



International Strategy 2021 – 2025

Standing up for refugee protection and inclusion across and beyond Europe

Content



Introduction: new realities for refugees – a new international strategy for DCR

International solidarity for refugee protection is needed more than ever, as the number of refugees and displaced persons fleeing war, violence and persecution is at an all-time high. However, protection is hard to find and durable solutions are barely attained. While Europe should be leading by example in sharing responsibility for welcoming and hosting refugees, instead the past years have seen increasing externalisation of refugee protection, preventing arrivals, outsourcing responsibility to countries outside the EU, and downgrading refugee protection inside the union. This is painfully illustrated by refugees who are living in overcrowded and inhumane conditions, sometimes for years on end, at the borders of Europe.

At the same time, governments, including those of the EU and the Netherlands¹, committed themselves to more responsibility-sharing for refugees through the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees at the United Nations in 2018. And more countries than ever are willing to play a part in the resettlement of refugees.

In this changing international context for refugee protection, and at the start of a new decade, it is time to renew our international strategy and commitment to advocate for refugee protection within and beyond the Netherlands. Since our current international strategies have reached the end of their term, there is an opportunity and a duty to expand our international engagement as a national NGO with international responsibility.

This strategy document sets out a vision and ambition to guide our international work for the next five years (2021-2025). It encompasses both how we envision our role in standing up for refugee protection and inclusion outside of the Netherlands, in Europe and beyond, and how we envision incorporating international developments into our activities for and with refugees in the Netherlands.

¹ All EU governments (except for Hungary) were among the 181 states that adopted the Global Compact on Refugees on 17 December 2018.



Background: international developments and opportunities

At the start of this new decade, we are evaluating international developments and opportunities that affect the protection and inclusion of refugees today, globally and in Europe, and that have an impact on our role as NGOs working to defend the rights and dignity of people on the move. Here are five trends identified by DCR and its international partners that need to be reckoned with:

1. Record amounts of displacement and lack of durable solutions

Forced displacement numbers have almost doubled globally since 2010. At the end of 2019, an unprecedented 79.5 million people were displaced, among them 26 million refugees, 4.2 million asylum seekers and 3.6 million Venezuelans displaced abroad; a staggering 85% of them were hosted in developing countries. Europe only hosts 3 million of those displaced. Almost 70% of them came from just five countries: Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar. As wars, violence, and persecution have persisted across the globe, and fewer displaced people are able to return home, durable solutions are rarely attained for most refugees; more than 75% of the world's refugees are stuck in situations of long-term displacement². Behind these statistics are millions of personal stories, hardships, crises and talents.

2. Fortress Europe, externalisation and lack of responsibility-sharing

The European Union has increasingly been closing its borders, making it harder and more dangerous than ever for asylum seekers to reach Europe and ask for protection. This effectively outsources responsibility for refugee protection to countries outside the EU. The situation was only made worse by the so-called 'refugee crisis' that saw many refugees arriving in Europe in 2015–2016 and the EU-Turkey 'deal' that followed.

Human rights and EU directives are increasingly being violated in attempts to keep migrants and refugees outside the EU. These measures include police brutality, even deadly fire, pushbacks over land borders and at sea, halting search & rescue operations, and closing ports to those who have been rescued. All those things have recently been reported in countries such as Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Malta. Europe has so far failed to structurally share the responsibility for hosting refugees across the continent, leaving European border countries to shoulder an unfair share of the burden. As a result, refugee protection is under pressure in Europe.

3. Polarisation and public support across Europe

The arrival of unprecedented numbers of refugees in 2015–2016 led to polarisation on issues pertaining to refugees. Migration has also increased throughout Europe and between European states. Sharpened anti-immigrant, anti-refugee and xenophobic rhetoric and sentiments have gone together with increasingly restrictive refugee policies and, in some European countries, have led to a rejection of responsibility-sharing for refugees altogether. On the other hand, the 'crisis' also triggered new manifestations of solidarity across Europe, including the rise of new citizens' movements and volunteers standing up to welcome refugees. A recent global study in 26 countries, including 10 European countries, found that more than 70% of respondents agreed that people should be able to take refuge in other countries to escape war or persecution.

80% of respondents in the Netherlands agreed, and even 57% did in Hungary³.

