

## Summary

### Lost time

*Advisory report on activities in reception facilities for aliens*

The main principle underlying Dutch policy on reception facilities for aliens is that they should be basic but humane. Within those parameters, the principal aim is to ensure that aliens are available for and able to cooperate effectively in their asylum procedure or departure.

In this report the Advisory Committee on Migration Affairs (ACVZ) addressed the question of how the opportunities for aliens in reception facilities to engage in activities relate to the aims of reception policy. To answer this question, the Committee examined the legal and other conditions governing participation in activities in reception centres; how the organisation of the centres influences the daily activities of the aliens housed there; developments in reception over the last few years in statistical terms and what authors on this subject and the people who live and work in the facilities think of the opportunities for pursuing activities there. The Committee spoke to staff of the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), the Repatriation and Departure Service (DT&V), the Dutch Refugee Council and the International Organization for Migration at a number of locations and in different types of facility (asylum seekers' centres (AZCs), the restrictive accommodation centre and the family accommodation centre). In addition, it consulted other organisations involved in this field and interviewed aliens who have resided or are currently residing in a reception facility.

### Developments in reception

The number of aliens awaiting a decision on their application in an AZC has declined over the past few years. In contrast, the occupation of facilities for failed asylum seekers has actually increased since 2010 (the restrictive accommodation centre) and 2011 (the family accommodation centres). It is worthy of note that both the absolute and relative numbers of aliens who spend more than three years in a facility both in AZCs and in family accommodation centres has increased. Most of the aliens in reception facilities are between 18 and 45 years old, which can be regarded as the most productive period in a person's life. Some years ago, the COA played an important role in offering various activities. Nowadays, it emphasises that facility residents should themselves take the initiative in this respect. In recent years cuts have been made in expenditure on activities. For example the financial contribution towards the costs of participation in social and cultural activities for adult asylum seekers has been abolished.

### Hardly any opportunities for activities in reception facilities

'Forced inactivity' is the daily routine for most of the aliens in the facilities. They are completely dependent on the COA for their basic needs and are not encouraged to undertake activities. The scope for paid work is limited and voluntary work outside the facilities is for a variety of reasons difficult to arrange. The only option for most aliens is to register for the COA's 'job shop'. This involves basic chores in the facility which contribute only on the most limited scale to the person's development. In addition, demand outstrips supply. With regard to education, the schooling offered in the AZCs is restricted to orientation and civic integration courses, general information on return to the country

of origin and Dutch lessons for asylum seekers who are residing legally in the Netherlands pending a decision on their application. Now and again, personal resilience training is given. In the restrictive accommodation centre and the family accommodation centre only general, informative meetings on return are held as well as individual interviews on the same subject. Where recreation is concerned, the COA confines itself in general to making space available. The financial resources available are however limited and it is not always possible to arrange for the necessary supervision. The COA expects residents to show initiative and organise activities themselves, but that has proved difficult in many cases as they do not know how to go about it. What is more, initiative in other areas is not always appreciated. The recreational activities on offer are therefore frequently dependent on the efforts of people from outside the facility and they are not a structural part of the programme in AZCs. The contact between residents in the restrictive accommodation centre and the family accommodation centres with people outside the facility is limited. Although residents in the restrictive accommodation facility can officially engage in voluntary work or participate in activities, this is in practice virtually impossible due to its isolated location and the COA's policy of discouragement.

### **Consequence: institutionalization**

The consequence of a long-term stay in a reception facility and the boredom it entails is that the residents become increasingly passive. The likelihood of displaying initiative inevitably disappears. People withdraw, lead an increasingly isolated existence and after a while regard their situation as hopeless. They see the time spent in the facility as lost and at a certain point become unable to think about ways of changing their situation. In the long term, some become completely institutionalised. Both facility staff and residents regard the inactivity, alongside the long period spent waiting and associated long-term uncertainty as to whether they will be allowed to stay as the major cause of or an aggravating factor in the constant stress residents experience. Staff have noted that the longer people stay in the facility, the more difficult it becomes to motivate them to become more active. DT&V staff acknowledge that it is more difficult to encourage aliens who have been institutionalised to return to their countries of origin. The lack of opportunities for activities in the reception facilities thus undermines residents' health and hampers the work of the organisations involved.

