

Training Kit for Empowering Refugee-Led Community Organisations

National Report on the status of refugee-led community organisations in The Netherlands

Project Summary

The main aim of this project is to see a dramatic improvement in the quality of enjoyment of human rights by refugees and is based on the idea of supporting the active inclusion of marginalised, vulnerable or excluded communities. With this, the project seeks to strengthen refugee inclusion by supporting the empowerment of those refugees who want to play an active role in their communities and at the EU level. Through the project, community needs, strengths and trends will be identified, and we will seek to produce an educational package that will tackle these challenges and provide improved skills to overcome them.

Part of our project will be a training programme which will be geared at supporting the mobilisation of refugees into organised and effective communities that will be active in various spheres such as peer-to-peer support, provision of information or other community-based services, and advocacy with national governmental stakeholders. This is done in order to bring the voice of excluded groups to the attention of policy-makers, engagement in public awareness-raising, talking directly from the heart of their represented communities.

This will be the Training Kit, our ultimate deliverable which will address the challenges faced by refugees in integrating effectively in their host countries. The Training Kit will contain content addressing refugee-led groups that wish to be active at a national and/or European level. It will also be available to the public and thoroughly disseminated throughout the Partners' networks.

The project is implemented by the following organisations: aditus foundation, Cyprus Refugee Council, Dutch Refugee Council, European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Greek Forum of Refugees, Jesuit Refugee Service (Malta), Mosaico – Azioni per i Rifugiati. With Syrian Volunteers Netherlands as Associated Partners.

For further information visit the project webpage: <https://aditus.org.mt/our-work/projects/training-kit-for-empowering-refugee-led-community-organisations>.

About the authors

Research for this report was conducted by the organisation Syrian Volunteers in the Netherlands (SYVNL) and commissioned by the Dutch Council for Refugees (DCR). The report was written by Mohammed Badran, Jiska Malschaert, and Irosha Driessen.

Biographies

Mohammed Badran: is a community mobiliser, facilitator, researcher and policy adviser. He has a degree in Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology from the VU University Amsterdam. Mohammed is the co-founder of Syrian Volunteers in the Netherlands (SYVNL), a refugee-led network of active citizens who give back to their communities, grow as volunteers, and gain expertise to support other refugees.

Jiska Malschaert: after finalizing a propaedeutic year in cultural heritage studies at the Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK), Jiska Malschaert started at the VU University Amsterdam with a bachelor in Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, with a focus on Migration Studies. She graduated in 2018 and today she is studying to be and working as a primary school teacher. She is part of the SYVNL research team.

Irosha Driessen: graduated in 2018 in Cultural Anthropology at the VU University Amsterdam, after which she worked for some time as coordinator and teacher at an education institute, Edu4U, run by and for young newcomers across the Netherlands. Currently she is obtaining her master in Social Work: Community Development at the HU Utrecht. She is part of the SYVNL research team.

This report was published in December 2020.

Table of contents

PROJECT SUMMARY	1
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	2
BIOGRAPHIES	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
INTRODUCTION	5
PART I: NATIONAL CONTEXT	7
REFUGEE DEMOGRAPHICS IN NUMBERS.....	7
GENERAL ASYLUM PROCEDURE AND RIGHTS ENJOYMENT	9
SEVERAL POLICY SHIFTS DURING THE LAST DECADE.....	10
THE IN-BETWEENNESS POSITION OF RCOs	11
THREE-LAYERED STRUCTURE	11
PART II: MAPPING	13
REFUGEE PARTICIPATION AND THE HISTORY OF REFUGEE SELF-ORGANIZATION	13
A RECENT REFUGEE-LED INITIATIVE: THE G100 AS A 'CREATED SPACE'	13
MAPPING METHODOLOGY	14
RCOs IN THE NETHERLANDS: NUMBERS AND CHARACTERISTICS.....	14
MISSION AND FOCUS	16
LACK OF SUSTAINABLE AND ESSENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH POLICYMAKERS	16
PART III: PERSPECTIVES.....	17
A REFUGEE-LED COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION (RCO) PERSPECTIVE	17
ADDED VALUE OF THE RCO-VOICE.....	17
TRIGGERS THAT LED TO THE FORMATION OF THE RCOs.....	17
DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON THE TERM 'REFUGEE-LED'	18
DEPENDENCY AND LIMITATIONS FOR RCOs	18
EMPOWERING, OBJECTIVES, EXPERTISE AND PROFESSIONALISM.....	19
SKILLS TO BE LEARNED FROM A 'GOOD PRACTICE': A PROVINCIAL SOUNDING BOARD	20
A NON-REFUGEE-LED PERSPECTIVE	22

THE INTERACTION BETWEEN REFUGEE ADVOCATES AND NON-REFUGEE-LED ORGANIZATIONS.....	22
THE VALUE OF PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN REFUGEE-LED AND NON-REFUGEE-LED ORGANISATIONS	23
PARTNERSHIP ON LOBBY PRIORITIES	23
NEEDED SKILLS FOR RCOs AND REFUGEE ADVOCATES.....	24
NEEDED SKILLS FOR NON-REFUGEE-LED ACTORS	24
A GOVERNMENTAL PERSPECTIVE.....	24
THE MOTIVATION TO INCLUDE REFUGEE PERSPECTIVES	24
THE SELECTION OF REFUGEE ADVOCATES	25
THE ISSUE OF OBJECTIVITY	25
COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE OR THE 'BIGGER PICTURE'	26
WORKING WITH CONSTRUCTIVE VOICES	26
<u>CONCLUSION</u>	<u>27</u>
THEME 1: PERSONAL LEVEL AND ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE.....	27
THEME 2: WORKING WITH LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS.	28
THEME 3: WORKING WITH POLICYMAKERS.....	28

Introduction

The aim of this report is to better understand the situation refugee-led community organisations in the Netherlands and to understand the role of such organisations in the overall advocacy framework where National and local NGOs operate with the aim to influence policies that affect the refugee population directly. And also, to understand what are the opportunities for growth and strengthening the current RCOs' within this framework? This national report provides information and analysis on the situation in the Netherlands and identifies challenges and required skills needed to develop the capacity of these organisations in doing advocacy work. The outcomes of this research will be used as an input to design and formulate a training kit, aiming to target existing challenges and boost opportunities for the target group. In the context of this research, a 'Refugee-led Community Organisation (henceforth RCO)' can be defined as an "organisation led mainly by people from communities whose members include significant numbers of refugees and their descendants, and whose activities address the needs and rights of refugees."¹

For this project we are not requiring a formal registration status for RCOs, but a degree of organisation needs to be present. Therefore, in this research, we refer to the interviewees with both terms as refugee-led community organisations and as individual refugee advocates. These were selected either because they are part of a registered network or an informal network. The focus is then both on the personal as well as on the organisational level.

This report is based on previous research projects and empirical knowledge that we gathered in the fieldwork period between March 2019 and July 2020. We build on the report 'Migrant-led advocacy across Europe'² from the European Programme for Migration and Integration, in which challenges and opportunities for migrant-led initiatives are researched. The data from this report is only used here when it is fitting the Dutch context and the fact that it is written on European level is not of importance. We refer to this report as the 'EPIM report'. Another vital source for this report is the Refugee Academy report on 'A Structural Place for the Perspective and Vision of Refugees in Policymaking'³, which was written on behalf of the Dutch Council for Refugees (DCR). The Refugee Academy is an expertise lab within the VU where existing academic, professional and local knowledge is connected to bring research and practice around refugee problems closer together. We will refer to this report as the RA report.

Additionally, to get more profoundly into the challenges and opportunities of refugee-led organization in the Dutch context, we conducted:

- interviews (n5) with refugees, refugee-led organisations and non-refugee-led organisations;

¹ Refugee Council (UK), *A bridge to life in the UK: Refugee-led community organisations and their role in integration*, October 2018.

² Badran, M., Stoker, T. (2019). *Migrant-led advocacy across Europe*, European Programme for Migration and Integration. www.epim.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Migrant-led-advocacy-across-Europe-Report.pdf.

³ Ponzoni, E., Ghorashi, H., Badran, M. (2020). *Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief en de visie van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming. Advies voor instituties en organisaties*. Refugee Academy, VU.