4. Restricted civil society spaces and the criminalisation of solidarity

In the context of increased securitisation of migration and refugee policies, there has also been a European trend to obstruct and criminalise organisations and volunteers that support refugees and migrants. This has occurred through measures such as obstructive anti-NGO legislation, public vilification, harassment, cutting access to finance, and prosecution of NGO staff. While NGOs in the Netherlands have continued to be able to operate in a relatively free environment, many of our partners are dealing with the direct consequences of this hostile environment, which jeopardises their ability to work for the protection and inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees.

International responsibility-sharing, safe pathways and inclusion While the growth in numbers and challenges faced by refugees over the past decade far outweigh the solutions attained, there has been increased recognition that more needs to be done to find homes for millions of refugees. In late 2018, 181 UN members made commitments to more equitable responsibility-sharing for refugee protection through the Global Compact on Refugees. Important focuses of this compact include resettlement and other safe routes, including more generous family reunification policies, humanitarian programmes, private sponsorship and visas for work or study. European countries have increased the number of resettlement places from 6,000 at the start of the decade to more than 30,000 in 2019. It is a start, though still a drop in the ocean. Much more is needed, given the total number of refugees and the resettlement needs identified by UNHCR: 1.4 million refugees in 2020 and a decrease in overall resettlement numbers due to drastic caps by the United States that have only recently been lifted.

² See UNHCR's *Global Trends in Forced Displacement in 2019*

³ See *IPSOS – World Refugee Day – global attitudes towards refugees, June 2020*

5. A global pandemic exacerbating vulnerabilities

And now, at the start of this new decade, we find ourselves amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. It is a direct threat to the health and livelihoods of so many across the world, including refugees who too often find themselves in vulnerable situations. With imminent economic crises and government spending redirected to corona-mitigation measures, the pandemic also poses a fundamental threat to the survival of NGOs across Europe.

The coronavirus crisis cannot become another excuse for the EU to close avenues for asylum, or worse, to force people to return to situations of danger. In the words of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees:

'In these challenging times, let us not forget those who are fleeing war and persecution. They need – we all need – solidarity and compassion now more than ever before.'

–Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees





Vision: protection, inclusion and safe passage into Europe

While the Dutch Council for Refugees in essence is, and will continue to be, a national NGO working for the protection and inclusion of refugees in the Netherlands, we do have, and take on, an international responsibility. International solidarity is one of the four pillars of DCR's mission, in addition to asylum, integration and public support. Our statutes include the goal of implementing activities aimed at the protection of asylum seekers and refugees 'also outside the Netherlands, especially in Europe'.

In view of aforementioned developments – such as the Europeanisation of asylum policies, the de-facto externalisation of refugee protection to countries outside the EU, the situations at European borders, and NGOs being squeezed – we see a responsibility to step up our engagement to turn these trends around.

Our vision is a Europe with fair and humane asylum policies and practices where refugee protection, true inclusion and solidarity are the norm. We support this vision through three interconnected objectives:

- **Protection:** Safeguarding access to the right to asylum and increasing capacity, solidarity and equitable responsibility-sharing across Europe and neighbouring states
- **Inclusion:** Advancing the inclusion of, and public support for, refugees across Europe
- **Safe passage:** Increasing resettlement and safe and legal pathways for refugees into Europe and the Netherlands

Ambition: expanding our international role

As a national NGO with European and international responsibility, we put our 40 years of experience in the Netherlands to the best use we can to contribute to this vision. In doing so, we build on what we have learned over the past decade through our partnerships with local NGOs in and around Europe and our membership in the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE).

Our hands-on experience and direct work with refugees give us the credibility and expertise to advocate for refugee rights at the EU level and to support local NGOs in and around Europe. Our starting point is to work in complementarity and collaboration with others. Many international NGOs assisting refugees focus on humanitarian aid. Our umbrella organisation, ECRE, is an alliance of more than a hundred NGOs across Europe. ECRE focuses on advocacy in Brussels; it does not facilitate capacity building of and operational collaboration between members. We step into those areas where others do not work, where we see gaps, and where we believe we can add value from our experience.

