A HOME AWAY FROM HOME
Housing Refugees in the Netherlands During the European Refugee Crisis

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Introduction

Since 2015, Europe has experienced “the greatest mass movement of people since the Second World War” (European Commission 2016, 1). The inflow of refugees traveling across the Mediterranean Sea peaked in the summer of 2015, and has declined sharply since spring 2016. Processing asylum applications and housing permit holders and facilitating their integration into society have been major challenges of countries that have received considerable numbers of asylum seekers. As of this writing, the root causes of the inflow of refugees and the disagreement among EU member states on a common strategy to face the challenges of asylum and migration into the EU have not been solved and thus will remain a major challenge in the near future.

Managing the refugee inflow across the Mediterranean involves formal responsibilities for European, national, local, and in some cases regional governments. Developing a common approach to immigration and asylum and the protection of the EU border are responsibilities shared by the EU and its member states, according to EU Treaties (European Parliament 2017). The national governments are responsible for receiving asylum applicants and establishing and implementing asylum procedures. The local governments are responsible for accommodating recognized refugees and for facilitating their integration into society.2 Municipalities play an important role in ensuring sufficient decent, affordable housing to cover the needs of refugees and the local population, in promoting community cohesion, and in creating a welcoming social environment (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2016).

This chapter focuses on the responses by the Dutch national and local governments in terms of accommodation for asylum seekers and recognized refugees. It is beyond the intended scope of this chapter to discuss in detail the challenges of integrating immigrants via education, jobs, social contacts, and language training.

Europe’s Refugee Crisis

In 2015 and 2016, Europe recorded high numbers of asylum seekers unparalleled since World War II. The largest previous movement was the exodus that resulted from several wars in former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. About 700,000 people fled to the 15 member states of the EU to apply for asylum between 1989 and 1994 (Ambroso 2006). In 2011 the number of refugees entering
Europe gradually increased due to the start of the civil uprising and wars in Syria and Iraq and due to the intensifying situation of insecurity and war in Afghanistan, peaking suddenly in 2015. This record number was accompanied by disturbing scenes of dangerous sea crossings in unseaworthy and overloaded vessels with the help of smugglers, resulting in 1,308 refugees and migrants drowned or missing in April 2015 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2015). Large-scale asylum inflows were a new experience for several EU countries (OECD 2015).

The humanitarian crisis was aggravated by a political one as EU leaders were unable to develop a common approach (Grigonis 2017). The refugee crisis has also incited anti-immigrant rhetoric and led to the growth of populist parties in many EU countries (Banulescu-Bogdan and Collett 2015). On March 18, 2016, the EU and Turkey agreed that all new migrants that tried to cross the border between Turkey and Greece without necessary authorization or documents would be returned to Turkey starting March 20. In return, the EU agreed that for every Syrian being returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian would be resettled to the EU (European Commission 2016). At that time Hungary, Slovenia, and Croatia, all part of the EU, and along with Serbia and Macedonia, which are not part of the EU, had already closed off the Balkan route. The implementation of the agreement between the EU and Turkey and the closure of the Balkan route resulted in a sharp decrease in the number of refugees and other migrants arriving in Greece from Turkey and, in turn, to a decline in the numbers of asylum seekers entering other EU countries.

Interestingly, the sharp decrease in sea crossings is not immediately reflected in asylum statistics of EU member states as it may take several months before asylum seekers arriving on the European coast submit an asylum application in one of the member states, usually not in the country of first arrival and often not immediately (see Figure 2.1; Connor 2016).

