

# Summary Annual Report 2015



## Who are we and what do we do?

**The Dutch Council for Refugees (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland) is an independent organisation that represents and defends the rights and interests of refugees and asylum seekers. Our efforts are devoted to promoting the fair and just treatment of those in a vulnerable position: those who have fled hearth and home because of war, political violence, their sexual orientation, race or religion.**

The Dutch Council for Refugees helps them make a success of their new life in the Netherlands. With a widespread network of branches, paid staff and volunteers throughout the country, the Dutch Council for Refugees is the only organisation in the Netherlands that offers support to refugees during all the various stages of their becoming residents here.

More than a million people were looking for protection from war and violence in Europe in 2015. Never before in our recent history have so many refugees come to Europe in one year: almost 60,000 people applied for asylum in the Netherlands. The Council for Refugees gave everything in their power to offer refugees the support they needed.

In 2015:

- We guided 77,284 asylum seekers during their asylum procedure.
- Our 12 regional foundations were active in 295 municipalities.
- We supported 29,233 refugees during their integration in society.
- We helped approximately 12,000 people with their family reunification.
- The Helpdesk answered more than 7,344 questions.
- We organised a wonderful week's holiday for 643 children and their parents.
- 15,000 people visited the first national open day at asylum seekers' centres.

Thanks to the support from donors, companies, funds, as well as contributions from the Dutch Postcode Lottery and government grants, we were able to commit ourselves to making every effort to help refugees in the Netherlands.



Photo: Goedele Momms

*Damon from Iran and volunteer Joke. Damon: 'I'll never forget Joke!'*

## Promoting the interests of refugees

**Through quiet diplomacy, the media, our own research, international cooperation or by mobilising our supporters, we promote the interests of asylum seekers and refugees. In 2015, we saw the results of some of the issues we have been campaigning for for years. One is that the Lower House of the Dutch Parliament has listened to our arguments in favour of small-scale reception facilities and another is that the stringent rules on family reunification have now been relaxed.**

### Call for safe routes to Europe

During 2015, we pressed those in politics to offer refugees legal ways of entering Europe. We also called on the European Member States not only to invest more in reception facilities in the refugees' own area, but also to invite more Syrian refugees to come here so that they no longer need to take the dangerous illegal routes to reach Europe.

We made this appeal together with tens of other European refugee organisations. We also regularly pointed out in the media how important it is for refugees to have safe ways of reaching Europe but, regrettably, Europe still found it impossible to provide any solutions in 2015.

## Plea for small-scale reception facilities

In 2015, too, we argued in favour of small-scale reception centres for asylum seekers in urban areas. This kind of reception centre offers refugees greater privacy and safety and, moreover, allows them to come into contact with the local residents more quickly. It helps cultivate mutual understanding. We drew up a proposed line of action and discussed this with various organisations such as the Ministry of Security and Justice and the political parties.

## More attention to work and integration

How can we arrange that refugees who may stay can find work quickly? The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment approached us with this question. After the government had for years shown little interest in the specific problems of refugees in finding employment, we now saw that this was changing. A very welcome development for us. The Ministry has adopted our proposal to set up a broad-based Task Force. In addition, we will be able to take part in this so that we can share our knowledge and experience.

## Improvement in family reunification

Just as the year before, our campaign focused on family reunification in 2015. Refugees can only start to build up a new future if they are reunited with their family once more. That's why we help refugees with family reunification and we offer them financial assistance to make this possible. There were more requests for family reunification in 2015 than in the previous year. We supported more than 12,000 refugees in their applications. We spent more money than provided for in our budget. The strong rise in contributions from our donors meant that we were still able to process all the applications.

We are very pleased with a number of the improvements that we managed to bring about with our lobby:

- The statutory application period for family reunification has been extended from three to six months; as a result, fewer people are confronted with problems.
- The tightening of the policy towards of-age children has been revoked and now children who are just a little older than 18 can be reunited with their parents.