- a case study of a good practice;
- participant observation in a self-organized online group discussion;
- literature review.

In the following chapter, part I, we will illustrate the Dutch setting regarding refugees and the Dutch asylum context, building on statistics, data research, policy shifts and its consequences and we will lay a theoretical groundwork in order to better understand the later presented data. In part 2, the mapping, the RCO-advocacy activities and presence in Dutch society will be discussed, in the light of the conditions as provided by the government. We intend to provide a general overview as well as an exemplary and more specific scrutinization on RCOs' presence. In part 3, we outline the different perspectives on what RCO activity should entail from the view of the RCOs, the view of refugees, the non-RCO view and the governmental view. With this, we aim to present a broad and comprehensive view on the status of RCOs in the Netherlands.

Part I: National Context

In this section, we provide an overview of the Dutch asylum context, general information on refugee demographics and the political context for refugee participation. Additionally, we include a theoretical perspective which we use as a lens to get a grasp on the data.

Refugee demographics in numbers

In the table below we see with the **total amount of asylum requests** categorized per country of origin in the year 2019 and partially 2020. The total amount of requests in the last 12 months has been 23.165. To put this in context: in the 1994 the number was over 50.000 and until 2001 the total number of asylum applications was constantly above 20.000 yearly. In the years after, the number fluctuated between 10.000 and 15.000 per year and then in 2015 the number of applications rose again sharply to 58.880, of which half came from Syria. The current influx of people from Syria and Eritrea is the most significant and has been so for the last five years. Thus, the number of asylum applications per year has varied considerably in recent decades.⁴

Total asylum influx in The Netherlands (first applications, repeated applications, family reunification influx)

Source: METIS

Top 10 Last thirteen months **total** asylum applications in The Netherlands

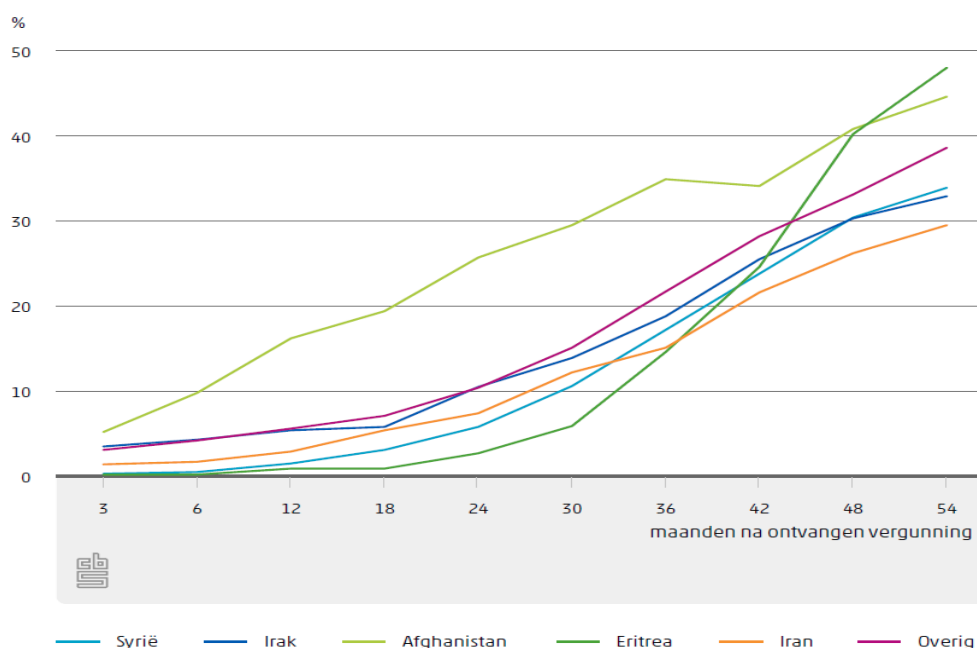
Total 2018	Total 2019	Country of citizenship	2019								2020								Last 12 months	Perc
			Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Total			
5.203	5.199	Syrian Arab Republic	392	423	417	604	601	499	721	3.657	673	491	260	125	113	200	1.862	5.127	22%	
3.953	2.365	Eritrea	272	299	165	211	186	191	245	1.569	303	251	77	61	41	68	801	2.098	9%	
659	2.206	Nigeria	218	243	188	189	128	125	124	1.215	109	99	58	9	13	33	321	1.318	6%	
1.336	1.317	Algeria	82	87	84	126	145	124	114	762	152	102	58	19	10	54	395	1.075	5%	
1.382	1.357	Turkey	105	174	112	100	125	71	128	815	90	108	81	9	19	34	341	1.051	5%	
2.422	1.857	Iran (Islamic Republic of)	161	132	145	125	125	99	90	877	110	79	29	30	22	43	313	1.029	4%	
1.163	1.191	Morocco	97	112	95	93	105	67	93	662	109	81	59	16	17	43	325	890	4%	
859	923	Unknown	79	103	70	92	109	68	84	605	79	51	44	25	27	67	293	819	4%	
659	852	Yemen	52	74	71	93	83	75	105	553	88	65	68	38	18	30	307	808	3%	
1.207	893	Afghanistan	58	75	91	84	75	59	87	529	112	77	57	13	5	39	303	774	3%	
11.537	11.275	Others	833	909	909	912	1.010	1.190	793	6.556	762	742	448	95	129	277	2.453	8.176	35%	
30.380	29.435	Total	2.349	2.631	2.347	2.629	2.692	2.568	2.584	17.800	2.587	2.146	1.239	440	414	888	7.714	23.165	100%	

* To conceal the lowest figures, all values between 0 and 4 are replaced by asterisk.

⁴ Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, *Vluchtelingen in getallen 2019*, www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/sites/default/files/Vluchtelingenwerk/Cijfers/20190722_vwn_vluchtelingen-in-getallen.pdf.

Below we see a graph of the current **employment rate** (see vertical line) people in the age of 18 to 65 years from different nationalities who received their Dutch citizenship in 2014 and the number of months it took them to get a job after receiving (see horizontal line). We can note that the Afghan community stands out with a larger percentage in comparison to the other communities and we see a significant rise in the employment of Eritreans. After 4,5 years about 38 percent of all status holders (aged 18-65) have a job. Not only does the employment participation increase gradually and steadily; we also observe that the differences in labour participation between nationalities are narrowing.⁵

3.9.1 Aandeel werkenden onder 18- tot 65- jarigen die in 2014 verblijfsvergunning asiel ontvingen, aantal maanden na ontvangen vergunning