We will continue to be a national NGO and do not open offices in other European countries or station staff abroad to do local protection work. What we will do more intently than in prior years is build alliances with NGOs outside the Netherlands and step up advocacy and collaboration for refugee protection across Europe, and bring home new ways of working. Here are our ambitions for the coming years:

1. **on advocacy:** to increase our advocacy at the European level, directly and by being part of coalitions of NGOs that jointly advocate and campaign for the protection and inclusion of refugees across Europe.
2. **on expertise:** to increasingly become a recognised international expert and be part of expert networks across Europe to exchange knowledge, expertise and jointly litigate for refugee protection.
3. **on operations:** to form alliances with NGOs on the operational level to exchange practical experience and to join transnational projects that enhance our work for refugees in the Netherlands, including acting as implementing partner throughout resettlement and safe pathway processes.
4. **on NGO capacity development:** to grow our support to develop the capacity of local NGOs and refugee-led initiatives, primarily at the borders of Europe.



Areas of work

Working for refugee protection and inclusion across and beyond Europe in the present climate requires us to be innovative, bold and agile, and to make clear choices about what we can and cannot do and where we can add value in partnership with others.

We will focus our activities and partnerships on a limited number of countries and regions that are of strategic importance at the internal and external borders of Europe, and where the needs of refugees and NGOs supporting them are great⁴. At the same time, we want to build or be part of broader alliances on advocacy and expertise across Europe and neighbouring states.

Taking a gradual approach, we will continue and improve the international work we already do well, while gradually developing new activities. Over the course of this strategy, priorities will be set and updated each year through the multi-annual international work plan.

Areas of work

We organise our international engagement in four areas of work in line with the four ambitions: (A) Advocacy, (B) Expertise, (C) Operations, and (D) NGO capacity strengthening. To support these four areas of work, we will invest in (also see Figure 1):

- **Communication and fundraising:** to let the world know – in English – what we do, what we stand for, and with whom we work (e.g. through our website and social media) and to raise programmatic and project funding to support our international activities.
- **International strategy and visioning:** to keep track of international and EU developments that affect refugee protection and inclusion across Europe and affect the work of DCR; and to ensure agility to be able to respond to such developments.

Figure 1: DCR's international areas of work



The four work areas will inform each other and activities will be built around the three priority objectives: protection, inclusion and safe passage. Here are a set of activities we intend to carry out under each of the areas of work:

Area A: Advocacy

- We will intensify our advocacy at the European level, directly in Brussels, and via the Dutch government.
- We will remain an enthusiastic member and supporter of the European Council for Refugees and Exiles (ECRE).
- We will invest in coalition building and campaigning with other NGOs across the Netherlands, Europe and neighbouring states. We will focus on issues such as the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, the EU Action Plan on Integration & Inclusion, the reform and implementation of European asylum policies, relocation, resettlement, EASO developments, country of origin policies, pushbacks, returns, and migration deals with third countries.

'DCR has the experience, credibility, brand and domestic network; now use them to lobby for the reform of the European asylum system and for European solidarity, produce materials that you can share with us partners and step up advocacy'

– Mariana Fragkou, programme coordinator
Greek Council for Refugees

Area B: Expertise

- We will invest in forming expert networks across Europe to exchange knowledge and expertise and jointly litigate for refugee protection.
- We will remain an active contributor to ELENA (the European Legal Network on Asylum) and AIDA (Asylum Information Database). In this way, we will contribute to the exchange of information between asylum lawyers in the various EU member states and keep up our own knowledge of legal developments elsewhere in Europe.
- We will continue the strategic litigation coalition and submit third party interventions to the European Courts to provoke rulings that enhance the protection of asylum seekers and refugees across Europe.
- We will organise joint learning sessions and joint work visits to the Netherlands with our project partners to ensure linking, learning and networking among the partners.
- We will explore the possibility of creating a (virtual) centre of expertise and an international (legal) help desk, where possible in collaboration with other national refugee councils, to act as a knowledge hub and as a resource for NGOs and lawyers across Europe.

'My dream is to meet my counterparts more often: to be part of regular thematic meetings and form loose networks with experts from NGOs working on refugee protection across Europe. I want to share experiences, do joint brainstorming, and develop litigation or advocacy strategies together, whether this is about asylum, inclusion, public support or other themes.'

– András Léderer, advocacy officer Hungarian
Helsinki Committee

⁴ To implement this strategy most effectively, we will invest in further needs assessments of local and national NGOs across Europe, in collaboration with ECRE.