## Sharing knowledge

**The Dutch Council for Refugees provides up-to-date information to its staff and volunteers, and lawyers about the asylum procedure, the safety situation in countries of origin and refugees' substantive rights. We enter into consultations and share our knowledge. Our telephone and digital Helpdesk receives tens of questions on a daily basis. Local and national government, too, come to us for information.**

## Information about the new asylum procedure

In 2015, important amendments were made to various aspects of the law and regulations on the asylum procedure and the reception of asylum seekers. It is vital that our staff and volunteers – as well as asylum lawyers – are kept up-to-date on these changes. We collected clear information for them and organised three meetings on this subject in cooperation with the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND).

## Cooperation with UNHCR

In September 2015, we entered into a contract with the refugee organisation of the United Nations, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), to write reports about the countries where refugees come from. These reports are an important source of information for governments, lawyers and refugee organisations, both nationally and internationally.

## Helpdesk

The National Bureau of the Dutch Council for Refugees has a Helpdesk to which staff, volunteers and asylum lawyers can turn with their questions. The questions are usually asked by email or by phone.

In 2015, the Helpdesk was asked a total of 7,344 questions about the asylum procedure and international regulations, countries of origin, integration, and other subjects.

## Support for regional foundations

**In 2015, we joined together with our regional foundations in putting all our efforts into offering support to all the asylum seekers housed in the new reception centres and municipalities. At the same time, we tried to find a good way of deploying the thousands of new volunteers who had just joined us. In addition, we organised holiday weeks for children and provided support in finding work.**



*After being separated from his family for 10 months, Mohamad from Syria was visibly relieved when his wife and children arrived at Schiphol airport. His daughter Sarah beamed when she saw her parents hugging each other.*

Photo: Mona van den Berg



Steven Ammeraal, one of the advisors on the Helpdesk at the National Bureau of the Dutch Council for Refugees, answers questions from lawyers and volunteers.

## Support in the reception centres

The number of asylum seekers that were helped by the Dutch Council for Refugees during their asylum procedure rose significantly in 2015, from 42,585 to 77,284. This is 91% of all asylum seekers passing through the asylum procedure. We were just barely able to offer all the asylum seekers the support they needed. Added to this, the large numbers of asylum seekers entering the country led to all kinds of emergency solutions such as sheltering them in sports halls and multi-functional event venues. We wanted to help the refugees there as well. We had to put all our efforts into setting staff and volunteers to work at the new emergency reception centres and to equip them with the right training for this. We organised training sessions on such things as the asylum procedure, family reunification, conflict management and intercultural communication for 6,357 members of staff and volunteers. We opted to avoid any publicity concerning our objections to the choice of former prisons and the tents at the large camp at Heumensoord as reception facilities. We were just glad that all the asylum seekers at least had a roof over their head.

## 11,000 new volunteers signed up with us

We were particularly happy to greet the 11,000 new volunteers who registered with us in 2015. At the same time, it was a challenge logistically to find the appropriate match of supply and demand of voluntary work within our organisation. We invested in extra schooling so that all the new volunteers were well equipped to start work.

## Support in municipalities

In 2015, the Dutch Council for Refugees was active in 295 municipalities, which meant that we were present in 75% of all the municipalities. We supported 29,233 refugees during their integration into society (social support).

## 25 years of holiday weeks for children

In 2015, we organised children's holiday weeks for the twenty-fifth time. Thanks to the holiday weeks, parents and children can forget all their troubles and the insecurity and stress of the asylum procedure for a short time. More than ten thousand children have enjoyed a holiday with us in the past 25 years. The children's holiday weeks are made partly possible by the financial support from our donors and the Dutch Postcode Lottery.

## Jobs for refugees

The Startbaan (or Runway) project that was financed by the Dutch Postcode Lottery allowed us, working together with the UAF, the Foundation for Refugee Students, to help refugees find a work placement or a work-experience position. And we successfully extended our network of employers in 2015.

