

Summary Annual Report 2013



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 people who are 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 2013, our services were delivered by around 6,800 volunteers and 500 paid staff spread across 12 regional associations. We are active in 305 local council districts, which means we have a national reach of 76%.

We were able to provide information to almost 21,868 asylum seekers during their asylum procedure. More than 500 refugee children were able to enjoy a children's holiday week. In the local council districts, we guide and assist refugees to help them build up a new life for themselves in the Netherlands. These are just a few examples of the many ways we provide help and support to thousands of refugees each year.

With the help of government grants, a contribution from the Dutch Postcode Lottery, and donations from more than 48,000 donors, we were able to continue providing support and guidance for refugees in the Netherlands.

Representing the interests of refugees

The Dutch Council for Refugees promotes and represents the interests of refugees and asylum seekers through a combination of quiet diplomacy, media coverage, and public campaigning. We also try to influence policy and legislation at a European level. In doing so, we try to act as a constructive, independent, expert, and critical discussion partner. Wherever possible, we work together with other refugee organisations, local councils, and other human rights organisations in order to create as much widespread public support as possible.



Bereket (left) gets help every week from his language coach Ton: "Thanks to him I am picking the language up a lot quicker."

Photo: Goedele Mommens

"No Refugees in Cells" campaign

The Dutch Council for Refugees considers it inhumane for asylum seekers who arrive at Schiphol airport to be automatically locked up in a prison. Border detention was therefore one of the key areas of focus in 2013. Our campaign on this issue resulted in various debates in the Lower House of parliament and a lot of media attention.

We collected over 31,000 signatures for a petition to abolish border detention centres, which was presented to the parliamentary leader of the political party GroenLinks, Bram van Ojik, on the International Day of the Refugee.

In December, the campaign ended with a postcard support campaign for refugees being held in prison. Thousands of people took the time to send a postcard to these refugees with a message of support.

In January 2014, we delivered a postbag with over 7,500 postcards to the prison at Schiphol airport. Unfortunately, this protest has not yet resulted in a change of policy. Our efforts to improve the situation will continue nonetheless.

Children's pardon offers insufficient guarantees

In 2013, asylum seeker children, who had lived at least five years before their 18th birthday in the Netherlands, were made eligible for a residence permit under the children's pardon. Many families were provided intensive support by the volunteers and employees of the Dutch Council for Refugees during the initial application period. The new, strict criteria that were introduced for the children's pardon meant a lot of children were subsequently excluded from eligibility. Together with Defence for Children and the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), we campaigned for a broader interpretation of the criteria for the children's pardon. The government eventually changed the criteria in a number of areas. However, only 675 children actually got a residence permit in the end. This out of a total of 3,280 applications.

Little sympathy for Syrian refugees

More than 2 million people were displaced by the Syrian civil war in 2013. Half of these were underage children. The Dutch government wanted to invite just 250 Syrian refugees to the Netherlands. However, this number was included in the 500 refugees that are already invited to the Netherlands each year. These invited refugees are a separate group in addition to the asylum seekers who arrive in the Netherlands and make an asylum application on their own. We campaigned for more solidarity with the neighbouring countries of Syria who have been left to care for the overwhelming flood of refugees on their own. That is why we think this group of Syrian refugees should be invited in addition to the annual quota of 500 invited refugees. State Secretary Teeven has not been willing to do so up until now.

Permit fees reduced

The Dutch Council for Refugees has been protesting for many years against the high fees charged for residence permits. In 2013, together with the Working Group against Permit Fee Increases we managed to convince Parliament to reduce the fees for family reunification from €950 per person to €225 per person. We also called on the government to reduce the fees for permanent residence permits. The fees will now be reduced from €400 per person to €150 per person.

Improvement in policy on family reunification

When refugees are fleeing from violence and persecution, they sometimes become separated from their families. The Dutch Council for Refugees believes that refugee families have a right to be reunited. It is difficult to build up a new life for yourself when your partner or children are living in a different country. That is why we support refugees in their attempts to reunite their families. We do that with advice and guidance, but also with financial support. At the start of 2013, amongst other things following a critical report published by the Dutch Council for Refugees together with Defence for Children, the very strict policy for family reunification was modified.

