. Those who attended thought it was a very successful day.



- Thanks to the *Language Coaches* project, refugees are able to become more confident about their language skills. This means they start speaking Dutch and participate in society much sooner. These conclusions were identified by the satisfaction survey carried out for the project in 2011.
- Getting more young people, refugees, and immigrants involved as volunteers with the Council for Refugees. That was the objective of the two-year project *Quality in Diversity* that also came to an end during this year. In total, more than 1,300 young people and 1,300 refugees/immigrants became volunteers. This was way over our expectations.
- The results of our fundraising activities also showed how high the level of public support is for our work. The number of donors went up by 6.6%.

## What could have gone better in 2011?

- Despite our intensive lobbying, a law was passed that made illegal residence a criminal offence in some cases. However, it is against European regulations for a criminal sanction to be imposed on a person purely because they have not left the Netherlands before a certain deadline.
- The Netherlands is still deporting asylum seekers who enter the country via Schiphol airport and who do not have a valid passport or visa. In a joint study report, the UNHCR and the Dutch Council for Refugees made it very clear: seeking asylum is a right, not a crime. However, the Minister did not adopt any of the proposed alternatives, such as a daily reporting obligation.
- A proposal for a relaxation of the application deadline for family reunification was rejected by the Dutch parliament. If refugees do not submit an application for family reunification within three months, they have to satisfy an almost impossible income requirement. But those three months soon go by if family members are missing or the applicant is in hospital.

## Asylum

Worldwide, almost 9 million men, women, and children have been forced to leave their homes. Almost 1 million people applied for asylum in 2011. More than 14,000 people applied for asylum in the Netherlands. Most of these people came from war zones, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia. The Council for Refugees helps refugees with support and advice. We also lobby politicians and civil servants for a fair and humane asylum policy.

### Well-informed asylum seekers

The provision of decent reception conditions and the provision of advice during the asylum procedure are two of our key policy areas. Before an asylum seeker begins the asylum procedure, we explain what will happen when they are interviewed by the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) and the Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), and what they can expect from our volunteers and their lawyers. We reach a very high proportion of asylum seekers: we provide information to virtually all the asylum seekers in all the different reception locations. We have seen both positive and negative effects of the new asylum procedure that came into effect on 1 July 2010. For example, asylum seekers are better prepared than before, and our information and the meeting with a lawyer to prepare in advance have proved to be effective. One negative aspect is the lack of proper medical advice. This advice concerns whether or not an asylum seeker is psychologically fit to be interviewed by the IND. The standard asylum procedure of eight days also created problems. This procedure proved to be too short to obtain background information and documents from the country of origin and to lodge an appeal.

## Lobbying in The Hague

Our open letter to Minister Leers about the so-called 'family transit centres' had an effect. In these centres, asylum seekers who have been definitively refused wait to return to their country of origin together with their children. Research carried out by the Council for Refugees showed these centres had a very sober regime with a very strict reporting obligation and limited medical care. Following our pressing letter, the Minister promised to improve conditions in these centres.

Together with the High Commissioner for Refugees of the United Nations (UNHCR), we published a report entitled *Extended Border Detention: Necessary and Effective?*. We described how asylum seekers who enter the Netherlands without a valid passport or visa are imprisoned on arrival at Schiphol airport. From 2008 to 2010, asylum seekers in this procedure spend on average 63 to 88 days in detention, and in extreme cases up to as long as 438 days. This can only be described as inhumane and has proved to be a very ineffective approach in our opinion. Especially when there are alternatives, such as a daily reporting obligation. The Minister failed to address these concerns. Nonetheless, questions were raised on this subject in the Dutch parliament.

## European affairs

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) made a milestone judgement in a case where the Council for Refugees had assisted the lawyer. The ECHR ruled that countries that send asylum seekers back to Greece are acting in violation of their human rights. Under the Dublin Regulation, asylum seekers have to follow the asylum procedure in the country where they first entered Europe. This system assumes that all EU member states offer the same level of protection and fairness in their asylum procedures. In reality that is not the case. In Greece, physical abuse and overcrowded tent camps are commonplace. Hundreds of asylum seekers (often with their children) are also being held in overcrowded, unhygienic prisons.

This ruling will have major consequences. Especially for the 2000 asylum seekers who have travelled from Greece to the Netherlands. It means they will now be able to follow the asylum procedure here. Furthermore, it reveals the flaws in the European agreements about who is responsible for asylum seekers. EU countries cannot simply assume that every member state operates a fair asylum procedure.

## Integration

Offering protection to refugees also means giving them the opportunity to build up a new life. Investment in a good start leads to active newcomers in the Netherlands who are keen to make a success of their new life. The Council for Refugees helps them to get started.

## Refugee research

What is the situation with the integration of refugees? What are local councils doing to promote the integration of refugees? What is going right, and what is going wrong? These are the questions at the heart of the Council for Refugees *IntegrationBarometer*. The most significant findings of this biennial study concern employment:

- refugees have a vulnerable position in the labour market;
- refugees are more likely to depend on social security benefits than the indigenous population;
- only one-third of refugees have a paid job;
- no less than 30% of refugee households are living below the poverty line.

The Cultural Planning Office (SCP) also published a study entitled *Refugee Groups in the Netherlands*, which the Council for Refugees was involved in right from the start. This large-scale study looked in detail at the position of refugees in Dutch society. The conclusion: there needs to be a policy specifically aimed at refugees. Nonetheless, this is exactly the opposite of the current government policy.