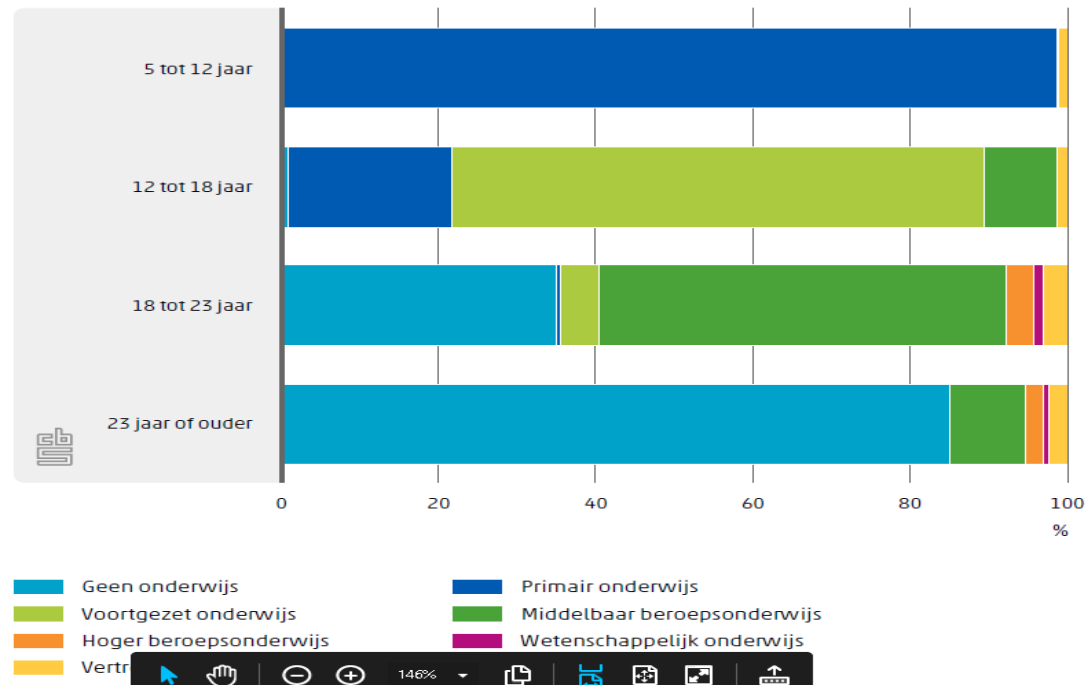


In the chart below we see the **participation in education** categorized by age (vertical axe) and level of education (colour). Increasingly status holders are participating in education, often within the MBO (vocational education). Of all people who received their permit in 2014, 28 percent attended education in October 2015 and a year later (October 2016), 31 percent followed a study program. This percentage continued to rise to 37 percent in 2019. Status holders who later received a permit in the Netherlands are more and more likely to take part in education, still the majority goes into MBO study programs. Specifically, within the Syrian community there is discrepancy between their degrees in higher education in Syria and their limited options to take part in (higher / theoretical) education programs here. Lastly, almost all children in the age of 5 to 18 years are going to primary or secondary school.⁶

⁵ CBS. *Asiel en Integratie*, 2020

⁶ CBS. *Asiel en Integratie*, 2020

3.7.1 Onderwijspositie op 1 oktober 2019 van personen met verblijfsvergunning asiel verkregen in 2015, naar onderwijssoort en leeftijd



General asylum procedure and rights enjoyment

An asylum seeker who applies for asylum in the Netherlands must report to the IND's (Integration and Naturalisation Service) registration centre in Ter Apel in Groningen. The asylum seeker signs his or her application at the centre, followed by a conversation with the IND to determine fingerprints, identity, nationality, personal story and travel route. After registration, the IND will determine which procedure applies. In some cases, a fast procedure applies. Theoretically he or she will hear from the IND within 6 months whether he or she is receiving a residence permit. The IND can extend this term to a maximum of 15 months, for instance if more research is needed. The asylum seeker can appeal this decision in consultation with his lawyer. When the asylum seeker does receive a permit, this is a temporary one that is valid for 5 years. During that time, he or she has various rights and obligations. For example, he is entitled to housing and education, and must take integration and language exams.

After 5 years, the IND will check whether an asylum seeker still needs protection. And whether he has successfully passed the integration exam. If that's the case, the asylum seeker will receive a permanent Dutch residence permit. He may then continue to live in the Netherlands for the rest of his life. But if he commits a serious crime, the permit can be revoked again.⁷

⁷ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/asielbeleid/vraag-en-antwoord/procedure-asielzoeker>.

Several policy shifts during the last decade

In the last five years more restricted migration and integration policy measures have been taken. The new policy regarding integration increasingly departs from the motto of strengthening the ‘own responsibility’ of migrants, which substantially reduced public support services available to migrants regarding integration exams and introduction of extensive fees. Similarly, labour market access of migrants has been severely hindered as the result of changes in the ‘Wet Arbeid Vreemdelingen’ (Law Labour Foreigners), which restricted employment of non-EU migrants for employers. Other notable restrictions since 2010 concern family reunification, defining the circle of persons eligible for family reunification and limiting their entitlement to an independent residence permit. In addition, the cancellation of the Wet Overleg Minderheden Beleid (Law on the Consultations of Minorities) eliminated the structural consultation of representative organisations of minorities in the context of the formulation of migration and integration policy.

Lastly, expulsion of migrants having resided in the Netherlands for a long time (20+ years) has been made possible where this was previously prohibited, and permissible absences of persons seeking to naturalise as Dutch nationals have been restricted too.⁸

Although the reception and integration policies and sustainable inclusion of refugee perspectives have changed a lot and have become more restricted than about ten years ago, we do see a tendency of rising attention towards failures in integration policies. In 2018, the Civic Integration Act 2013 was evaluated⁹, concluding that the current integration policy does not do enough justice to the reality and possibilities of refugees in the Netherlands.¹⁰ In response to this policy, new refugee-led networks and organizations have been established (see section II for more details).

The Ministry of Social Affairs, which has initiated a process of transforming the entire integration policy in 2019, has identified a lack of perspectives from refugees themselves. Therefore, the Ministry decided to organize a refugee consultation by itself and establish a temporary advisory board in which former refugees could give input and feedback on the new integration policy. Notably, this is not a common practice to be done by policymakers themselves, rather, it is often assumed that such consultations are being done by other external actors such as mainstream NGOs. When policymakers from the Ministry of Social Affairs were asked about their motive to take such an action, one policymaker said that they have been talking with different actors and stakeholders such as the Dutch Council for Refugees (DCR), but less with people going through the integration process themselves.

⁸ 2015 Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX). Maastricht University.
<https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/blog/2015/07/dutch-immigration-and-integration-policy-turn-restrictiveness>.

⁹ Evaluation of the Civic Integration Act 2013:
<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2018/06/27/evaluatie-van-de-wet-inburgering-2013>.

¹⁰ A similar conclusion emerges in a 2015 study by the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) into the integration of permit holders.
<https://www.wrr.nl/publicaties/policy-briefs/2015/12/16/geen-tijd-verliezen-van-opvang-naar-integratie-van-asielmigranten>.

Other ministries have not yet realized the gap of refugee perspectives in policies and they rather still depend on non-refugee-led advocacy groups to bring them the perspectives of refugees (RA, 2020).

The in-betweenness position of RCOs

RCOs have in common that they build on lived experiences and their refugee background combined with the professional experiences they gain in their new country. The combination of both allows refugee advocates to identify the blind spots and gaps in policies directed to newly arrived refugees. The connection between policy and the lived realities makes refugees' empirical knowledge relevant and of great importance. A refugee also has to deal with various frames of reference in everything he or she experiences. This is called, as described in the Refugee Academy report, "in-betweenness".¹¹ It is an intermediate state that achieves a two-part perspective whereby nothing is taken for granted. The constant translation of contexts and practices ensures that refugees do not simply see the world around them as it is, but as it came about. They have the privilege and the burden not to take structures for granted. This contextual alertness can act as a source of originality and different thinking in various social structures.

Three-layered structure

In the RA report a shift is noted from emphasis on collective representation to increasing interest in individual stories from refugees.¹² In many contexts, efforts are actively made to help refugees getting a seat at the table. Often newcomers are asked to tell their stories at meetings. These stories can have a strong effect, but if these are also emphasized during consultation (in policy, in committees or expert meetings), this can have a 'box-ticking' and tokenistic effect under the guise of 'if there is someone with a refugee background, we are alright.' The emphasis will then be on the 'being a refugee' label, with the risk that too little attention is paid to the substantive value of the stories. Moreover, there is a risk that the refugee perspective, which people wanted to make room for, is reduced to an individual story that is interchangeable with any other individual story of a refugee.

It seems a paradoxical tension, refugee-led advocates bring stories, perspectives and experiences that can break through fixed thinking patterns from their position as part of a specific group, but their contribution should not count as representative of the whole group. At the same time, specific stories are more than purely individual stories. Often not only the personal story is important, but it is about embedding a person's experience in different contexts and the response in the experiences of people from their own network. Precisely the positioning of advocates in this network, which is different from most policymakers and policy experts that makes their contribution important.

¹¹ Ponzoni, E., Ghorashi, H., Badran, M. (2020). *Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief en de visie van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming. Advies voor instituties en organisaties*. Refugee Academy, VU.

¹² *ibid.*

The tension between the individual story and the collective experience raises a fundamental question and dilemma with many policymakers and experts: what is the individual story and what is the collective experience? And how can we find a new form for consultation, advice and structural cooperation with refugee-led advocates?

In the Refugee Academy Report, a three-part layered structure is proposed to understand the different refugee perspectives in which refugee-led advocates take on different roles, and each role requires different competences and conditions.¹³ (1) **The first layer is that of individual refugee stories**, which can inspire a change in mindset and imagination. (2) **The second layer is that of supported stories**; stories and perspectives of refugee advocates that mirror those of fellow sufferers in their network and to whom they can also give meaning in an institutional context, so that they can actively think about policies. (3) **The third layer is that of a protective shell**, formed by former refugees with long experience in advocacy and an institutional memory. Their commitment is necessary to feed the ones active in the first and, especially the second layer to support their resilience and reflexivity. This third layer is, as it were, a protective jacket for the efforts of advocates at the first and second layer. Together, these three layers can form a powerful structure that better connects policy frameworks and the lived experience of refugees.

