

# Summary Annual Report 2016



## Who we are and what 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 in the Netherlands. We are devoted to promoting the fair and just treatment of people in a vulnerable position: those who were forced to leave their 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. Backed up by a large branche network, 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 they have to go through before becoming Dutch residents.

In the past year, cooperation was more important than ever before. We started the year with the launch of our manifesto: 'Together we can make a difference!' in which we ask refugees, citizens, government, companies, media and civil society to work together. Because it is only by working together that we can help refugees to truly feel at home in the Netherlands and participate in our society.

In 2016:

- We assisted over 80,000 asylum seekers during their asylum procedure.
- Our 7 regional foundations operated in 289 municipalities.
- We assisted over 58,000 refugees to get integrated into society.
- We provided family reunification assistance to nearly 10,000 people.
- Our helpdesk received over 10,000 questions asked by volunteers, asylum lawyers and staff.
- We organised a one week holiday for over 700 refugee children and their parents.
- Over 40,000 people visited the Open Day for Asylum Seekers' Centres (Open azc dag).

Thanks to the support from our private donors and companies, as well as contributions from the Nationale Postcode Loterij (Dutch Postcode Lottery) and government grants, we are fully committed to helping refugees in the Netherlands.

## Representing refugee interests

We represent the interests of refugees by consulting ministries, lobbying with the Parliament, conducting our own research and mobilising our supporters. This year our main goal was to get more refugees invited for resettlement. We also continued to raise awareness about the long delays for family reunification. For years, we have been advocating that asylum seekers should already start to integrate into Dutch society while they are living in asylum seekers' centres. It appears our efforts are finally paying off.



'Sara truly understands me', says Saran about her language coach Sara.

## 'Together we can make a difference!' manifesto in 2016

In 2016, The Dutch Council for Refugees presented its manifesto 'Together we can make a difference!' ('Samen maken we het verschil!'). We advocated the need for a new approach that focuses on the participation of refugees in society. More and more people are seeking refuge in the Netherlands, representing a major challenge for these refugees themselves, but also for society. Our manifesto calls for a collaboration between refugees, citizens, governments, companies, the media and social institutions. Our motto: 'include, don't exclude; don't reject people but invest in them instead' ('Insluït in plaats van uitsluiting; investeren in plaats van afweren').

## Inviting more refugees for resettlement

One of our main issues in 2016 has been the invitation policy for refugees. In our view, the Netherlands and the European Union should invite more refugees for resettlement. Vulnerable refugees in particular, e.g. sick people, disabled people or single women and children, are not safe in refugee camps. They should therefore be invited to benefit from an accelerated procedure. We advocated this point of view at several international conventions in Geneva and New York, and even got the media involved. We did however not manage to convince the Dutch government to invite more refugees than the current 500. In spring we called on the Netherlands and the European Union to ignore the 'Turkey deal' ('Turkije-deal') and create safe routes for refugees instead. Unfortunately, the government persists in keeping the external European borders closed.

## Learning Dutch during the asylum procedure

We consider it of the utmost importance that refugees start to participate in Dutch society during their asylum procedure. We have been advocating this approach for many years now. In 2016, the delays for asylum procedures increased, which makes it all the more important for refugees to participate in our society and start learning Dutch as soon as possible. This year, the government finally decided that refugees are allowed to learn Dutch and work as volunteers during their asylum procedure.

## Additional funding for social support

By offering social support, our volunteers assist refugees in getting acquainted with Dutch society. Thus, refugees get self-sufficient and are able to participate actively in Dutch society as soon as possible. For years now, The Dutch Council for Refugees has advocated additional funding for social support. In 2016, our efforts finally paid off. Social support funding has been increased to € 2,370 for each refugee. This increase will be maintained in 2017. Moreover, it has been decided in 2016 to cement this support in the Civic Integration Act (de Wet inburgering) starting July 1<sup>st</sup> of 2017. This means municipalities will be obliged to offer refugees social support.

## Adjusting the rules for Eritrean family reunification

It has come to our notice that with regard to applications for Eritrean family reunification, the Dutch government tends to pressure Eritrean family members to provide documents that prove their family relationship. It can however be extremely dangerous for relatives of refugees to contact Eritrean authorities. If the Eritrean government finds out that refugees have left their country illegally, these people risk being prosecuted. After we brought this serious matter to the Ministry's attention, they adapted their policy, making it less dangerous for relatives of Eritrean refugees to participate in family reunification.