Area C: Operations

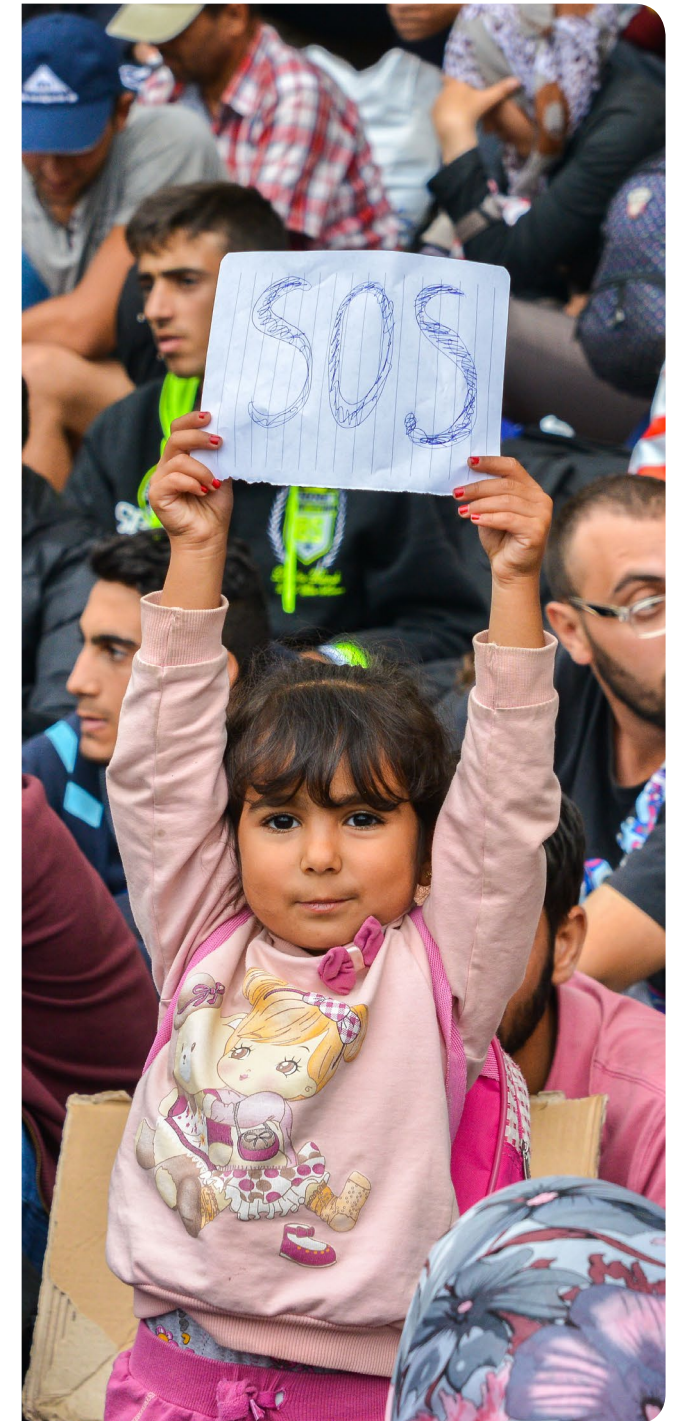
- We will invest in becoming part of communities of practitioners to share experience and expertise on the operational level so we can learn from other countries' practices to develop projects together and to respond to calls for proposals from the EU and other donors.
- We will proactively seek to be part of several strategic pan-European/international projects with national implementation that can support and improve our core activities related to issues such as inclusion, legal aid, social orientation, volunteering, public support or employment. We will also invest in relationships with international foundations and donors.
- We will explore taking on an operational role in the resettlement of refugees by being part of the preparatory process for invited refugees. We see this as an extension of our role in assisting refugees to settle into their new communities by providing social counselling and orientation.
- We will take an active role in developing (pilot) projects for alternative legal pathways, such as private and community sponsorship, student visas or humanitarian access. In doing so, we also seek to play a part in implementation, from pre-departure preparation to settling into new communities in the Netherlands.
- We will explore possibilities for getting involved with European volunteering opportunities for refugee protection, in order to send and recruit volunteers (from) across Europe.

'The tailor-made capacity support that you are providing to NGOs and your sustained support over time is unique. You speak from experience and that gives it credibility, while you respect the needs and local context of your partners. I do not know any other organisation that does that.'