Case in point: We can see the position of the Nieuwlander foundation in the light of the differentiation of three layers of refugee advocates. Firstly, the Nieuwlander foundation and its position can be recognized in the third layer: former refugees who have lived in the Netherlands for more than thirty years and who have been active in the field, and have an institutional memory. They are well situated and aware of the challenges faced by refugees in the past and now. They have extensive experience and their knowledge of existing mechanisms can be instrumental in helping a younger generation gain a better grip on their own position and discover new strategies for navigating in the field of policy advocacy. Secondly, Nieuwlander can also be positioned in the second layer, as they contextualize personal stories in order to advise policymakers and train social workers to work with the target group. They can “switch easily between cultural realms and structures” as they described their positioning. Within municipalities, Nieuwlander provides guidance so that the community can play a role in its own solutions and gain ownership over them.

¹³ Ponzoni, E., Ghorashi, H., Badran, M. (2020). *Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief en de visie van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming. Advies voor instituties en organisaties*. Refugee Academy, VU.

Part II: Mapping

This section provides a mapping analysis of the main refugee-led organisations in the Netherlands.

Refugee participation and the history of refugee self-organization

In the Dutch policy making context, the lack of first-hand refugee perspectives on policies was acknowledged a long time ago when the government decided to support the establishment of the Refugee Organisations the Netherlands (in Dutch: *Vluchtelingen-Organisaties Nederland (VON)*) in 1985, an advisory body consisting of a substantial number of refugee-led organisations who joined together to do national advocacy work on behalf of the refugee communities in the Netherlands.¹⁴ The VON worked together with the Dutch Council for Refugees (DCR) to give polyphony a place in policy-making, specifically on the effect of the existing integration policy.

They also collaborated on elections, for example by organizing debates together or by contributing to governmental research on the integration of refugees. On a societal level, this collaboration was also active, for example by organizing the festival "Borderless Meeting" (*Onbegrensde Ontmoeting*), in 1997, 1999, 2001 and 2003, a place where refugees and Dutch people could meet and to promote public support for the reception of refugees. However, since 2011 the VON has been phased out and ceased to exist in 2015 as a national body that advocates on behalf of refugee-led organisations and while new influxes of refugees are coming to the Netherlands and therefore, new refugee policies are being developed, the government is missing a lot from the perspectives of those most affected. VON's former director also highlighted this current gap whereby she argues that it is rather resulting in short-sighted policies, she says: "the government has not yet thought of a replacement of VON and it cannot compensate for this through only discussions with the Dutch Council for Refugees."¹⁵

A recent refugee-led initiative: the G100 as a 'created space'

An example of an initiative where *in-betweenness*, as previously discussed, is utilized and translated into strength, was during the G100 initiative and the event *New Voices for Europe* in Pakhuis de Zwijger on January 18th, 2018 in Amsterdam. The G100 defines itself as a refugee-led initiative and has the objective to facilitate a dialogue in between refugees, non-refugee citizens, policymakers and experts to together create and evaluate policy recommendations on a local, national and European level. The initiative started with a survey among newcomers to determine important themes, followed by a workshop organized with socially active refugees to together write policy recommendations. These were presented and reviewed among policymakers and experts at the conference. This initiative is best

¹⁴ Ponzoni, E., Ghorashi, H., Badran, M. (2020). *Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief en de visie van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming. Advies voor instituties en organisaties*. Refugee Academy, VU.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

to be seen as a *created space*, as opposed to *closed spaces* where citizens, in this case RCO-advocates, have no access and are not invited, and *invited spaces*, where advocates are guests in a structure of explicit and implicit rules and expectations that regulate their presence. Created spaces are exactly this, a place designed by the advocates themselves, with the best possible conditions to let unprecedented voices be heard in a structured and organized manner.

On a global scale, the Global Refugee-led Network, a group of refugee-led organizations partly from the Netherlands, is one of the key actors that in recent years have advocated meaningful refugee participation and created space for this since the adoption of the New York Declaration and the Global Compact on Refugees. The first Global Refugee Forum (GRF), which took place in December 2019, benefited for the first time from an unprecedented contribution from more than 70 refugees from around the world. The role of refugees in preparing for (and participating in) the GRF has set an important precedent for all forums in which decisions and policies for the lives of refugees are made or discussed.

Mapping methodology

Based on a mapping of the number of operating refugee-led community organisations (RCOs) in the Netherlands in 2010 and updated in February 2020, an estimated 90 refugee-led organisations seem to be active (see annex)¹⁶. This mapping unfortunately does not give a complete picture of all the RCOs active in the Netherlands, among others things due to the fact that the online presence of these organisations – in particularly the local ones - varies greatly, some have very complete websites with reports, various information resources and contact details, whereas others lack visibility especially online or contact details are outdated. This has been a big obstacle in providing a clear-cut overview of the active RCOs in the Netherlands. Therefore, we had to search for a personal contact within each organization individually through phone calls and/or email contact. Some organisations responded and others were more hesitant as they did not really see the benefit out of being part of such a mapping. In the future, a complete mapping could be created on identifying RCOs with more time dedicated to mapping refugee-led organizations at the municipal level, where most of them operate.

RCOs in the Netherlands: numbers and characteristics

Between 2010 and 2020, about 50 percent of the organizations present in the mapping seem to have ceased to exist.¹⁷ Furthermore, most RCOs are currently organised around nationality and ethnicity. For example, the Somali community stands out with 38 organisations across the country, mainly organised per city or region, followed by the Eritrean community with 10 organisations which are principally based in the region of Amsterdam. The Syrian community is represented by 8 organisations. The Afghan community has about 5 organisations and there are 3 organisations that represent Eastern

¹⁶ Both maps were not published because we haven't received permission to do so.

¹⁷ Ponzoni, E., Ghorashi, H., Badran, M. (2020). *Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief en de visie van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming. Advies voor instituties en organisaties*. Refugee Academy, VU.

African refugees and migrants. Furthermore, we see a couple of scattered organisations that represent the Sudanese, Congolese, Burundian, Sierra Leonean, Ethiopian, Ghanaian, Assyrian, Armenian, Aramese and Kurdish communities. Lastly, there are 6 organisations that focus in general on asylum seekers and refugees from different backgrounds. The following 8 organisations can be mentioned as quite visible, well-organised and sometimes engaging on the national level:

- **Yalla Foundation** (Syrian community). This foundation facilitates encounters to build meaningful relations between (mainly Syrian) newcomers and Dutch locals to boost the integration from both sides and it offers a lot of information to newcomers on the bureaucratic processes.
- **Stichting Nieuwlander** (Eritrean / Syrian community). This foundation is a collective of experienced trainers who are multilingual. They train both social workers that work with newcomers as well as newcomers themselves to help them guide their path in society. In addition, the trainers have extensive experience in the field of policy and organization.
- **Stichting Lemat** (Eritrean community). The aim of this foundation is to provide culturally sensitive and tailor-made assistance to the Eritrean newcomers in their integration process. It tries to build bridges between the Eritreans and the Dutch and it advocates for a national integration policy that meets the particular needs of their community.
- **Stichting Cultuur in Harmonie**. (Ethiopian, Eritrean, Middle-Eastern and East-African community). This foundation deals with integration issues in the broadest sense of the word. Their aim is to narrow the gap between different cultures and thereby contribute to a more harmonious society.
- **FSAN** (Somalian) Federation of Somali Associations in the Netherlands. FSAN is the overarching organisation of 48 Somali RCOs. They promote full integration, participation and interests of the Somali community within Dutch society, they increase cooperation between Somali self-organizations in the Netherlands, and they function as interlocutor for the Dutch government and other institutions involved and representative of the Somali community.
- **Stichting HIMOLO** (Somali community). This foundation is active in both Somalia and the Netherlands. In the Netherlands they focus on improving the societal position of the Somali community by offering support in legal, civil, social and cultural questions.
- **Stichting African Women Perspective** (mainly Ethiopian/Eritrean community). Their aim is to support African (refugee)women in their integration, they organize thematic discussions and presentations as well as several cultural activities.
- **Stichting WIN / Women Initiatives Network** (African communities). This foundation, with specific expertise on gender-sensitive programs, works on the (economic) empowerment of women from conflict / fragile countries that are either living in the Netherlands or at home.
- **Syrian Volunteers Network (SYVNL)** (Syrian community). The purpose of this foundation is to give back and grow as new citizens by participating with local initiatives, by supporting refugees and strengthening refugee networks and by establishing strong bonds between the Syrian and Dutch communities.