![Figure 2.1](image_url)  
*Figure 2.1* First Asylum Applicants in the European Union, September 2013 to August 2017.  
Since the agreement between the EU and Turkey in March 2016, the central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy has gradually become the main route of undocumented migration to the EU by sea, resulting in about 181,000 arrivals in 2016 and 85,183 arrivals between January 1 and July 3, 2017 (International Organization for Migration 2017a, 2017b). The far longer central Mediterranean route has a higher rate of casualties, resulting in more than 15,150 migrants who attempted to cross losing their life between 2011 and early July 2017 (European Commission 2017; International Organization for Migration 2017b). Most migrants who arrive in Italy are economic migrants from Nigeria, Eritrea, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Senegal, and Gambia (International Organization for Migration 2017c). Since the summer of 2017 there has been a major decrease in the number of undocumented migrants arriving in the EU by sea (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees n.d.). However, this may be a temporary decrease, as the root causes of migration from Africa and Asia have remained the same.

The influx of migrants is distributed unevenly across the EU. While many migrants enter the EU in Italy and Greece, most migrants attempt to cross the EU border in Southern and Eastern European countries to reach a few popular Western and Northern European countries that are perceived as offering better economic opportunities. In 2015, 90 percent of asylum applicants were registered in nine EU states: Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Austria, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and the UK (Eurostat 2017). While the largest number of refugees went to Germany, Sweden received the largest proportion. For example, in 2015 Sweden received about 16,000 asylum seekers per one million inhabitants, Germany about 5,500 per one million, the Netherlands about 2,600 per one million, and the United Kingdom about 600 per one million inhabitants (OECD 2016).

In 2015, a record number of 58,900 asylum seekers applied for a refugee permit in the Netherlands, about twice the number as in 2014 and 2016 (about 31,600), and about twice the number as in 2013. About 47 percent of the 58,900 asylum applicants in 2015 were from Syria, followed by Eritrea (14 percent), Iraq (6 percent), and several other countries. About 8 percent of the applicants were stateless, typically Palestinians who had formerly lived in Syria (Statistics Netherlands (CBS) 2017).

The Netherlands has had a long history of immigration since World War II, from the former colonies Indonesia and Suriname, the Dutch Caribbean territories that are still part of the Netherlands, and Spain, Italy, Morocco, and Turkey, typically migrant or “guest” workers as well as workers from Eastern EU member states. Currently, refugees from Iraq, Iran, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Syria make up the largest refugee groups. Figure 2.2 shows changes in the number of asylum applicants to the Netherlands over the past 25 years. The results for the Netherlands generally follow the pattern of other Western European countries.

**The Dutch Response to the Inflow of Refugees**

Unlike several other countries, the Netherlands provided a sufficient number of emergency accommodation for all asylum seekers arriving during the peak period in 2015 and early 2016. Dutch politicians frequently state that in the Netherlands no newly arrived refugee has to sleep on the street, noting that it is a matter of decency. Refugees who complete the asylum procedure and are granted a residence permit have a similar right to housing as any other Dutch citizen. Thus, the demand by new migrants has increased the burden on the already overburdened Dutch housing system, with a particularly strong impact on social housing. Given the shortage of affordable housing, national and local authorities have to balance the rights and needs of the new residence permit holders with those of the resident population.

Asylum applicants arriving in the Netherlands must first report to the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) (see Figure 2.3). Once asylum applicants enter the country, they enter the formal application procedure at an asylum seekers’ center, called *azielzoekerscentrum* (AZC), administered by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA).
The number of AZCs depends on the number of incoming refugees. At peak, there were about 130 AZCs; as of this writing there are about 65 (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) 2017). They provide basic shelter and accommodate between 300 and 1,000 refugees. AZCs are typically established in vacant schools, monasteries, barracks, or vacation resorts (when not in season). In some cases AZCs may be newly built or expanded units. While some AZCs are located in cities or small towns, others are located in rural areas. Asylum seekers are required to check into their AZC each night and are subject to a curfew.

