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## **The spatiality of the reception infrastructure in the Netherlands**

Written by Francini Laufer Schuh

Supervised by Abhijeet Chandel

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## Abstract

Significant population displacements have been taking place for centuries, most of the time as a consequence of natural disasters, wars, persecution or economic challenges. In 2023, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported 110 million people forcibly displaced worldwide (UNHCR, 2023). Conflicts in one country rapidly affect others, mainly as a result of these displacements and the vulnerable situation in which people find themselves in such circumstances. Thus, upon arrival in foreign countries, asylum seekers rely on the support provided by means of so called *arrival/reception infrastructures*, which can be material or immaterial means of aid.

The Netherlands, a country that receives refugees since its years as a republic, faced many crises in this regard over the years and keeps dealing with the consequences of episodes of high influx of refugees until nowadays. So, the objective of this research is to answer the questions “How did the reception infrastructure evolve during the main refugee crises in the Netherlands since World War II?”, and “What are the challenges and gaps in the spatial reception infrastructure offered by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), considering the minimum standards required by the Common European Asylum System?”, by analysing and reflecting upon historical media, archival materials, and publicly available reports and articles on the news about the current physical conditions of reception facilities.

Even though the asylum seekers’ reception system gradually became more regulated and the infrastructure provided changed significantly over the years, inhumane conditions continue to take place. European policies that fail on taking individual basic necessities of refugees into account, and a lack of shelter places in the country demonstrate that the reception infrastructure does not comply with the ever changing numbers of asylum requests, resulting in extremely inhumane situations to happen over and over again.

**Keywords:** refugees, asylum seekers, reception infrastructure, Netherlands.

## Introduction

Humanity has witnessed significant population displacements for centuries, stemming from wars, political conflicts, economic challenges, and natural disasters. Instabilities worldwide have forced entire populations to seek safer places to live, with conflicts in one country rapidly affecting others. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported, in 2023, that around 110 million people were forcibly displaced<sup>1</sup> worldwide, fleeing “persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disrupting public order” (UNHCR, 2023). In Europe, large-scale displacements occurred during the First World War (1914-1918), with an estimated 10 million internally or externally displaced individuals (Gattrel, 2014). The Second World War (1939-1945) forced approximately 55 million people to relocate in Europe alone (The National WWII Museum, 2022). These are just two of many instances that overwhelmed several countries with refugees, bringing up challenges regarding their reception and stay at the new living place.

In this context, reliability on facilities and essential services has been key to support refugees upon arrival, the so called *arrival infrastructures* – sometimes also called *reception infrastructures*. The term ‘arrival infrastructures’ can refer to different instances. Some authors refer to it as the built or material form of arrival spaces, defining it as “those parts of the urban fabric within which newcomers become entangled on arrival, and where their future local or translocal social mobilities are produced as much as negotiated” (Meeus, Arnaut, & van Heur, 2019). Other uses of the term refer to an immaterial aspect, such as stated by Lindquist & Xiang with the concept of ‘migration infrastructure’, defined as “the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility” (Lindquist & Xiang, 2014). Adding to the discourse, Kox & van Liempt identify and explore the role of institutional and personal infrastructures on home-making processes of refugees in Amsterdam (Kox & van Liempt, 2022), exploring the perspective of people and institutions as infrastructural support during the process of arrival and integration on the new country.

Building upon a base of material infrastructures, the first European Union Council Directive (Directive 2003/9/EC) defining the minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers was charted in 2003 (Council of the European Union, 2003). It was intended to harmonize the reception system within all EU Member States, ensuring “dignified standards of living” to all applicants. Within the material reception conditions established in the document, which entail the provision of housing, food and clothing, nothing specific is defined in the matter of housing quality or physical characteristics/standards to be met.

The Recast Directive of 2013 (Directive 2013/33/EU) (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2013) misses the same specific regulation, lacking clarity about what a dignified or adequate living standard would mean. This vagueness about operational standards caused divergences on, within others, the material reception conditions between Member States, leading to the proposal for a new Directive in 2016 (European Commission, 2016). This proposal addresses the problem of an unequal system and the lack of proper guidance. Still in 2016, the former European Asylum Support Office (EASO) published guidelines about the

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<sup>1</sup> Forcibly displaced people “encompasses refugees, asylum-seekers, other people in need of international protection and internally displaced people. It includes refugees and other displaced people not covered by UNHCR’s mandate and excludes other categories such as returnees and non-displaced stateless people.” (UNHCR, n.d.)

physical conditions of the infrastructure offered to refugees (European Asylum Support Office, 2016), clarifying the provisions established in the Directive of 2013.