Mission and focus

The majority of these 90 organisations have been focussing on issues of participation and integration in the Dutch society, the labour market, health care system, educational system and support in asylum or other processes (e.g. asking for social benefit) in the Netherlands as well as offering social gatherings to maintain and strengthen community bonds. Specific to the Somali community is their focus on offering their community members as well as social workers training and information sessions on topics like domestic violence, gender equality and FGM. There are also quite a few organisations that intend to raise funds for setting up projects and other forms of aid to fight poverty issues in their countries of origin.

Lack of sustainable and essential partnerships with policymakers

In the RA report, it was noted that getting direct access to policy makers doesn't seem too difficult for most refugee-led advocates.¹⁸ Yet none of the refugee-led organizations we spoke to had acquired a recognized role as a key player in the national advocacy landscape. Policy makers said they had no current structural contact with refugee-led advocates at the time, and the advocates also said they had little structural contact with policy makers. It was highlighted that refugee-led organizations are very changeable in this field. About 50 percent of the 90 organizations in the mapping 2010 no longer existed. This can partly explain why it is difficult to enter into structural partnerships, especially there is a lot of turnover among policymakers. For example, the policymakers we spoke to were not always aware of the existence of VON (the overarching body of refugee-led organization) before and its former role as a national public participation body for refugees.

¹⁸ Ponzoni, E., Ghorashi, H., Badran, M. (2020). *Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief en de visie van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming. Advies voor instituties en organisaties*. Refugee Academy, VU.

Part III: Perspectives

In this section, we elaborate on the perspectives of refugees, RCOs and non-RCOs, policy makers and other stakeholders on refugee-led organizations and refugee-led advocacy. The RCO perspective came about by using the report of the Refugee Academy¹⁹ and the report of the European Programme for Integration and Migration.²⁰ Furthermore, we spoke to the Nieuwlander Foundation, which cannot be defined as an RCO as such, but has a unique position of 'in-betweenness'. With the results of this interview we form a thread for this first perspective. The perspective of the refugees is based on the provincial 'sounding board', a consultative board which was set up in the province of Gelderland. The non-RCO part was formed based on an interview with a trainer from the Dutch Council for Refugees (DCR) and the reports from the Refugee academy and EPIM. We also used these reports for the governmental perspective and we spoke with a policymaker of the Ministry of Social Affairs.

A Refugee-Led Community Organization (RCO) Perspective

Added Value of the RCO-voice

During focus groups that were held with RCO-advocates for the EPIM research, the added value of their presence in policy and practice came forth in three ways.²¹ Although in this conversation respondents from other European countries joined in as well, their take can be considered as equally useful as that of RCO-advocates in the Netherlands. Firstly, their knowledge and first-hand lived experience of migration make their communication with their communities easier and make them able to translate their needs and priorities accurately. Secondly, RCO-advocates bring new perspectives with which to challenge dominant discourses. The respondents felt that their exclusive portrayal in the public spaces (e.g. media) as being the 'victim', the 'problem', the 'helpless', the 'inferior' or 'poor' could be confronted by Refugee-led advocacy. In line with the previous added values, the respondents also saw their activity as bridging the gap between policy and reality, as connecting policymakers with people who are affected by these policies by bringing in perspectives that are often absent within these processes.

Triggers that led to the formation of the RCOs

The EPIM research showed that many research participants, who use terms to describe themselves as 'leader', 'advocate' or 'ambassador' do not perceive this position as acquired by personal choice.²² They feel the necessity to play such a role and often started their activism while working as volunteers in other non-refugee-led organisations and assisting other refugees. Often their involvement in advocacy

¹⁹ Ponzoni, E., Ghorashi, H., Badran, M. (2020). *Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief en de visie van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming. Advies voor instituties en organisaties*. Refugee Academy, VU.

²⁰ Badran, M., Stoker, T. (2019). *Migrant-led advocacy across Europe*, European Programme for Migration and Integration. www.epim.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Migrant-led-advocacy-across-Europe-Report.pdf.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

started with small-scale projects such as visiting schools and sharing their personal stories. These personal stories were what they felt could change the dominant narrative and this is also what many of the interviewee's work is focussed on: providing new perspectives to change the dominant discourse about migrants.

Case in point: Nieuwlander is a foundation that was set up in 2014 that wanted to support newcomers from Syria and Eritrea in building their future in the Netherlands. One of the founders studied Immigration Law, worked for DCR amongst others as Head of Asylum, and as social worker in civic participation. Nieuwlander wanted to deal with problems mainly regarding culture and language by guiding refugees in their mother tongue. Because both founders are culturally well-grounded in the Netherlands and Eritrea, thus speaking both languages and having a vast professional network here, their experiences intersected right at the formation of 'Nieuwlander' (meaning 'new citizen'). They offer training in cultural expertise to public service providers and training in shaping future prospects to the target group itself. Unique is that their trainers are multilingual and have a refugee background themselves. In addition, the trainers are well trained and have extensive experience in the field of policy and organization.

Different perspective on the term 'refugee-led'

From the interview with the founder of Nieuwlander, it becomes clear how defuse the term 'refugee-led' is. There are many ways of being refugee-led. The employees of Nieuwlander know the Netherlands and its authorities very well and certainly agencies that work with refugees. So they try to organize the target group within the Dutch context. They generally switch easily between cultural realms, possess "in-betweenness" as discussed above, and have the ability to organize themselves no different from non-RCOs. The people that run Nieuwlander have been in the Netherlands since childhood or at least for many years. The interviewee feels that RCOs are something else, namely they are new in the Netherlands and still have a lot to learn about this country and its culture, about the lines of funding, about how to establish oneself well as an organization and how to best express oneself. These things are culturally specific and have not posed a problem to Nieuwlander.

Dependency and limitations for RCOs

Something that RCOs in the Netherlands run into, according to the interviewee of the Nieuwlander foundation, is the dependence on authorities and partners. In the EPIM report²³ and the RA report²⁴, the lack of financial resources which is followed by a dependency on mainstream non-RCOs came forth. As a result it is hard for RCOs to set their own agenda and priorities when, for the sake of subsidies, they have to deviate from what fits within their own goals. During a focus group discussion it became clear that in RCO advocacy invisible structures of exclusion can emerge in consultation and money flows, whereby a certain policy focus is given priority over others. Respondents regularly feel compelled to pay attention to certain themes that they do not regard as priority in their community, but

²³ Badran, M., Stoker, T. (2019). *Migrant-led advocacy across Europe*, European Programme for Migration and Integration. www.epim.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Migrant-led-advocacy-across-Europe-Report.pdf.

²⁴ Ponzoni, E., Ghorashi, H., Badran, M. (2020). *Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief en de visie van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming. Advies voor instituties en organisaties*. Refugee Academy, VU.

that are dominant in subsidy flows due to their political attention. Respondents then see the predominance of non-RCOs, established Dutch organizations and research institutes that have structural access to consultation tables where priorities are determined. There appears to be a structure of influence that even organized advocates cannot penetrate. According to the respondents of the focus group, at the policy level, attention is mainly paid to culturally different customs, rather than creating conditions for the actual participation of refugees in society.

These structures lead to tokenism and co-option, mechanisms that are omnipresent in the lives of the respondents in the RA report and the EPIM report.²⁵²⁶ These mechanisms limit and obstruct the impact of advocates from minority groups. Tokenism refers to the fact that they can participate, but their presence has a mere symbolic value, as a showpiece to reassure the ‘inclusion of a minority/refugee voice’. This can lead to co-option and will happen if the by an advocate obtained seat at the table is swallowed by the existing perspectives and agendas and is only being heard selectively. The presence may lead to policy changes, but the RCO advocates perspective is not truly included and the original perspective is not acknowledged.