This meant that many families that had previously been refused are now eligible for family reunification. In 2012, only 20% of all applications for family reunification were approved, while in 2013 the number of approvals went up to more than 50%. We were delighted with this result.

Support regional associations

The National Office supports the regional associations so that they have the right knowledge and skills to be able to guide and assist asylum seekers and refugees.

We coordinate the legal assistance given to asylum seekers in asylum seeker centres, and support the regional associations in their work to help refugees build up a new life for themselves. Together with the regional associations, we run projects that enable asylum seekers and refugees to support themselves.

More asylum seekers, extra guidance needed

Partly as a result of the war in Syria, more asylum seekers came to the Netherlands in 2013 than in 2012. A total of 14,399 people requested asylum in the Netherlands. New asylum seeker centres had to be opened. It also meant we had to quickly establish new support networks at the new locations. Due to the serious situation in Syria, many of these asylum seekers received a residence permit without too much delay. Which in turn meant a lot of accommodation had to be found for these people.

However, because of the shortage of suitable housing, thousands of refugees with a residence permit are still waiting for a home.

We tried to improve the living conditions in the centres through the children's holiday weeks and various other projects.

Integration programs

Since 1 January 2013, newcomers have been responsible for organising their own integration, and have to pass compulsory examinations in order to complete the process. The Dutch Council for Refugees knows just how important it is to prepare properly for these integration examinations. A successful integration program is an



Photo: Goedele Momms

Finally together again. Ubah is reunited with her daughter once more. Volunteers of the Dutch Council for Refugees helped arrange the family reunification.

important stepping stone towards full integration into Dutch society. We therefore decided to start offering our own integration services in 2013. By the end of 2013, five regional associations had established an integration service program. Professional teachers provide language lessons to small classes at the appropriate level. The newcomers also receive one-on-one guidance both inside and outside the classroom. Our aim is to provide integration services throughout the whole of the Netherlands by the end of 2014.

Language on the Move

More than 2,500 language coaches provided language training via the Language on the Move project to help refugees learn Dutch and develop a social network. Furthermore, the training given to volunteers enables them to guide refugees to the appropriate social services specialists. Eleven regional associations took part in this project.

Enjoying a break with the children's holiday weeks

The children's holiday weeks offer children (and parents) the opportunity to go on holiday for a week and relax, meet new people, and enjoy leisure activities. In 2013, 505 children and 74 one-parent families enjoyed a wonderful week on holiday.

Photo: Martijn Schuijjer



Umbrella March raises awareness about border detention. On the International Day of the Refugee, more than 1000 people took part in the Umbrella March. In 2013, we marched past the detention centre at Schiphol to raise awareness about the refugees who are incarcerated there.

Knowledge and expertise

The rules and regulations for asylum procedures and integration are often complex and changing all the time due to developments at a both a national and a European level. Reliable information and advice on these subjects is therefore essential. Our specialists have been providing our volunteers, staff, and lawyers with detailed information in this area for many years.

Vluchtweb upgrade

Our online *Vluchtweb* database was given a significant makeover in 2013. *Vluchtweb* is an important source of information for our staff, volunteers, and lawyers. The database contains a store of case law history, detailed information about the countries of origin, the current legislation, as well as advice of specialists in the Expertise department.

Helpdesk: advice and information

The telephone Helpdesk is run by specialists in such subjects as the asylum procedure, information about countries of origin, and integration. Lawyers, volunteers, and other people working to help refugees are able to get information and advice here by telephone every day. In 2013 we received 6,706 enquiries, 7% more than in 2012. The enquiries concerned such subjects as the children's pardon, the sending back of asylum seekers to the country where they entered Europe, and family reunification.