In this research, the physical conditions of these material infrastructures are analysed and reflected upon, with a focus on the context of the Netherlands. The objective is to answer the following research questions: “How did the reception infrastructure evolve during the main refugee crises in the Netherlands since World War II?” and “What are the challenges and gaps in the spatial reception infrastructure offered by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), considering the minimum standards required by the Common European Asylum System?”. The result is an overview of the physical conditions experienced by refugees over the years, from the Second World War when the first refugee camp emerged in the country, until 2024, when the state was still facing the consequences of a major crisis in the asylum system in 2022. By understanding the historical root of these events, the physical situations surrounding the reception infrastructures and the regulations in force in each of these periods, existing gaps can be identified, leading to potential improvements in the conditions for individuals seeking asylum in the country in the future.

## **Methodology**

The methods used in conducting this research are media analysis, historical analysis and analysis of documentation and reports. The first step of the research was the collection of historical material (literature and archival media) regarding the spatiality of the reception infrastructures in the Netherlands from World War II (WWII) onwards. Public media, documents, news and reports, made available publicly online by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) and by the Dutch Council for Refugees VluchtelingenWerk were also collected. The data is described and reflected upon, with a critical eye to the physical condition of the infrastructures observed (which might represent an isolated moment and situation within a much broader context/reality), based on directives in force in each period (if any), such as the regulations established by the Common European Asylum System in official documents nowadays.

## **The Netherlands, the refugee republic**

The Netherlands has a history of receiving large numbers of people seeking for a safe place to build their lives. Scholars de Boer & Janssen (2023) define the country as 'The Refugee Republic' (*De Vluchtelingenrepubliek*). In their work several scholars discourse about the history of the arrival of refugees in the Netherlands, stemming from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when it was still a republic. Since that period care is provided to people fleeing to the country, an effort normally made by churches and/or private individuals by that time, with no involvement of the government (Opel, 2023, p. 162). Referring to a "national amnesia" (de Boer & Janssen, 2023, p. 9) with regards to this historical involvement, the authors refresh our memories on how the country was and has been shaped by immigrants for five centuries, having Dutch people themselves elected for a ranking, years ago, a number of personalities with a migration background as the 'Greatest Dutchmen' (*Grootste Nederlander*) (de Boer & Janssen, 2023, p. 9).

Centuries of history in receiving refugees also mean changes in the way this reception takes place and in the living conditions of these people, and part of this is due to the change in the view that a society has about newcomers and how this translates into policies. Reception conditions in the Netherlands left much to be desired at different times, mainly due to cuts in finances or to restrictions in reception capacity. Despite major improvements resulting from regulations and agreements signed between nations, mainly in the European Union, the living conditions for those arriving in search of refuge are still frequently precarious and inhumane nowadays.

### **How do we control these people?**

Among many periods of crisis, WWII was a major occasion, when an estimated 34,000 refugees – number not confirmed, because many crossed the borders illegally – arrived in the Netherlands between 1933 and 1940 (van Voolen, 2007). The large inflow of refugees in the Netherlands during WWII started already in 1933 when Adolf Hitler came to power, with four thousand registered refugees that year (Opel, 2023, p. 152). As the anti-Semitic rules took on greater proportions, the number of people crossing the border between the Netherlands and Germany also increased, causing tensions amongst people and alarming the government, surprised by the rapidly increasing influx of refugees. Due to the war, the Netherlands was also facing economic challenges and unemployment, which made them question the arrival of such a large amount of refugees, leading to discussions on how to regulate their access to the country and to the labour market (Opel, 2023, p. 154).

In 1933 the reception of Jewish people was coordinated by the Committee for Special Jewish Interests – CBJB (*Comité voor Bijzondere Joodsche Belangen* – CBJB), the Committee for Jewish Refugees (*Comité voor Joodsche Vluchtelingen* - CJV) and local committees. The government did not provide any financial means for that and the committees would act out of faith and philanthropy (Opel, 2023, pp. 162-163). In 1938, the CJV was assigned by the government the task of selecting a limited number of refugees that could enter the country, since its borders were closed. To place these limited incomers, there were camps opening and closing without prediction, mostly funded by Dutch Jewish citizens (White, 2022). Besides dealing with over 11,000 applications to legally cross the Dutch border, the CJV committee was also involved on the establishment of refugee camps to house illegal refugees (Opel, 2023, p.