## Sharing knowledge

**The Dutch Council for Refugees provides employees, volunteers and lawyers with up-to-date information concerning the asylum procedure, the security situation within the countries of origin and the refugees' legal status. Thus, refugees are offered better support. In 2016, our helpdesk received more questions than ever. Moreover, we participated in international research and published our very own international reports, e.g. about the security situation in Ethiopia.**

## Our helpdesk received more questions than ever

Our helpdesk answers questions from staff members, volunteers and asylum lawyers regarding the asylum procedure, countries of origin and integration policy. In 2016, our helpdesk answered over 10,000 questions, an increase of 25% in comparison to the previous year, which is truly remarkable.

## Background information about countries of origin

The consultants of our Country Information unit answer questions from lawyers and staff about the security situation in the refugees' country of origin. In 2016, we wrote a letter that was used during an Afghan atheist's appeal procedure. In this letter, we stated that the situation in Afghanistan for muslims that become atheist is similar to that of muslims that converted from Islam to Christianity. The latter group was already granted a residence permit in the Netherlands. Luckily, the judge agreed with our point of view and the Afghan refugee was granted an asylum permit.

## Doubts about Eritrean and Somalian nationalities

In 2016, we supported a number of cases from Eritrean and Somalian refugees who were granted an asylum residence permit but whose nationality was questioned by the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND). As a result, these refugees risked losing their residence permit. Based on the information we provided, it was however demonstrated that the Immigration and Naturalisation Service based its decisions on incorrect information and erroneous assumptions. Thus, the refugees got to keep their asylum residence permit and remained protected from being prosecuted in their country of origin.

## Ethiopia country report

In 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) invited us to publish a report about the security situation in Ethiopia. It's our very first report for UNHCR. All over the world, governments base their asylum and country policies on these independent UNHCR reports.

## Supporting our regional foundations

We assisted our regional foundations in getting the necessary volunteers at all new emergency shelters on time. We also supported the adequate training of these volunteers. Moreover, we created new projects, e.g. to educate children about the asylum procedure and to help refugees get acquainted with the Dutch labour market. This year, our 'Kindervakantieweken' (one week holidays for refugee children) offered more children and parents a week's holiday filled with fun and relaxation than ever before.

### Supporting asylum seekers in (emergency) shelter

In 2016, thousands of asylum seekers found shelter in sports halls, event locations, prisons and different sorts of emergency shelters. It sometimes takes months before their asylum procedure is finally started. Our goal is to assist these refugees by offering them a team of volunteers on time at each location. Within a limited amount of time, new volunteers have to be able to deal with different challenges, such as long delays for asylum seekers, uncertainties and refugees worrying about the family they had to leave behind. We assisted over 80,000 asylum seekers during their asylum procedure and offered (additional) training to almost 10,000 employees and volunteers.

### Educating refugee children

Our 'Eigen-Wijs' ('Headstrong') project educates refugee children on different levels about the asylum procedure and their new life in the Netherlands. We do so interactively, for instance by showing them a video, handing them a comic book or by playing games. We educated children at twenty schools that collaborate with an asylum seekers' centre. At 12 asylum seekers' centres, we offered a one-hour consultation on a weekly basis – Time4You – during which children can ask any question they want. This helps them understand the process they are involved in.

### Music lessons and concerts for children

We organised music lessons for refugee children of primary school age. This included a final concert, for example in the prestigious Concert Hall in Amsterdam. Apart from the joy that comes with practising, this experience boosts the self-esteem of these children that have been facing uncertainty for such a long time.



Refugees receive support from volunteers at a regional office.



Photo: Goedele Momms

After a long time apart, a Syrian family is reunited at Schiphol Airport.

### Employment: VIP project and Refugee Talent Hub

Employment is one of the primary conditions for the successful integration of refugees. Therefore, we started the VIP project, Vluchtelingen Investeren in Participeren (Refugees Invest in Participation). The goal is to support refugees in finding employment by offering them training and practical experience. In 2016, over 500 refugees started with the project. Approximately 250 refugees of these 500 people gained practical experience during an internship or job experience traineeship. Some refugees have already managed to find employment.

In association with several companies and the Foundation for Refugee Students (Stichting voor Vluchteling-Studenten, UAF), we created the Refugee Talent Hub. This is a digital platform where refugee jobseekers, employers and mentors can meet up. So far, hundreds of refugees have created their very own profile, dozens of mentors have started training and 50 companies have signed up.