The interviewee of Nieuwlander highlights the tendency of organizations that support the RCO to change things to their own liking and to change course. This leads to control from the other organizations and they lose true ownership. From their own experience and professionalism, many supporting organizations will feel the need to take over organizational parts. But with that, they also take ownership of the interests of the organization and ownership of the themes that play a role. This creates a dependency relationship, argues the interviewee of Nieuwlander. The interviewee highlights that a different way of support is needed whereby the supporting actors (non-refugee-led) look at what the RCO wants and what they do. On the same note, the RCOs should be aware of what their goal is, and keep this goal in sight. Nieuwlander provides training in order to find clarity regarding these goals. Moreover, supporting entities should be aware that they themselves do not possess ownership, but are there to strengthen, stay in the background and are only there to realize the ideals of the other, even if the ideals do not quite match. To do so, the interviewee highlights more time should be given by the supporters to RCOs to develop in their own way of organization.

Empowering, objectives, expertise and professionalism

The interviewee of Nieuwlander tries to encourage communities supporting each other, for example in the form of cultural mediators. He gives newcomers who want to lead or support their own community training in communication, and their sometimes-complicated position within and outside of the community. In this way he trains people to form a bridge between their community and professionals. He leaves ownership as much as possible to the other, while supporting where necessary with contact with authorities, practicalities and how things work with subsidies and funds.

²⁵ Badran, M., Stoker, T. (2019). *Migrant-led advocacy across Europe*, European Programme for Migration and Integration. www.epim.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Migrant-led-advocacy-across-Europe-Report.pdf

²⁶ Ponzoni, E., Ghorashi, H., Badran, M. (2020). *Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief en de visie van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming. Advies voor instituties en organisaties*. Refugee Academy, VU.

It is very important for RCOs to have their objectives and priorities clear, and that is what Nieuwlander helps them with. Organizing oneself can be a goal in itself. For example, if an Eritrean RCO wants to offer Tigrinya language lessons or undertake Eritrean cultural activities, it is often said: “No, that is not important in the context of integration, so it is better to organize information evenings about themes related to life in the Netherlands, or about getting in touch with authorities”, the interviewee explains. This is important from the non-RCOs perspective, but maybe the RCO is in a completely different phase of their existence. According to the interviewee, if they want to provide Tigrinya classes, this is an expression of the need to organize and thus fulfils this purpose. Later, other needs will come from the group.

The EPIM report shows that most projects and initiatives start on a voluntary basis and are later professionalised.²⁷ Being a formal organization and having an official website are important steps towards being recognized as a professional organization. The development of an RCO is influenced by the degree of consensus among the board and executives, and its potential of disagreement or different goals, ideologies, political positions or approaches. In line with this, the interviewee of Nieuwlander emphasizes the importance of professionalism and expertise for RCOs. The fact that one lived certain experiences, has a particular view and represents a group, is in fact professional expertise. Therefore one can stay away from many discussions, for instance about a conflict taking place in the home country. These conflicts are felt here too and RCOs may be politically motivated and emotionally charged. However, awareness of the importance of professionalism and expertise makes this less polarizing; keep the goal in mind and set priorities. The emotion that is still there can be somewhat rationalized in this way.

Skills to be learned from a ‘Good Practice’: *a provincial sounding Board*

The establishment of provincial sounding board (In Dutch ‘klankbordgroep’) is an initiative that organizes the voices of newly arrived refugees and former refugees at the provincial level of Gelderland, as a request from the province itself as they recognized the need to hear how refugees experience integration and its policies. The initiative has been perceived as one of the most exciting and vital initiatives to hear refugee voices and requests have been made by other municipalities and stakeholders to create guidelines on how best to start such an initiative. Furthermore, the members of the group have been very active in 2019 participating in different sessions with local policymakers and stakeholders to share their lived experiences, to bring other refugee voices to the table, and to formulate recommendations to stakeholders upon their requests. This ‘klankbordgroep’, which is Dutch for “sounding board group”, was established on the concept of “*not talking about refugees, but talking with refugees*” with the aim to provide policy recommendations to the province, the Dutch Council for Refugees and different municipalities that are located in the same province. The board currently has 13 members who have a diverse background in terms of nationality, expertise, age and gender. The initiative is led by the regional bureau of the DCR.

²⁷ Badran, M., Stoker, T. (2019). *Migrant-led advocacy across Europe*, European Programme for Migration and Integration. www.epim.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Migrant-led-advocacy-across-Europe-Report.pdf.

Although this initiative cannot be defined as refugee-led (based on the definition provided earlier), we see it as a ‘best practice’ that can be improved with a potential to become a ‘co-created space’ to be replicated in other cities as it provides direct access for its members to be active in thinking and talking about policies that concern them. Another reason is the follow-up system that they have created on the recommendations that they provide to stakeholders. For instance, when they provided the province with advice, they were able to see which ones have been considered by the province (marked green) and which ones have not (marked red) with an explanation on why so. Such a follow-up system helps the participants to observe the benefit of their contribution to policymaking processes and advocacy. As a major issue for some refugees is the no following-up or continuity when they are being approached to share their perspectives.²⁸

We participated in a brainstorm session to create ‘guidelines’ on how best to establish such a group in different locations. This session was organized and supervised by the DCR and Open Embassy, which also prepared the questions beforehand for the group. The group identified some key challenges that they have faced and how to overcome them. These challenges and recommendations will then be directed to the stakeholders who wish to establish such a group as well as for newcomers who will join the group. The first question that the group brainstormed on was how do they imagine an ideal voicing board to be established from the start and what should it look like? They agreed that they should take more time to reach out to the different nationalities before starting and to set a kind of profile on who should be in the group ahead.

This lesson learned is coming from the experience that they had with previous members who joined for a short time and then left. Moreover, they highlighted that the need to be involved in setting up the agenda, space and the house rules of such a board. Most of the members do not know how the selection process went and it should be clear for them what the selection criteria are which then the member profile can be built upon. Another question that was addressed by the supervisors is how can the members stay active? The first thing that the group highlighted was to give personal attention to the members and take into account that some members might not give their opinion because of cultural barriers or language. Also, time was highlighted as a challenge for the members as most of them work on a voluntary basis and have to combine this work with other activities such as full-time studying or working.

Moreover, on the questions of what they should advise municipalities, one interviewee stated the following: “[...] the advice is not the key. Our stories are gold and they should hear them and make use of them. We might not give clear advice but we can think together of advice based on our stories”. The group sees the objective of the board not just as giving recommendations to policymakers, but instead, as a space where both actors come to share experiences, hear stories and think of solutions to incorporate into policies. Furthermore, the question rose of whether the board should become independent or not. The group agreed that independence is the way to go, however, at the beginning the group requires a lot of skills development and trainings to be able to stand on its own. For example communication skills

²⁸ Badran, M., Stoker, T. (2019). *Migrant-led advocacy across Europe*, European Programme for Migration and Integration. www.epim.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Migrant-led-advocacy-across-Europe-Report.pdf.

like how to actively listen, negotiate and discuss certain issues and policies. Another skill that was stressed often was how to bring a critical perspective (e.g. to policymakers and stakeholders) and frame it positively. Some members are noticing that perhaps due to cultural barriers and language difficulties framing critical perspectives or highlighting the negativity in the situation might not be perceived well by stakeholders. Such a challenge or fear they want to learn to overcome. Additionally, skills such as leading a conversation and presenting were also mentioned as well as giving feedback, developing reflection skills and conflict management.

Finally, we asked how they imagine an ideal profile for a member in their board to understand what competencies they demand from a refugee advocate. The profile that they sketched was someone motivated, actively forming an opinion, responsible, with good writing skills, cooperative, a trust builder, daring to take steps, and who has experience in voluntary and organizational work. These competencies can further highlight the missing skills they wish to develop.

A Non-Refugee-Led Perspective

The interaction between refugee advocates and non-refugee-led organizations.

Often refugee advocates interact with local and national civil society organisations. Their interactions are often limited to on-the-spot activities such as speaking at events, consultations, mediation, leading conversations, and other (voluntary) activities. Often, leaders of the RCOs are being approached individually for the same activities or in some cases as implementing partners for certain projects.