164). Refugees would go from camp to camp, until the government decided to create a main location to house everyone, assigning a terrain where the Central Refugee Camp Westerbork would be opened in 1939 (Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork, n.d.).

### ***Central Refugee Camp Westerbork***

Created out of the need to control refugees who entered the country illegally during WWII and moved from place to place without a fixed destination, the camp was characterized as the first centralized physical space built to house and control this large group of people. Located in an extremely remote area in the Northeast of the Netherlands, in the city of Westerbork, the land provided by the government was far from the city centre and any possible integration with Dutch society (Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork, n.d.). As the government had no intention of investing in this, the Jewish community was the one who bore the construction costs, under the promise of good infrastructure, with heating, good sanitary facilities, school and synagogue (Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork, n.d.).

When the first 22 inhabitants arrived at the site, much still needed to be done. The conditions were very precarious, especially outside where everything was muddy and wet. The 'central kitchen' was actually not centralized, meaning that meals were never served hot. And very few of the promises made had been fulfilled. The camp expanded rapidly, reaching 749 residents in April 1940, only six months after its opening (Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork, n.d.).

In 1942, when the Nazis invaded the Netherlands, the camp was transformed by them into a 'transition camp' (*Polizeiliches Juden-Durchgangslager Westerbork*). It was there where prisoners of other work camps across the country were transferred to, to later be taken to die in concentration camps in neighbouring countries, such as Auschwitz and Sobibor concentration camps. After the German take-over, the camp expanded enormously, with many new barracks being built and the number of residents increasing rapidly. By 1942, 1100 people were living in Westerbork, and even though the maximum capacity was never reached, they kept building more barracks, representing that many more people were to come (Prenger, 2021).

The camp terrain consisted of an area of 500x500 metres where wooden barracks were built side by side or face to face, where living and work took place simultaneously (Tijenk, n.d.). As seen in Figure 1, the barracks were built very close to each other and had small windows, indicating a probable low solar incidence inside. The surroundings of the barracks prove to be a lot of clay, with no suitable condition for walking, increasing the dirt carried by people to their living spaces. As reported in testimonials, the washing facilities were limited, with around 350 individuals sharing only 10 taps. These 350 people was also the number that Ben Valk, a former resident of one of the barracks, reported as the number of people living in it at a certain time (Tijenk, n.d.).

*Figure 1 Barracks in Camp Westerbork*



*Note.* Kamp Westerbork bij de groote barakken (1942 – 1944). Location: Westerbork, Netherlands. (Image number: 66374. Collection: NIOD. Type: photo). From: Beeldbank WO2 (n.d.). Amsterdam (<https://beeldbankwo2.nl/nl/beelden/detail/170fad46-025a-11e7-904b-d89d6717b464/media/26b91d55-fd1a-b817-7d04-bbb2f88f5230>)

Figure 2 illustrates the condition inside one of those barracks. It was a one-room hall where people would sleep all together in bunkbeds, with no privacy. As mentioned by Ben Valk in his testimonial, there was always noise, making the living conditions more complicated, because besides the heavy work throughout the day, it might have been difficult to properly sleep due to the lack of privacy and silence. Add to this the constant apprehension about the future... the perfect recipe for health deterioration. The privacy issue is also shown by lack of space to store personal belongings, as clothes and other objects are seen hanging around, even on the wooden structure of the barrack.

Despite the unwholesome condition of the place, the idea was to pretend that life was normal over there and that other camps would be the same. For that reason, a hospital was built, there was a school, a theatre, a small shop, and sports were played (Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork, n.d.).

In this period, besides the Central Refugee Camp in Westerbork, there were other work camps spread across the country, and despite being smaller, the condition at those camps was very similar to Westerbork.