- Oktay Durukan, director Refugee Rights Turkey

Area D: NGO capacity strengthening

- Our international partnerships will focus on strengthening the capacity of local partner organisations in countries at the internal and external borders of the European Union. We will do so with the goal of improving the situation for refugees and asylum seekers there, being able to monitor the impact of EU policies and migration deals, and strengthening our national and European advocacy.
- We will support local organisations with training, peer-to-peer learning, knowledge exchange, seed funding, co-financing, or support in developing and fundraising for projects.
- Through the strategic litigation programme, we will continue cooperation projects with local partners at the borders of Europe, helping to select and prepare legal cases to go to the European Courts and provoke rulings that enhance the protection of asylum seekers and refugees.
- We will invest in projects to strengthen refugee-led organisations in Europe.
- We will develop and make available our methodology, toolkit and theory of change on effective capacity building. This includes paying attention to how we select our partners and how we best unlock and share expertise, standardised training modules, train-the-trainer workshops, work visits and peer-to-peer learning between partners.
- We will explore the need and possibility to set up an NGO Capacity Academy, where possible in collaboration with other national refugee councils, and an NGO capacity development fund to which local NGOs from selected countries can apply for small grants and capacity development support.



Geographical scope

Our international activities and advocacy are organised around four interconnected levels of work in the Netherlands, Brussels, EU member states and countries neighbouring Europe (see Figure 2). In our annual international work plan, we will make well-substantiated choices about the countries and themes to focus on, based on where we can add value and make an impact on the lives of refugees and the NGOs supporting them. We aim to be part of broader advocacy alliances and communities of practice across Europe and neighbouring states. For capacity strengthening activities (area D), we will focus on a few countries based on the following criteria:

Within the EU:

- Countries at the borders of the EU where there are many refugees and insufficient capacity to provide decent reception and a fair and efficient asylum procedure.
- Countries at the borders of the EU where refugee numbers are lower but where refugee protection is under strain or civil society is under threat, and where we thus consider it of moral and strategic importance to support local NGOs.
- EU countries that are taking part in relocation or resettlement but have little experience in receiving and settling refugees.
- The priority countries are Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Spain and the Dutch Caribbean⁵.

Outside the EU:

- Countries at the external borders of the EU who are dealing with the consequences of de-facto externalisation of EU refugee policies, including as part of migration deals with the EU.
- In the countries where we work, there must be some foundation for a national asylum system and one or more independent NGOs with whom we can work.
- The priority countries and regions where we believe we can make an impact are the Western Balkans, Turkey and Morocco.

Figure 2: geographical focus



⁵ The island states of Curacao and Aruba are part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and are, by extension, part of the EU. They are currently hosting high numbers of displaced Venezuelans.

Organisation

To translate this strategy into reality, and to allow for agility in responding to international developments and opportunities in the future, a small multidisciplinary International Bureau will be established within DCR.

The International Bureau will closely coordinate with staff from other departments on matters such as communication, strategic litigation, advocacy and project development, and it will be linked with DCR's local offices. The Bureau, which will be led by an international coordinator, will give strategic direction and oversees DCR's international activities: implementing policy, projects, networking, communication and fundraising work.

To have more direct influence on and access to European institutions and EU funding, we will explore the possibility of having representation in Brussels and appointing an EU advocacy coordinator. We will also explore the possibility of working with other national refugee councils to set up an NGO Capacity Academy, a (virtual) centre of expertise, and a European (legal) helpdesk for NGOs.

Figure 3: Schematic overview international strategy DCR 2021-2025

Objectives	Ambition	Areas of work	Geographical scope	Organisation
Protection	to step up EU and international advocacy	Advocacy	EU neighbouring states	<div>International Bureau</div> <div>Advocacy</div> <div>Expertise</div> <div>Operations</div> <div>Communication</div>
Inclusion	to be a recognised international expert	Expertise	EU member states	
Safe passage	to be part of international projects and communities	Operations	Brussels	
	to support the capacity of local NGOs	NGO capacity strengthening	The Netherlands	



Partnerships

Partnerships and networks are key to the success and implementation of this strategy. Partnerships will be sought in the Netherlands, Europe and beyond with organisations such as:

- **In the Netherlands:** Dutch NGOs who also work across Europe (in particular Stichting Vluchteling, Oxfam Novib, and other WIV⁶ partners), UNHCR, the Central Organ for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) and its International Bureau, and the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND).
- **In Europe:** Brussels-based networks including ECRE and the ELENA network, local and national NGOs, the AIRE Centre and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), international NGOs working across Europe and the International Rescue Committee, UNHCR, and existing international networks of NGOs in areas such as resettlement, border violence and refugee rights.
- **Outside Europe:** local and national NGOs in target countries, international NGOs working in the target countries, UNHCR, and some networks of NGOs, including ICVA.