Case in point: Open Embassy is a Dutch CSO that works to “build inclusive mixed communities of newcomers and Dutch residents”. In its recent project “Maker Sessions” 2019 that aims “to bring participants (newcomers and local stakeholders) to learn from each other and, using their own experience, design answers to urgent questions”, the organisation collaborated with the earlier describe Sounding board members in a number of sessions. They engaged with them as speakers, facilitators of working groups, and co-thinkers in some sessions. the co-director of the organisation highlighted the extreme value that the members brought to the sessions. The interviewee explained “members of the sounding board group also play a mediating role, because they also put into words what others (who were not present) are experiencing. So they also gave us access to other's refugee experiences.”

Furthermore, when talking to an experienced trainer at the Dutch Council for Refugees (DCR) who trains both refugee-led and non-refugee-led organisations, she underlined that one of the strongest values of RCOs is their proximity to and (lived) expertise on the different refugee communities. RCOs have the particular cultural and social know-how of the issues, needs and do's and don'ts within their communities. This is also why training and informative sessions (like Country-and Theme days) organised by DCR regularly host speakers from a broad network of people with a refugee background who can speak about their country / culture or a specific theme. These gatherings are aimed at people (mainly DCR volunteers) who assist refugees in their integration process. Within the DCR personnel structure there are quite some (former)refugees that work as team-leaders or assistants. Moreover, they

have an advisory council with refugees and this is a space where refugees can voice their perspectives. Another example of involving refugee advocates by the DCR directly in policy advice is when there were informative sessions organised by NGO Pharos and DCR with a group of Eritreans in the municipality of Haarlemmermeer that suffered from the tightening of the family reunion procedure. This gave the advocacy workers from DCR a lot of insightful data of the actual experiences of and consequences for this community, which was also used in meetings with policy makers.

The value of partnership between refugee-led and non-refugee-led organisations
The interviewees from DCR also stated that non-refugee-led organisations that work *for* refugees are very necessary as well because of their more distant relationship to the communities, which sometimes helps to see things a bit more clearly. Moreover, they have the know-how of the Dutch systemic structures and context, and can therefore make refugees aware (without imposing Dutch norms and values) of the options as well as the consequences one will face when manoeuvring through the Dutch system. In addition, it's very useful to have different actors with particular roles within the domain of integration so they can learn from each other and stay sharp.

Partnership on lobby priorities

In addition, DCR works together with different organisations that have a particular expertise, both refugee-led and non-refugee-led, depending on the type of topic and whether lobbying for a demand is stronger received from a partnership or when each one takes its own role. Nonetheless, the DCR stated that they want to aim for taking the direct voices of refugees more as a point of departure also in their decisions on lobby priorities, lobbying and advocacy work practices with the Dutch national House of Representatives and on a more regular basis. They believe that personal faces and stories are more effective and impactful in transmitting a message to national policy makers and in convincing them than (just) general numbers (Interview DCR). So far, however, they faced some practical issues (time- and planning wise or language barriers) in inviting speakers with a refugee background to come along regularly to meetings with policy makers. Besides that, it remains a struggle also for DCR to decide who can be representative for issue X and can offer continuity, and which organisations truly have expertise and legitimacy.

Another issue that was mentioned regarding building partnerships is that DCR operates within a field of many different interests ranging from national or European policies, changes in laws, social workers, other NGOs and the needs and struggles of different refugee groups and within these groups. It is therefore important that partners, whether these are RCOs, other NGOs or individuals with a refugee background, understand the overarching complexity of the issues at stake and that advocacy work requires quite some patience and strategic thinking. Furthermore, DCR has quite a well-known professional reputation and expertise among different actors, therefore it is difficult to form public alliances with organisations that have “extreme” or “non-realistic” demands like e.g. opening up all borders or taking actions that could harm the organisation's reputation and position.

Needed skills for RCOs and refugee advocates

According to the trainer's perspective 'capacity development' in general but also for RCOs has a lot to do with strengthening the organisational structure, meaning the vision, expertise, skills, means and clear-cut division of responsibilities / leadership that an organisation needs to be independent, established and sustainable. Both with volunteers and employees or a combination of these. Furthermore, it is very important that an organization knows how "to get a seat at the right table with the right people" and how to position and present itself to other partners. A general recommendation in this regard from the interviewee, is that organizations should *not* just bluntly say what they have to offer a potential partner, instead they should first dive into the needs of this partner and then link it to what one can offer specifically to meet those needs, then one can stand out as an organization. Lastly, to participate in informative sessions and gatherings organised by DCR it is required that speakers with a refugee background have some experience in public speaking and are able to approach the topics from an overarching rather than only personal narrative.

Needed skills for non-refugee-led actors

The interviewee offers training in coaching skills to non-refugee volunteers in which she thinks that it would be helpful to train non-refugee actors how to interact with refugee advocates. An example of a training that she often gives is aimed at how to "guide" a refugee without making him or her dependent and without playing the expert. A good coach should assist the client in becoming self-sufficient without overruling. In these training sessions they make use of tools like (group)discussions, reflection exercises, role play and simulations with an actor in which they learn how to deal with compelling behaviour of clients, how to practice intercultural communication, how to refer clients to external professionals and how to know to what extent one can support (e.g. with mental health issues). In total they have a package of 30 different trainings.

A Governmental Perspective

The motivation to include refugee perspectives

Since the VON has fallen apart, gradually we see more signs of a willingness and awareness of the importance to include refugee voices. This is expressed in taking the initiative of the sounding board ('klankbordgroep') by both the province of Gelderland and the Ministry of Social Affairs to setup an 'invited space'²⁹. We spoke with policymakers (n6) at three different Dutch ministries; Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, and The Ministry of Justice and Security³⁰. The one by the ministry of Social Affairs consisted of 20 people with 12 different nationalities who are or have been permit holders and which is facilitated by a Dutch professor of the Erasmus University Rotterdam. This chairman is an independent one who has no agenda, can be 'objective', and can adopt the approach that anyone can say what is on their mind, according to the interviewee.

²⁹ Ponzoni, E., Ghorashi, H., Badran, M. (2020). *Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief en de visie van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming. Advies voor instituties en organisaties*. Refugee Academy, VU.

³⁰ During the Refugee Academy research project.

The selection of refugee advocates

The selection procedure for the participants was as follows: first large organisations that work with refugees like DCR and UAF were contacted with the appeal for diverse (age, nationality, reason of migrating) interested people to take part in an advisory council. Out of 80 applications 20 people were then selected without knowing their name, based on their mastery of the Dutch language (minimum A2, mostly B1/B2), level of education (preferably higher) and who were quite far in the process of integration. Another selection criterion was to choose people that are not necessarily representing an organisation or RCOs as they can be more objective and do not represent a specific community interest.

The issue of objectivity

The aim of this consultative group (5 meetings) was to gather a wide range of information from the perspective of the target group itself, because the Ministry had taken on a motion that demands more space for the voice of the target group in the policy making process. They wanted their input especially for the new integration laws coming up, because so far they had mainly spoken with DCR and other non-refugee-led organisations but little with the people integrating. It was mentioned that the insights gathered from this consultative group were only going to be implemented for the (details of) new integration policies, which supposedly could mean that the participants could be ‘reasonably objective’, because it won’t change much for themselves but their advice was asked for the group that will come after them.

This brings us to “the issue of objectivity”, a notion that hampers RCO-advocacy in involvement with policymaking. In the Refugee Academy report this issue is put forward as the assumption that experts (scientists, advisers, journalists) without refugee background are more objective than refugees regarding themes such as inclusion, integration or reception.³¹ This is a dominant discourse among policymakers and scientists and contributes to the tendency to reduce the perspective of someone with a refugee background to a specific and individual gaze or a personal story. In this assumption it is underestimated that not one single story comes from nothing. Every story has a history and all perspectives are rooted in the lives of people who have a certain position towards a subject and who reason based on these convictions. Even the most distant and observing position brings about choices that are embedded in a personal and professional background. The ‘view from nowhere’ simply does not exist.

