

## Field Trip to the Netherlands

18. – 21. 02.2025

The Transnational Exchange VI project hosted a group of six European return counsellors to visit the Dutch AVRR field, encountering relevant actors for two full days in Amsterdam and Hague. In the following, the content of the different meetings is summarized.



*Photo 1: from left to right: Riikka (Caritas Augsburg, Germany), Biljana (The Directorate of Immigration, Iceland), Maida (IOM Germany), Pernille (Danish Refugee Council), Mishelle (IOM Switzerland), Faisa (IOM Finland) and Arjan (BBU, Federal Agency for Reception and Support Services, Austria) visiting the NGO VluchtelingenWerk (Dutch Council for Refugees).*

### NGO VluchtelingenWerk (Dutch Council for Refugees), Amsterdam

We started our two-day field trip in the Netherlands, by visiting three NGOs that are operating in the field of assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR). Our first visit headed to Vluchtelingenwerk, which is a prominent NGO in the Netherlands, dedicated to supporting asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. The organization plays a crucial role in guiding individuals

through the complex process of migration, providing essential assistance ranging from legal advice and psychological support to reintegration support for those considering voluntary return to their country of origin.

### **Core Activities in Return Counseling**

One of the key areas of Vluchtelingenwerk's work is return counseling. This involves providing individualized guidance to asylum seekers, helping them make informed decisions about voluntary return. The organization offers legal and practical advice, assisting clients with understanding their rights, obtaining necessary documentation, and connecting with relevant support services. Moreover, Vluchtelingenwerk collaborates with international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to facilitate sustainable reintegration and ensure proper travel arrangements. In certain cases, aftercare support is also provided, including assistance with housing and employment.

### **Key Programs**

Vluchtelingenwerk runs two major programs focused on return and future orientation for refugees and asylum seekers.

#### **Return Project**

"The Return Project" supports refugees and asylum seekers throughout their journey, from arrival to potential return. The program offers both social and legal support, particularly for undocumented individuals. It also provides future-orientation counseling, helping clients explore both legal and personal pathways. Alongside direct support, the project is involved in advocacy and public awareness initiatives.

#### **Future Orientation Program**

"The Future Orientation Program" creates a safe environment for individuals to explore their options without the pressure of immediate decisions. The program employs client-led discussions and structured guidance to empower decision-making. It uses various methodologies, such as Bewogen Terugkeer and TIP, and integrates trauma-sensitive approaches. The program works closely with the European Return and Reintegration Support Organizations (ERSO) and offers vocational training and temporary shelter for up to 18 months, with possible extensions. It helps clients navigate various legal pathways, explore return to their country of origin, or consider migration to third countries.

### **Organizational Structure and Impact**

Vluchtelingenwerk has a large and dedicated workforce, consisting of around 9,000 volunteers and 1,000 staff members. The organization operates with country-specific advisors who provide specialized guidance nationwide. The organization's funding has evolved over time, with AMIF funding supporting return counseling and reintegration from 2015 to 2020. From 2020 to 2025, the Ministry of Justice has been the main source of funding, and future shifts in funding models are expected, with increased involvement from municipalities.

The LVV program, running from 2019 to 2024, was a government-funded pilot project that provided shelter and return counseling for undocumented migrants. This program will transition in 2025 to the Program Undocumented Amsterdam (POA), a municipality-funded initiative aimed at continuing support for undocumented individuals.

### **Asylum Seeking Centers**

Within asylum-seeking centers, Vluchtelingenwerk deploys five future orientation counselors. Clients are typically referred by legal professionals or the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA). In year 2023, 178 clients received future orientation counseling, and 644 counseling sessions were conducted. Additionally, 34 clients received return counseling.

### **Amsterdam Regional Office**

The Amsterdam Regional Office operates with four counselors who work with clients referred by municipal authorities and registration centers. In year 2023, 112 clients engaged in future orientation counseling, while 19 clients received return counseling. Nine clients successfully returned—seven through voluntary return and two through migration to third countries.

### **ERSO Network and International Collaboration**

Vluchtelingenwerk is part of a broader network that includes six European countries and 45 NGOs in countries of origin. Many initiatives within this network have evolved into the European Return and Reintegration Network (EURP), which ensures follow-up monitoring of returnees at 6 and 12 months post-return, based on mutual agreement.

### **ACO – The Amsterdam Centre for Undocumented Migrants**

The second visit took place at ACO, the Amsterdam Centre for Undocumented Migrants, which is operated by the NGO Regiegroep Ongedocumenteerden Amsterdam. Regiegroep is responsible for overseeing and monitoring the implementation of municipal and national policies concerning undocumented migrants in the city. In collaboration with various partners, the ACO program works to create sustainable, future-oriented solutions for this vulnerable group.

Since 2022, Regiegroep has been coordinating ACO's activities, providing undocumented migrants with essential information and services related to municipal programs and shelter. The core objective of ACO is to ensure that individuals in need feel welcome, supported, and heard. The center offers a range of services, including return counseling, legal support, medical assistance, and food aid.

ACO is currently facing significant changes in its funding structure. The new government has expressed its intention to discontinue financing the project, which has raised concerns about the

future of its operations. However, there are ongoing discussions about the potential for the municipality to take over the funding.