During their stay at the AZCs, officers from the IND decide whether an asylum seeker is eligible for asylum. Between 2008 and 2013, about 50 percent of applicants were eligible for asylum (Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) 2017b; Dutch Council for Refugees 2016). This rate peaked to almost 70 percent in 2015 when many Syrians and Eritreans applied for a residence permit, which was typically granted to members of these two groups. However, the number of refugees decreased sharply in April 2016, after the agreement between the EU and Turkey. Since then, more African economic migrants, who typically have low odds of being eligible for asylum, have arrived. In sum, the overall application rate decreased to just over 30 percent from April 2016 to March 2017 (Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) 2017b). Rejected applicants have to leave the country, although many tend to disappear into illegality.2

Asylum applicants who are granted asylum status receive their residence permit and are sent to municipalities in proportion to the municipality’s population size. Thus, Amsterdam has had to accommodate the highest number of refugees: 1,377 in 2015 and 2,077 in 2016. At the national level, there were 28,871 permit holders to be housed in 2015 and 43,000 in 2016; the latter is about 25 percent of the Dutch population (Statistics Netherlands (CBS) 2017).

Housing Refugees in the Netherlands

The Right to Housing

The residence permit provides the same right to housing, work, and social welfare benefits as any other Dutch resident. Most recognized refugees receive welfare benefits as they are unable to obtain
Reception of asylum seekers in the Netherlands

*Figure 2.3 Dutch Asylum Procedure.*

*Source: Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) (2017a).*
a job. Thus, they typically receive first priority for a unit in the social housing sector, as is the case for low-income or unemployed Dutch citizens. On average, about 20 to 40 percent of all Dutch applicants for social housing obtain priority, depending on their personal situation, local regulations, and regional pressure on the housing market. Thus, local authorities have to balance the housing needs of refugees with the housing needs of waitlisted Dutch applicants, resulting in a wait time of five to eight years or higher.

**Social Housing and Refugees**

The Netherlands has a relatively large social housing sector compared with other countries in Northern and Western Europe (Elsinga and Wassenberg 2014; see also the chapters authored by Marja Elsinga and Marietta Haffner, and by Reinout Kleinhans). About one-third of all households rents a social housing unit; most of these are owned by housing associations. Before 2014, most refugees who received a residence permit easily found housing in the social housing sector. For example, a city of, say, 100,000 inhabitants would be able to accommodate about 40 to 60 new refugees each year without significant problems.

However, since 2008 waiting lists in the social housing sector have gradually increased because of a decrease in housing construction due to the national and global financial crisis (Elsinga and Wassenberg 2014) and due to the recent refugee crisis. In December 2015, about 48,000 people lived in AZCs, about 30 percent (or 16,000 people) of whom had already received a residence permit but who were unable to obtain suitable housing from local agencies. These numbers have decreased recently (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) 2017).

Housing needs typically depend on household composition. Between January 2013 and April 2016, 68 percent of all refugee households were single-headed households, while 32 percent were couples with or without children (Mulder 2016). The average household size was about two persons. About 50 percent of households headed by single males wait to be reunited with their families, although the date of reunification is difficult to predict (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) 2017; Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) 2017b). Interestingly, municipalities found it easier to house families than singles as there is more support for the former, resulting in a relatively high number of young males in AZCs (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) 2017).

**Policy Agreements to Support Local Housing Provision for Refugees**

In order to accommodate refugees that have received a residency permit, the national government and the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) signed two agreements. The first agreement, signed in November 2015, focused on two housing funding mechanisms: (1) a subsidy to build additional housing units for refugees, and (2) a subsidy to establish temporary housing solutions to address requirements from the COA. Unfortunately, the strict conditions of both funding mechanisms caused local actors to be rather reluctant to use them (Smits van Waesberghe and Razenberg 2016). The second agreement between national and local governments, signed in April 2016, goes beyond housing and includes additional funding for language classes, schooling, and job training for refugees.

Moreover, the Association of Dutch Municipalities established two temporary organizations that assisted municipalities and other stakeholders from 2015 until July 2017. First, Platform Opnieuw Thuis (Platform Home Again) supported many local actors that focus on housing refugees, implementing creative solutions, showcasing best practices, advising municipalities, and improving administrative processes. Second, Ondersteunings Team Asielzoekers en Vergunninghouders (Support Team for
Asylum Seekers and Residence Permit Holders, OTAV) was a helpdesk for municipalities to answer questions about refugees in regard to housing, education, employment, and social benefits. Moreover, both organizations advised local practitioners about the housing funding mechanisms mentioned earlier.