## Integration Support Services

We conducted an intensive lobbying campaign to keep the funding for integration support services – the traditional core activity of the Council for Refugees. The government wants newcomers to be responsible for their own integration. If their plans go ahead, local councils will no longer receive government subsidies for support services to refugees. They will have to decide for themselves whether or not, and how much, they want to invest in integration support services. The Council for Refugees is totally opposed to this proposed cut in government funding. This is because the support given to refugees pays for itself: it prevents refugees getting into debt, having to live on benefits, and being excluded from society.

## Satisfaction

The successful project *Language Coaches* has come to an end. The satisfaction survey carried out amongst coaches, newcomers, project leaders, local councils, and language service providers resulted in very positive findings:

- the language coaches are a very helpful addition to the integration courses;
- they help newcomers to become more self-reliant, to speak Dutch more and to participate in society much sooner;
- the one-on-one contact between the language coach and the newcomer makes it possible to cater for individual needs.

## Family reunification

The requirements for family reunification for refugees have become tougher. For example, family members (including children) who want to come to the Netherlands have to be interviewed at an embassy to verify their family relationship. If there

are too many inconsistencies, the IND will refuse any applications immediately, without carrying out any additional DNA testing. The Council for Refugees sent a letter severely criticising this policy to the Minister and Dutch parliament. Various parties put critical questions to the government following this letter.

## New volunteers

Getting more young people, refugees, and immigrants involved as volunteers with the Council for Refugees. That was the objective of the two-year project *Quality in Diversity* that came to an end during the year. In total, 1,300 young people and more than 1,300 refugees/immigrants became volunteers. This was way more than we expected.

## Children's holiday weeks

"I'm sitting on my bed and looking through the photo album of that children's holiday week. It is a very happy memory." The Council for Refugees has been organising holiday weeks for refugee children since 1990. Most of these children are living in asylum seekers centres. During the children's holiday weeks they are able to have fun without a care in the world. In 2011, no less than 1,061 people were able to enjoy these activities (1,036 children and 25 parents). A total of 360 children spent a week on holiday and 676 children took part in holiday activities in asylum seekers centres.

## Public Relations

Public relations helps us to connect with our donors, volunteers, and the general public in relation to our work. In this way, we strengthen the public support for refugees in the Netherlands.

## Living Without Fear

Threatened because you are a Christian, forced to be a child soldier, militias that threaten to kill your father; every refugee has a story. But you don't find out about the story until it is put into words. That is why we have documented the gripping stories of Babaak, Tahmina, Parwana, Abdi, and Ram on our special campaign website [www.leveninveiligheid.nl](http://www.leveninveiligheid.nl) (in Dutch). They are the first individuals that feature in the long-term campaign *Living Without Fear* that was launched in 2011.



Tahmina, one of the faces from the campaign

The aim of this campaign is to show that there is a reason why people become refugees.

### The first Community Congress

In November, our volunteers came together in our first *Community Congress*. With this Congress, we wanted to show our appreciation for the volunteers, as well as to exchange experiences, to inspire each other, and to tell each other about our activities. The Congress was a day full of interaction, discussions, shared understanding, workshops, and speeches. Those who attended the Congress gave it a rating of 'good' or 'very good', and thus it was a big success.



### World Refugee Day

On the World Refugee Day, the 20th of June, we organised the *Umbrella March* as a way of raising awareness about the need to provide protection for refugees. The march went from Utrecht Central Station to an asylum seekers centre, where amongst others Minister Leers addressed the crowd. Earlier in the day, the Minister had been

presented with an open letter in The Hague from the UNHCR, the Foundation for Refugee Students UAF, IOM Netherlands, and the Council for Refugees. This letter contained a clear message that refugees deserve protection wherever they are in the world. This letter is also featured in the photographic exhibition *The Refugee Jackpot*.

### Media coverage

We were able to get coverage for the issue of refugees in all forms of media. The launch of the campaign *Living Without Fear* generated a great deal of media attention. Several press releases concerning the findings of the Council for Refugees *IntegrationBarometer* generated numerous stories on radio, television, internet, and newspapers. We managed to take the media interest in Mauro to a higher level by giving examples of

other refugee children who have become integrated in the Netherlands. In addition to topical news stories, we were also featured in such television programmes as *Koffietijd*, *Achter de voordeur*, *TV-Lab Carte Blanche*, and *Je zal het maar zijn*, as well as such magazines as *Vriendin*, *Volzin*, and *Eigen Bedrijf*.

## Finances

The Dutch Council for Refugees defends the rights of refugees and helps them to build up a new existence in the Netherlands. We would not be able to fulfil this mission without the support of our funders and our thousands of committed donors.

### How do we finance our work?

The Council for Refugees receives subsidies from the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. This year, we received more than €11 million in government funding. We received funding from the National Postcode Lottery in 2011 totalling €10 million. Almost 47,000 donors gave almost €3 million last year.

### Donors

Donors are indispensable for our work: they form our support base. The larger our support base is, the more the politicians and the media are going to listen to us. In turn, this increases the public support for refugees. Our fund-raising activities are evidence of just how much public support we have for our work. The number of donors went up by 6.6% in 2011 to 46,766. Public fund-raising in 2011 raised a total of €2,895,000 – 5.5% more than in 2010 (€2,744,000). Internal fundraising in 2011 at €2,986,000 was down on 2010, when it reached €3,037,000. This was primarily due to the unusually high level of funding from the Stichting Instituut Gak in 2010 for the project *From Pardon to Work*.

The Council for Refugees aims to keep the cost of its fund-raising in line with the CBF norm. Over a period of three consecutive years, the cost of fund-raising must not exceed 25% of the income generated from fund-raising. In 2011, it was 20.45%.

Would you like to read the full details of our finances in 2011? See the Annual Accounts 2011 at [www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/jaarverslag2011](http://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/jaarverslag2011) (in Dutch).