## Communication and support

**The Dutch Council for Refugees is dedicated to improving public support for refugees via its own publications, teaching kits, campaigns and press briefings. Public support is very important: if people's attitudes are favourable towards refugees, a climate will be created in which refugees can prosper. The widespread attention that refugees attracted in 2015 mobilised a great deal of support for our work. It showed that there is a large group of people in the Netherlands who show solidarity with refugees and want to help and support them.**

## Strong support for refugees

When the photo of Aylan, the drowned toddler, appeared in the media in early September, the Dutch Council for Refugees' telephones never stopped ringing and its mailboxes overflowed. Everyone wanted to do something to help refugees.

A small selection of the splendid initiatives and financial support:

- A well-known Dutch TV talkshow host led a campaign for refugees in an extra-long edition of his late night show. The Dutch Council for Refugees received a share of the proceeds: €135,000.
- Euro commissioner Frans Timmermans donated the proceeds from his pamphlet: *Brotherhood – A plea for solidarity* to the Dutch Council for Refugees. They amounted to €20,000.
- Theatres on and around Leidseplein in Amsterdam donated the revenues from their shows on Wednesday 21 October. We received the sum of €34,498.
- The Dutch Islamic Foundation raised €44,000 during collections in their mosques and mobilised their followers to work as volunteers.

## Refugees-can-count-on-us Campaign

With our Refugees-can-count-on-us Campaign we wanted to make it clear to a wider public that the Dutch Council for Refugees is *the* organisation in the Netherlands that supports refugees and we asked for contributions to support our work. The Campaign consisted of radio and TV commercials, outdoor and internet advertising and advertising in magazines. Many media offered the adverts or TV spots free of charge or at a great reduction. As a result, familiarity with the Dutch Council for Refugees rose from 51% to 63% among the Dutch public. The numbers of followers on Twitter and Facebook rose and more than 1 million people visited our website.



*Many Dutch people are willing to devote their free time to helping refugees.*

## Open day at asylum seekers' centres

On Saturday, 13 June, together with COA (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers), the Dutch Council for Refugees organised the first national open day at asylum seekers' centres. 38 centres opened their gates to the public throughout the entire country. Altogether 15,000 people visited the centres. The most popular parts were the guided tours and the snacks that the residents had themselves made at many of the centres. Many visitors said they had a better understanding of asylum seekers after their visit. In 2016, there will be a second edition of the open day.

## Finances and organisation

**In 2015, we doubled the results of private fundraising. Donor numbers increased considerably, as did the number of companies who came to us to give their support to what we do, either with their expertise or financially. Thanks to their support, we could give our full commitment to supporting refugees.**

### Great increase in income

Society's involvement in refugees increased greatly in 2015. It was shown in the doubling of the returns on private fundraising. In total, we received €7,455,000. With this income, we could continue to work independently as the representative of refugees. The number of donors to the Dutch Council for Refugees also rose - by no less than 30% to 64,999 people. In addition, larger amounts were donated: the average donation rose from €69.84 to €110.93. The acquisition percentage was lower than ever and fell from 16.4% in 2014 to 10.3% in 2015, bringing us well under the 25% norm accepted by the Central Bureau on Fundraising (CBF).

## Support from the Dutch Postcode Lottery

The Dutch Postcode Lottery paid out a record sum of €312 million to almost one hundred good causes in 2015. The Dutch Council for Refugees received an extra gift of €1 million in addition to the basic grant of €9 million.

## Greater cooperation with business

More than 150 companies and organisations contacted us in 2015 because they wanted to help refugees in some way. Their support varied from organisational advice and financial contributions to jobs and work placements for refugees. We tried to link these companies with existing activities as far as possible, such as the children's holiday weeks or our work-experience projects. We received almost €700,000 from companies. That sum had never been so high.

## Government funding

In 2015, we received €10,640,000 in grants from the Ministry of Security and Justice, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Social Affairs. That was more than we budgeted for, but was a consequence of the increased numbers of asylum seekers that we were supporting. This money was used, among other things, for the information we gave to refugees during their asylum procedure.

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