⁶ a loose working group of NGOs in the Netherlands that work on the international protection of refugees

Resources

The implementation of this strategy requires dedicated staff, resources and fundraising. By pooling existing resources and staff and by investing time in international coordination, communication, institutional fundraising and international project development, DCR will intensify its international engagement for refugee protection, true inclusion and solidarity across Europe and beyond.

Multi-annual programme budgets and fundraising plans will be made and updated annually. Fundraising for international activities and programmatic funding will focus on international private foundations, EU funding instruments and government funding. More international engagement also will offer opportunities for private fundraising.



Timeline: three horizons

We will organise our ambition and activities around three overlapping phases in time. We will start with improving what we already do well, then innovate and test new activities, and finally explore new horizons:

- **Phase 1: Continue and improve existing activities**, including how we invest in the capacity of local NGOs and do strategic litigation.
- **Phase 2: Innovate and develop new activities**, including advocacy coalition building and expert networking across Europe; piloting an operational role in legal pathways and resettlement (e.g. by taking a role in community sponsorship); stepping into European projects with national implementation; communicating in English through the website, social media and mailings; and fundraising with international foundations and the EU.
- **Phase 3: Exploring new horizons** including the possibility of setting up an NGO Capacity Academy, a centre of expertise, and a European (legal) help desk in cooperation with other national refugee councils; getting involved with European volunteering opportunities for refugee protection in order to send and recruit volunteers across Europe; and supporting the capacity of local NGOs beyond Europe and neighbouring states.

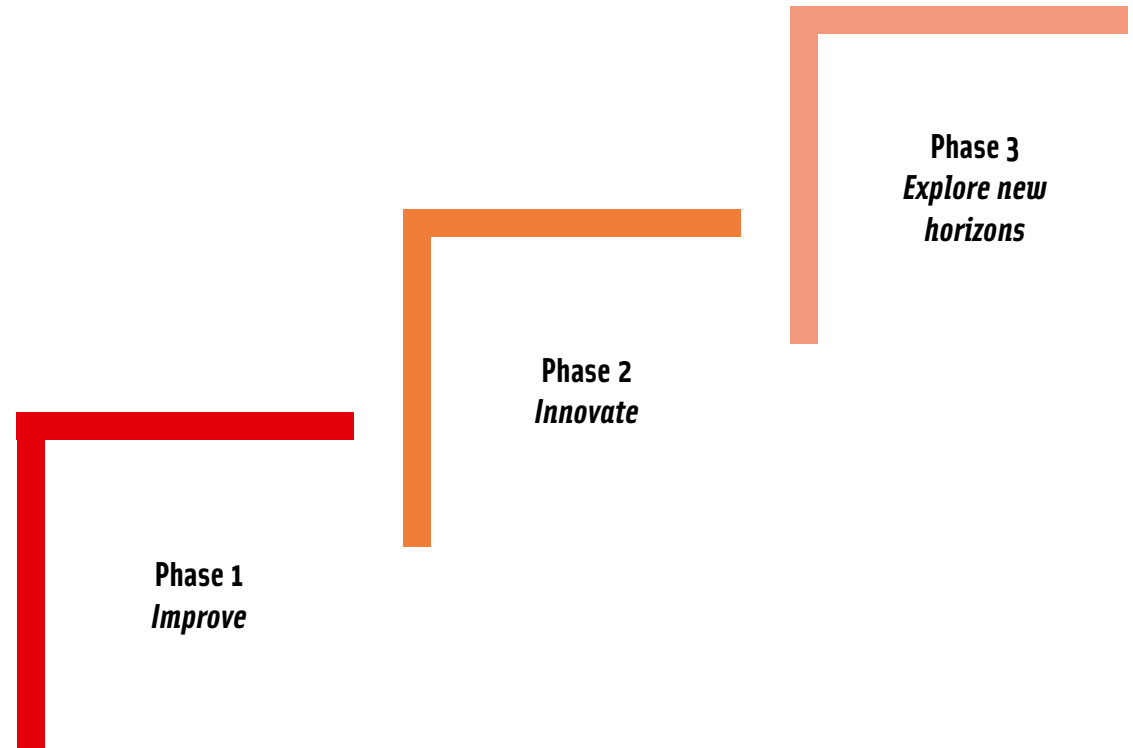


Figure 4: three horizons



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