Country information

In 2013, together with Amnesty International we published a report about the dangers that Uighur asylum seekers face if they are sent back to China. Furthermore, the Country Information department handled a large number of enquiries from lawyers in relation to individual cases. A number of positive rulings in court cases showed just how decisive this information can be.

Strategic litigation

With the *Strategic Litigation project* we aim to put Dutch regulations to the test of European law. We do this by supporting legal challenges in the European Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Justice. A ruling by the European Court of Justice in a case supported by the Dutch Council for Refugees emphasised just how important this is. It concerned asylum seekers who had applied for refugee protection on the grounds of their sexual orientation. Previously, it was common practice in the Netherlands for homosexual asylum seekers to be sent back to the country of origin. They were then told to be discreet about their lifestyle and then they would not be in any danger of persecution. The European Court of Justice ruled that this violated the rights of homosexual asylum seekers. Consequently, they are now more likely to be offered protection in the Netherlands.

Refugee Fund receives (too) many funding applications

In 2013, €540,000 was paid out in grants from the Refugee Fund. A significant part of the Refugee Fund is financed by donations from

donors. Refugees are able to make applications to this Fund, amongst other things for a financial contribution towards the cost of family reunification. Thanks to the changes in the family reunification policy, there was a sharp rise in the number of refugees that were finally able to reunite with their families in 2013. That was something we were very happy about. However, the large number of applications meant we did not have enough finance to cover the full amount of the applications, and we had to ask the refugees to make a personal contribution as well. This means they now run the risk of getting into even more debt.

Communication and media

Many people have no idea what a refugee is or the suffering that refugees go through. The Dutch Council for Refugees therefore tries to get their stories across to as many people as possible. We do this amongst other things via the media, teaching packs, and our campaigns. In this way we try to improve public opinion, create understanding, and raise support for refugees in the Netherlands.

New website

In 2013 we launched our new website. The new website gives much more attention to refugees and to the important role of volunteers. Furthermore, the website provides a portal for all the regional associations. This sharpens our profile as a single, national association. The new website was a growing success, and the number of visitors went up in the second half of 2013 by one-third compared to the first half of the year. In total, the website attracted more than 225,000 visitors in 2013. An increase of more than 25% on the previous year.

Social media reach widens

Our social media reach expanded considerably in 2013. By the end of the year we had been 'liked' by over 8,500 people on Facebook, almost 6,000 more than at the beginning of the year. The number of followers on Twitter went up from 5,000 to over 6,300.

Media

The Dutch Council for Refugees received a lot of media coverage in 2013. We were featured on the radio twice as much as the year before, namely 47 times. Our participation in television programs was also slightly up compared to 2012. We were quoted 224 times in national newspapers and 416 times in regional newspapers. The latter was a spectacular increase compared to 2012, when we were only featured 144 times. Thirteen articles about refugees and the Dutch Council for Refugees appeared in magazines and journals.



Finally no more fear. In the Netherlands, Yvonne (left) from Jamaica can finally walk hand-in-hand with her partner Denise. The European Court of Justice made an important ruling about sexual orientation in 2013, in a case that was jointly instituted by the Dutch Council for Refugees.

Finance and organisation

Thanks to the support of thousands of donors, the Dutch Council for Refugees is able to act as an advocate for the rights of refugees. We also receive funding each year from the Dutch Postcode Lottery, the government, and other organisations.

Donations from donors

The donations of donors are an important source of income. More donations were received in 2013 than in 2012. In total we received €3,157,000 from our donors, which was 2% more than in 2012.

Grant from Dutch Postcode Lottery

We received a total of €9.6 million in funding from the Dutch Postcode Lottery in 2013. The Dutch Council for Refugees used the funding received to provide support and guidance to refugees during their asylum procedure and during their integration in the Netherlands, and to represent and promote the interests of refugees.

Government funding

The Council for Refugees received a total of €8.8 million in subsidies from the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. This money was used amongst other things for the information and guidance given to refugees during their asylum procedure.

Volunteers

In 2013 we had around 6,800 volunteers, which was 800 more than in 2012. We were glad to see that a growing number of people were selflessly committed to helping refugees.