When we position one view (distance and objective because not being refugee), above another (involved and subjective, because of being a refugee) the fact that we need different sources of knowledge to acquire relevant insight. In order to have an inclusive policy we need profound dialogue with people who have an involved story. We need the connections between the stories and perspectives and this can lead to co creation of knowledge that exposes blind spots and can grasp the complexity of different experiences.

³¹ Ponzoni, E., Ghorashi, H., Badran, M. (2020). *Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief en de visie van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming. Advies voor instituties en organisaties*. Refugee Academy, VU.

Creating invited spaces from the policy maker side corresponds with what is described in the EPIM report.³² Namely that the majority of research participants have experienced a lack of feedback, follow-up and continuity in their advocacy work with policymakers. Including refugee and migrant voices in policymaking is usually limited to providing recommendations without being consulted in the whole design and implementation of policies and without receiving feedback or insight into if and how their input will be used (the voicing board in Gelderland is quite exceptional in that sense). Additional challenges were faced by research participants undertaking advocacy work on a voluntary basis, generally alongside paid employment or study, who lacked time for structured follow-up with policymakers. Research participants identified full political participation – the ability to vote and to stand for election – as one potential solution for ‘closing the gap’ between policymaking and migrant realities to this problem.

Community perspective or the ‘bigger picture’

Several policymakers at the ministerial level explained that they cannot really get the voices of refugee-led organisations to a higher political level as these perspectives still cannot bring the ‘bigger picture’ of the mass refugee community in the Netherlands.³³ Often refugee-led organizations are profiling around a specific group or community interest (as mentioned earlier under the mapping chapter). Although policymakers are interested in hearing these perspectives as well as individual stories, they are more focused on creating a national policy for the mass majority of refugees. It was highlighted that it is an impossible task for the ministry to have all different communities with different contrasting voices around the table. Therefore, for them, talking with a non-refugee-led partner who can bring that perspective is faster and more effective than organizing or bringing all refugee voices at the table by themselves. They, however, have expressed interest in working with a national refugee-led partner who can organize the different refugee voices and can deliver the ‘bigger picture’ to them.

Working with constructive voices

Moreover, policymakers prefer to work with advocates who are not just negatively criticizing and against the whole system (like extreme activists can be in their view) but who come up with constructive ideas and advice from a more or less united voice, including the host community interest. Additionally, policymakers are not fond of the pitying paternalistic discourse about refugees that many organisations who work for refugees adopt. Policymakers cannot do much with the ‘victimizing’ narrative and stories of refugees. They therefore prefer the perspective of what refugees can contribute to the Dutch society and what they can do to help them participate in doing so. That attitude would be a lot more effective, according to the interviewee.

³² Badran, M., Stoker, T. (2019). *Migrant-led advocacy across Europe*, European Programme for Migration and Integration. www.epim.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Migrant-led-advocacy-across-Europe-Report.pdf

³³ Ponzoni, E., Ghorashi, H., Badran, M. (2020). *Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief en de visie van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming. Advies voor instituties en organisaties*. Refugee Academy, VU.

Conclusion

In this section, we bring together all the three perspectives discussed before and how they are connected. We will identify themes and topics that should be included when developing the training toolkit.

Theme 1: Personal level and organisational structure

Foremost, the results out of the mapping illustrate the challenges faced by many refugee-led organizations in the Netherlands. These start with **small challenges such as creating a well-maintained public and online image of the organization**. Such an image and online presence (e.g. website) should aim to be clear and easy to find so that other stakeholders who wish to work with them and support their work can easily find them. Moreover, creating an online and regularly updated website of all refugee-led organisations in the Netherlands can be a solution to increase the visibility of these organizations. Once that is achieved, it will be easier having an overview of who does what and where, which will lay the groundwork for a more connected structure among refugee-led organisations themselves.

This leads us to the second challenge, **the lack of refugee-led spaces where these organizations can come together and coordinate advocacy strategies and messages**. The fact that there is quite a big number of refugee-led organisations in the Netherlands (based on the incomplete mapping) highlights the opportunity of getting organized and having a stronger voice in the Dutch policy making context at all levels. However, as most of them are working on general issues and some on specific issues to specific refugee communities, these organisations should identify clearly their objectives and priorities. Furthermore, they should start negotiating these priorities among themselves and find common grounds to create more focused and joint advocacy projects. This will also help in overcoming the challenge of lack of sustainable and essential partnerships with policymakers. **Coordinating among other refugee-led organisations will help to create** the three-layered structure of refugee perspectives. Which will be discussed in the coming paragraph.

Moreover, in the first chapter, we build on the work provided by Refugee Academy on the differentiation between the different roles and layers of refugee perspectives. In this section, we suggest that a focus should be given in the toolkit on understanding and reflecting the different layers and roles that refugee advocates can bring and play. Each role requires different competences and conditions.

Questions to be included in the toolkit, how and what layer to employ when doing advocacy work? What competencies do I have or need, and in what space? These questions will help refugee advocates understand their position in the different structures (see “*The in-betweenness position of RCOs*”).

Overall, this layered structure of refugee perspective should not just be addressed to refugee advocates themselves, but also non-refugee-led actors who wish to include a refugee perspective. It is **important to identify what refugee perspective a partner needs and who can best bring that perspective from**

the refugee advocate. Doing so, will help to increase the awareness of refugee perspective and minimizing the tokenistic participation experienced by refugee advocates.

Theme 2: working with local civil society actors.

From the data information gathered from the interviewees, it came out clearly that a lot of interactions take place between refugee-led and local civil society organizations. The collaboration varies from participating in events where they can share their perspective and sometimes directly with the question of providing advice on how to improve certain services for refugees (e.g. the Gelderland provincial sounding board). In most cases, local civil society looks for refugee advocates who have good skills in public speaking, leading conversations, and facilitating discussions in Dutch or in their own native language (e.g. focus group aimed at a specific refugee community). If we are to make a distinction between the two types of advocacy work, that one is aiming to influence the public opinion and the other to influence policies. Refugee advocates work often with local civil society on activities that can go under the first type of advocacy work. In very few cases, they collaborated in activities that can be under the second type to influence policies (as is the case with the Gelderland sounding board). **This illustrates a collaboration gap between refugee advocates and local civil society organizations.** Moreover, both parties wish to work together more and enhance their collaboration, but the question is how? Some ideas and lessons learned have been provided by the interviewees. For example, it was often highlighted that **collaborating on setting a joint advocacy agenda and priorities** is something that both would like to see happening in the future.

Theme 3: working with policymakers

Policy makers are increasingly more open to directly incorporate the voices of refugees in the policy making process on a regular basis. Although examples were more of individual stories, the preference was expressed strongly for a well-organized voice that doesn't just represent one group but as a collective voice. It was repetitively mentioned that having an overarching neutral and independent organisation that represents the whole target group of newcomers and does not have to execute policies would be very beneficial for policymakers, like a Dutch and/or European **refugee-led network that can speak about the position of refugees from a perspective of 'the bigger picture' without representing singular interests.** Because the bigger the constituency, the more credibility and legitimacy the advocacy workers will have and therefore more possibility to get a seat at the table with policy makers.

What comes forth in the above, however, is an unrealistic expectation from the policymaker side of refugee advocates that represent entire communities, and therefore a narrowed view on diversity, which ultimately undermines the credibility of refugee-led advocates (or other alleged representatives of

minority groups) who *cannot* demonstrate to be speaking on behalf of a whole group.³⁴ The issue of objectivity and legitimacy - the extent to which refugee-led initiatives are 'representative enough' of the groups they advocate or 'objective enough' to speak about the group issues - might be used by both mainstream CSOs and policymakers to challenge their legitimacy in the political space. In reality, and since it is near impossible for any organisation to be truly representative of all refugees, and 'true objectivity' cannot be achieved, this act of questioning legitimacy consequently leads to delegitimizing the voices of refugee advocates, and therefore non-refugee experts become the only trustworthy voices in the political space (EPIM report, 2019).

Overall, refugee advocates and RCOs need to be able to navigate the policymaking spaces and how to best use their voice to guarantee such navigation among policymakers. They should be able to understand the different impacts of their stories and how to use personal/collective stories what and when, effectively to achieve the advocacy objective they aim for.

³⁴ Ponzoni, E., Ghorashi, H., Badran, M. (2020). *Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief en de visie van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming. Advies voor instituties en organisaties*. Refugee Academy, VU.