In addition to these two temporary organizations, VluchtelingenWerk Nederland (Dutch Council for Refugees), a non-governmental organization, offers practical support to refugees to facilitate their social integration in Dutch society with the help of about 14,000 volunteers and funding by the national government as well as the private sector.

**Unorthodox Ways to Provide Housing**

A simple solution for the affordable housing crisis would be to build additional housing units. However, there are many financial and spatial planning constraints, along with a long planning process and insufficient land for constructing housing units. Thus, creativity is needed for finding housing solutions other than new construction. The peak of arrival of the refugees in 2015 stimulated many housing providers to develop temporary or permanent housing alternatives, relieving the shortage of affordable housing by utilizing vacant properties in a more efficient way, i.e., adding temporary or flexible prefabricated housing units, constructing smaller dwellings, and intensifying property usage, as discussed later.

One alternative is to accelerate the transformation of vacant to occupied buildings. In the Netherlands, 19 percent of all offices, 14 percent of all shops, and about 1,000 churches, schools, libraries, monasteries, and other kinds of property were vacant as of 2016, despite the scarcity of land (Bouwstenen voor Sociaal 2016; Statistics Netherlands (CBS) 2016). The vacancy rates are relatively high compared with adjacent countries. From an urban planning and sustainability point of view, reusing vacant properties at closer-in locations is preferable to new construction further out, yet most developers prefer building new structures instead of reusing or transforming the old stock, as building new is easier and more profitable compared to rehabilitating and redeveloping existing buildings.

Another alternative is temporary use or reuse instead of the permanent transformation of vacant buildings, as the former has fewer restrictions in terms of building regulations. Demand for reused office or retail space has declined because some employees work from home or in shared spaces due to the Internet. In 2015, Platform31, a national think tank, ran a pilot study to analyze technical, legal, planning, and financial barriers faced by municipalities and property owners that would like to temporarily reuse vacant buildings via minor basic adjustments in the buildings and temporary leases (Platform31 2015). They found that temporary reuse is easier than most professionals expect, not only technically and legally, but also in terms of planning and finances. With some limited rehabilitation, a vacant property that operates at a loss can be converted into a building that generates some profit in the interim.

Another alternative is to postpone demolition plans. For example, in the town of Vught in the southern part of the country, planners had intended to demolish an old nursing home. As the municipality suddenly had to house a large group of refugees it postponed the demolition and rehabilitated the old building to provide refugee housing. At present, the local housing association houses 32 refugees in this building. The municipality, a housing association, the Dutch Council for Refugees, neighbors, and the refugees themselves helped with rehabilitation activities (see Figure 2.4, Figure 2.5).

Flexible housing units (e.g., prefabricated housing, modular construction, container style housing, or mobile homes) are an attractive alternative because these units are easy to disassemble, to transport, to reconstruct, and to rebuild. Platform Home Again (Platform Opnieuw Thuis), discussed earlier, provides an overview of many types of flexible housing, giving ideas to municipalities and other
Figure 2.4  Temporary Refugee Housing Next to Offices in Rijswijk, the Netherlands.
*Photo credit:* Frank Wassenberg. Used with permission.

Figure 2.5  Temporary Use of an Old Elementary School in Landgraaf, the Netherlands.
*Photo credit:* Gemeente Landgraaf. Used with permission.
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actors that are suddenly in need of additional housing (Expertisecentrum Flexwonen 2017). In January 2016, the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) and the Rijksbouwmeester (the Dutch National Architect, an honorable and thus influential title, although it is only temporary) launched the A Home Away From Home competition for architects, housing designers, developers, and the building industry to develop and provide alternative types of flexible and temporary housing, including housing for refugees (see Figure 2.6). The COA aimed to respond better to the sudden increase of refugees. The solutions had to be easy to transport (for example, tents or caravans), easy to pack and to store (for example, containers), easy to use and reuse (flexible in terms of household size), and low cost. In total, 366 design suggestions were received; 12 were short listed, and six received awards and are being constructed.