### **Scope for change**

On the basis of a widely felt need among residents and staff for more opportunities to engage in activities in reception facilities, and the observation that the austerity measures implemented in this respect in the last few years are affecting the health of residents and do not appear to contribute to the effectiveness of reception policy, the Committee concludes that there are grounds for investigating the scope for change. It assumes that offering opportunities for meaningful activity can help maintain, restore or strengthen aliens' self-esteem and reduce the stress they experience, thereby improving their health. Purely from the point of view of prevention, this is extremely important. In addition, it could benefit the humane character of the facilities. At the same time, the Committee expects that such measures would increase aliens' self-reliance and give them space to think in a more focused manner than at present about their future. This could increase the effectiveness of policy, whether in the context of civic integration after admission, or departure after denial of their applications. These are assumptions based on the outcome of the research done. It is now time to test these assumptions.

The Committee advises the State Secretary for Security and Justice to adopt a number of measures enabling aliens to engage in more activities during their stay in a reception

facility. Because the COA has a statutory responsibility to provide reception in both the material and non-material sense, it would be logical for this organisation to take the initiative and to be equipped to do so. To be able to measure their impact, the measures would have to be in force for a considerable trial period, for example two to three years, followed by an evaluation. Since it is not only important to chart the impact of the measures on the level of activity and health of the aliens concerned, but also to be able to determine whether and to what extent they influence the intention to return and decision-making on the subject of return, they should be implemented both in the AZCs and, more importantly, in the restrictive accommodation centre and family accommodation centres.

### **Recommendations:**

- 1) *Inform aliens more explicitly, and preferably orally as well as in writing, as soon as they arrive and throughout their stay in the facility about the opportunities they have, within the limits of their residence procedure and the associated reception regime, to engage in various activities.*
- 2) *Reaffirm the COA's statutory responsibility for non-material aspects of reception and make sufficient financial resources available to enable it to fulfil this part of its statutory mandate properly as well as the material aspects.*
- 3) *Expand the interpretation of the right to education and development and the right to participation in recreational activities laid down in the RVA 2005 (Order concerning benefits to asylum-seekers and other categories of aliens), for example in the way described below, and apply this broader interpretation as well to aliens in the restrictive accommodation centre and the family accommodation centres who do not fall within the scope of the RVA 2005 because they are not legally resident in the Netherlands. Offer at all locations a supply-driven programme consisting of a number of short skills courses adapted to the relevant stage of the residence procedure and the nature of the reception facility.*
- 4) *As soon as aliens arrive at the facility, establish their level of education, skills and interests and discuss with them what activities they are able and willing to participate in or contribute to.*
- 5) *Restore the financial contribution towards participation in social and cultural activities for adults in reception and ensure that there are a limited number of sports facilities available to them within the centres. Ensure that at least some of the time the sports facilities are available to women only, so they can engage in sporting activity undisturbed. In addition, encourage links with local sports clubs.*
- 6) *Ensure that aliens in reception facilities have free and unlimited access to internet and create dedicated study areas.*
- 7) *Move the time at which aliens in the restrictive accommodation centre and the family accommodation centres have to report for the internal roll call to the beginning or end of the day and abolish the requirement to report on Saturdays for persons in the family accommodation centres.*

The Committee assumes that these measures will benefit the health of aliens in reception facilities and reduce institutionalization. It does not rule out the possibility that the

measures could be cost-neutral or even that the benefits accrued through prevention may exceed the costs.

At the same time, it expects that the measures will give aliens a greater chance than they have had until now to shape their own lives and thus enable them to think in a more focused manner about the future, whether that future consists of civic integration after admission or departure after their application has been denied. This could, among other things, positively influence decision-making in the context of return. The evaluation of the proposed pilot will have to show whether this is in fact the case, and what remaining influence the uncertainty over the future which can continue during the stay in a reception facility will have.