*Transnational Exchange VI field trip participants visiting ACO – The Amsterdam Centre for Undocumented Migrants*

### **NGO Goedwerk Foundation**

The Goedwerk Foundation was established in 2014 by Elias Brhave, an Ethiopian refugee who came to the Netherlands seeking asylum. The foundation has offices in both Amsterdam and Eindhoven and is dedicated to providing independent and sustainable voluntary return support. Its core programs include Return Counseling (RMP) and Future Orientation (LVV).

The foundation's target group consists of asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, individuals with addictions, and those in detention centers where deportation is not currently possible. The majority of clients come from Northeast African and Southwest Asian countries, such as Libya, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia, and Pakistan. However, citizens from EU and non-Visa countries are not eligible for the program. Clients typically learn about Goedwerk through various channels, including the internet, community networks, and the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA).

Since its founding in 2014, the Goedwerk Foundation has successfully assisted approximately 700 individuals in making voluntary returns to their home countries.

### **Methodology**

Goedwerk's approach involves regular engagement with clients, including visits to shelters at COA and National Alien Facilities (LVV), where they provide return counseling. They also offer support at Schiphol Airport for individuals preparing to return. Additionally, the foundation utilizes the 7 ROSES Improvement Exercise, a transdiagnostic intervention designed to increase self-efficacy in refugees facing post-migration stressors. This approach helps refugees better manage the challenges they encounter following their migration journey.

Another key element of their methodology involves group meetings where individuals from the same country can come together to share their experiences and engage in meaningful conversations, fostering a sense of community and mutual support.

### **Return Assistance**

The foundation provides clients with comprehensive assistance in organizing their return. Each client receives a reintegration support package of €2,615 to help with their reintegration in their home country. In some cases, clients may be eligible for additional support from the Dutch Repatriation and Departure Service (DTV) or the municipality. Three months after return, the foundation conducts follow-up monitoring to assess how the reintegration process is progressing and identify any challenges or issues that the returnees might be facing.

In partnership with local organizations in Ethiopia and Uganda, such as "Fond Your Future," Goedwerk offers an interest-free loan of up to €2,000 to assist clients with their reintegration. Clients are required to repay this loan over a specified period, and the program has proven effective in helping clients use the funds for their benefit.



*Visit at the NGO Goedwerk Foundation in Amsterdam.*

### **IOM Netherlands, Hague**

On the second day of the field trip, the Transnational Exchange VI group visited the IOM Netherlands in Hague. A key aspect of IOM Netherlands' work is Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR), which has been active since 1991 through the REAN program (Return and Emigration Assistance from the Netherlands). The AVRR team consists of field counselors, medical staff, and reintegration assistance units, working closely with asylum seeker centers, municipalities, and detention facilities.

An important aspect of AVRR work at IOM Netherlands are the outreach activities. AVRR counsellors in IOM Netherlands have been “on the field” already since 2001, and at the moment there are 25 return counsellors that work for example in reception centers, shelters and even in detention centers.

In recent years, IOM Netherlands has facilitated voluntary returns for asylum seekers, irregular migrants, and regular migrants, as illustrated by statistical trends from 2020 to 2024. The program

provides pre-departure counseling, travel document assistance, medical support, and reintegration aid in migrants' home countries.

A case study of “Daniel” from Romania highlights IOM’s commitment to ensuring smooth returns. It details his journey from the Netherlands back to Romania, emphasizing support at transit points and final arrival assistance. Another example follows “Tony” from Tilburg, returning to Nigeria after 20 years, illustrating the social and logistical aspects of the AVRR process.



*Visit at IOM Netherlands in Hague*

### **Visit to the Ministry of Justice and Security – Repatriation and Departure Service (R&DS)**

During our last visit of the field trip, to the Ministry of Justice and Security – Repatriation and Departure Service (R&DS) in the Netherlands, we gained a clearer understanding of the country's return process, its legal framework, and how various agencies collaborate to facilitate returns.

The Dutch return policy is guided by the Return Directive 2008/115/EC, which establishes standards for returning third-country nationals who do not have the right to stay. This directive is implemented through national laws, such as the Aliens Act of 2000. The R&DS coordinates the return process and works closely with other organizations, including the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS), which issues return decisions, and the Aliens Police and Royal Netherlands Marechaussee (RNLM), who enforce compliance. Additional support comes from organizations such as the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), the Custodial Institutions Agency (DJI), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and various NGOs that run return programs and provide support for reintegration.

A key aspect of Dutch return policy is the prioritization of voluntary return. This approach has been in place for over 30 years in partnership with the IOM. The European Return and Reintegration Program (EURP) has also become an essential tool, offering reintegration support for returnees and increasing the involvement of return counselors working for the R&DS.

Another important feature is that return counseling begins even before the final decision from the appeals board is made. This early intervention helps individuals prepare for the possibility of return, even before the outcome is finalized.

If voluntary return does not occur within the designated timeframe — usually between 0 and 28 days, depending on the specific case — the authorities will initiate a forced return process. To encourage compliance, the R&DS may apply measures such as reporting obligations, movement restrictions, confiscation of travel documents, financial deposits, and, in some cases, detention. These measures are designed to ensure that individuals without the right to stay leave the Schengen area properly.



*Paying a visit to the Ministry of Justice and Security – Repatriation and Departure Service (R&DS)*

### **Conclusion**

Overall, our visit to the Netherlands provided a clear picture of how the country manages returns, focusing on voluntary return whenever possible while keeping forced returns as a backup option. The NGO field has traditionally been very strong in the Netherlands and it still plays an important role in the overall AVRR system in the country. It was valuable to observe how various agencies cooperate in the field of AVRR and how reintegration support plays a crucial role in the process.



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