Housing people of different backgrounds, for example, refugees, young people who have just started their first job, temporary workers, the homeless, or recently divorced people, within one larger building constitutes a way to address needs quickly and possibly is a way to integrate refugees into society. Platform31 (2016), along with other practitioners, suggested housing these different groups within the same building, called The Magic Mix. While much research on both sides of the Atlantic shows that mixing residents of different backgrounds and incomes at the neighborhood scale may exacerbate tensions, The Magic Mix shows that mixed-income housing may work when there is strict screening of applicants, when tenants are only allowed to stay for a few months or years, and when resident rules are strictly enforced.

Two Magic Mix examples are located in Amsterdam and Utrecht. In Amsterdam, a village of container style housing, Startblok Riekerhaven (2016) has provided housing for 280 refugees and 280 Dutch students who were matched, i.e., one refugee with one Dutch student, and live in a block sharing kitchen facilities and a garden, since 2016, thus combining housing and support for social

![Figure 2.6 The Finch in Leiden, One of Six Winners in the A Home Away From Home Competition. Photo credit: Kees Hummel. Used with permission.](image-url)
integration (see Figure 2.7). In Utrecht, Place2BU (2017) has offered 490 studios to young people age 23 to 27, a combination of refugees and non-refugees, since May 2017. There are other creative ways to house refugees. For example, Platform31 (2017) issued a report highlighting 45 existing examples of refugee housing.

Figure 2.7  Startblok Riekerhaven, Amsterdam.

Photo credit: Frank Wassenberg. Used with permission.

Housing is key to social integration and participation in society. Once refugees receive their permit, they have to rebuild their lives in their new country to become self-reliant by attending language or vocational training classes, learning Dutch, becoming familiar with local customs and institutions, qualifying for and finding a job, and fully participating in society. However, in reality these steps are challenging for most refugees. In December 2015, the influential Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (Scientific Council for Government Policy, WRR) published the policy brief “No Time to Lose: From Reception to Integration of Asylum Migrants,” which was a wakeup call to many (Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) 2015). The authors found that after 15 years, only about one-third of all refugees with a permit had found a job. In December 2016, the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER), another influential national organization, concluded that although promising small-scale initiatives had been developed in the meantime, they are often too small and fragmented and of too ad hoc a nature to help most refugees who are in need of support (Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER) 2016). Thus, integrating refugees into Dutch society will remain a key challenge for the future.
Conclusion

This chapter has described how the Netherlands, one of the main European destination countries of refugees, has addressed the need for emergency accommodations for asylum seekers and for housing recognized refugees. The Dutch government has responded to the sudden increased influx of asylum seekers in a pragmatic way by organizing emergency shelters and expanding the processing capacity of the Immigration and Naturalization Service and by constructing additional housing for refugees with a residence permit. The national government and municipalities have been well aware of the importance of balancing the right to housing, work, and social benefits of refugees with those of Dutch residents. Refugees as well as Dutch residents have taken advantage of newly constructed and rehabilitated housing units—although in general the national and local governments have emphasized rehabilitation over new construction. The next task for the national government, the municipalities, and other stakeholders is to facilitate the participation and integration of refugees in the labor market, educational systems, and the broader society, as well as to address likely future inflows of refugees.

Notes

1 In addition, there is an intermediate level between state and local governments, i.e., regional, state, or provincial governments, with varying responsibilities to house and integrate refugees. The intermediate governmental level is important in countries like Germany, Austria, and Belgium, but not in a unitary state like the Netherlands.

2 The number of people who disappear into illegality is unknown, but estimates vary from about 20,000 up to 100,000 (The Post Online 2015). Numbers typically increase when repeated asylum applications are rejected. Many undocumented refugees do not stay in one country but migrate to another. Some try to increase their odds by discarding their papers. Debates at the local level focus on whether to provide illegal immigrants with basic amenities called “a bed, a bath, and some bread.”

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