### One week holiday for refugee children

In 2016, we organised a one week holiday for a record number of over 700 refugee children and their parents. Thanks to these holiday weeks (which we have been offering for the past 26 years) children and their parents can experience a week filled with fun and relaxation, whilst leaving their worries behind for the time being. We are able to offer these holidays thanks to the organisations that help us put them together, contributions made by private donors, the help of volunteers and financial donations by schools and other organisations.

### Over 5,000 integration course students

Just like all other new Dutch residents, refugees are obliged to pass their integration examination within three years. They have to sign up for a suitable integration course themselves. Since 2013, The Dutch Council for Refugees also offers such integration courses. In 2016, approximately 5,400 students followed our integration course at one of 92 locations. Student ratings for the course varied from 6.9 to 8.6 out of 10.

## Communication and support

With the help of our own media channels, press briefings and campaigns, we remain committed to increase the support for refugees. In 2016, our 'Warm Hart' card campaign and an on-the-go petition on trams showed that many Dutch people show solidarity with refugees. The Open Day for Asylum Seekers' Centres (Open azc dag) was visited by twice as many people as the year before.

### #rekenopmij (#countonme) campaign

Many Dutch people care deeply about refugees and are more than willing to lend them a helping hand. In order to draw attention to this positive note, we started the #rekenopmij (#countonme) campaign in the spring and fall. During this campaign, people discussed their motives for supporting refugees. In order to support our campaign message, we conducted a study on the level of support for refugees. It appears that four out of five Dutch people think positively about refugee reception in the Netherlands. Moreover, 59% of the respondents is willing to lend a helping hand to refugees living in their neighbourhood.

### Tram showing support for refugees

The Dutch could show their support for refugees by having their name painted on a tram for € 5. Starting on Budget Day (Prinsjesdag), these trams ran through Rotterdam and Amsterdam for a month, accompanied by the slogan 'THE NETHERLANDS IS CROWDED... with people supporting refugees' ('NEDERLAND IS VOL... met mensen die vluchtelingen een warm hart toedragen'). Over 4,000 people signed this on-the-go petition.

### 'Warm Hart' card campaign

In December we launched our 'Warm Hart' card campaign. Dutch people who think positively about refugees were cordially invited to send them a personal card. Nearly 15,000 people sent us a request for one of these cards. In January 2017, we handed out the first cards to refugees in asylum seekers' centres.

### Open Day for Asylum Seekers' Centres

In 2016, we organised our Open Day for Asylum Seekers' Centres for the second time. On this specific day, visitors can meet refugees and experience what it is like to live in an asylum seekers' centre. On Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> of September, over 70 asylum seekers' centres welcomed approximately 40,000 visitors. That's more than twice as many visitors as the previous year.

## Finances and organisation

In 2016, the number of private donors increased yet again. Moreover, over 400 companies were willing to cooperate with us or grant us a donation. Thanks to this support, we can continue to dedicate all our efforts to supporting refugees.

### Number of private donors increased yet again

Without the help of private donors, we wouldn't be able to do our job properly. These donations enable The Dutch Council for Refugees to operate independently as an advocate for refugees. Following the spectacular increase in the number of donors in 2015, even more people supported our work in 2016. The number of private donors increased from 65,000 to 67,500 people. Incoming resources from our own fundraising landed at € 7,091,000.

### Dutch Postcode Lottery support

At the beginning of 2016, the Nationale Postcode Loterij (Dutch Postcode Lottery) announced they would grant a whopping € 328 million to over a hundred good causes devoted to mankind and nature. On top of the structural € 9 million we already received from them, The Dutch Council for Refugees was granted an extra € 3.1 million to increase support in asylum seekers' centres and assist the integration of refugees.

### Support from the business community

In 2016, over 400 companies and organisations approached us with a proposition or a request for cooperation. Some companies offered us their expertise, for instance with regard to the development of Integration, an e-learning programme for our volunteers. Many companies made a donation, be it large or small. Employees of several companies waived their Christmas gift and donated its value to The Dutch Council for Refugees, raising € 71,000.

### Government grants

In 2016, the Ministry of Security and Justice (ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie) granted us a subsidy of € 12,664,000 as support for our work in asylum seekers' centres. In order to train and support our volunteers and employees who assist refugees during the integration process, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid) granted us a subsidy of € 1,365,000.