*Figure 2* The interior of a barrack in Camp Westerbork



*Note.* Tekening uit Judendurchgangslager Westerbork. 'Westerbork'; (interieur barak). Deze tekening maakt onderdeel uit van een collectie van tien (waterverf)tekeningen. Location: Drenthe, Netherlands. (Image number: 185229. Collection: NIOD. Type: drawing). Author: Otto Birman. Copyright: NIOD. From: Beeldbank WO2 (n.d.). Amsterdam. (<https://beeldbankwo2.nl/nl/beelden/detail/d2110932-025a-11e7-904b-d89d6717b464/media/5254eebb-ffc7-7d84-a865-1cf457e8bd6b>)

### ***Other refugee camps in the country***

The Dutch government built working camps to house the unemployed from all over the country as part of job creation (Joodse Werkkampen, n.d.). Some of them were built many years before WWII (Joodse Werkkampen, n.d.). Between 1940 and 1943, a number of them were cleared to house Jewish forced labourers, which would, later on, be moved to Westerbork to be taken to concentration camps. There were more than 50 of those camps spread over 5 provinces (Joodse Werkkampen, n.d.). Two examples are Camp Molengoot, located in Collendoorn (Figure 3) and Camp De Fledders, located in Norg (Figure 4).

All these camps had a similar organization and structure, with wooden barracks, usually one story tall, arranged side by side, on land surrounded by barbed wire fences. The physical conditions of the camps were not always bad, in the opinion of former residents, but the living conditions, in general, were difficult. Lack of freedom to leave the camp, intense labour, almost no free time, exposure to extreme cold and limited amount of food are aspects commonly mentioned in letters written by them, as in Harry de Metz's testimony, written in 1942, about camp De Fledders (testimony translated from Dutch version):

*"The camp leader is a strict and fair person, and I believe that we have not been badly off in that respect. (...) The entire camp is surrounded by barbed wire, there is no freedom of movement at all. So 0 hours off per week. We are not allowed to receive parcels, smoker's cards have been taken away, and we eat very little. (...) It is a deserted place with not a house in sight. It's all so strange and deserted, we have to get used to it, and that will be difficult. Of course, we are not allowed to receive visitors at all. And it's just like military service here. Everything modelled and on the clock."*

(Joodse Werkkampen, n.d.)

**Figure 3** Camp Molengoot



Note. 11962Wm. Copyright: Joodse Werkkampen. From: Joodse Werkkampen (n.d.).  
(<https://joodsewerkkampen.nl/overzicht-joodse-werkkampen/molengoot>)

*Figure 4* Camp De Fledders



Note. 11941Wm. Copyright: NDAC / Joodse Werkkampen. From: Joodse Werkkampen (n.d.).  
(<https://joodsewerkkampen.nl/overzicht-joodse-werkkampen/de-fledders>)

The barracks housed dozens of people in a single hall, without individual privacy, sharing space and diseases with others. Sometimes there was a separation between dormitories and the dining hall. The surroundings of the dwellings were completely muddy, and the land around them was cultivated by those who lived there. Harry Italiaander described in 1942 the conditions of camp De Beetse, located in Westerwolde (testimony translated from Dutch version):

*"The camp consists of eight large barracks, each for fifty people. These barracks are divided into two, one part dining room and the other part dormitory. (...) The dormitory consists of fifty bunks, on which a straw bag and pillow and five blankets each, but despite that it is still cold and we go to bed with socks on and a hat on our heads. The barracks look very nice from the outside, but on the inside they are draughty, cheerless rough wooden chains with no decorations. Everyone has their own locker. There is also a washroom in each barracks, but unfortunately there is no water at the moment due to frost. We get light through a wood gas generator."*

(Joodse Werkkampen, n.d.)

Figure 5 depicts the dining room of camp De Beetse, where people would get food, with no possibility for cooking by themselves, and sit together to eat. The room had board games apparently, showing that this was also the place where workers would spend some free time. As Jewish forced labours started to arrive in larger numbers, the living conditions gradually became worse, due to the measures imposed by the nazis against them. As told about camp Molengoot, jews were forced to do the same work as other people, but they got less food at the end of the day. In addition, the rules became much more stricter and censorship took place (Joodse Werkkampen, n.d.).

*Figure 5* The dining room of camp De Beetse



Note. 11732 Small. Copyright: Joodse Werkkampen. From: Joodse Werkkampen (n.d.). (<https://joodsewerkkampen.nl/overzicht-joodse-werkkampen/de-beetse>)

During the Second World War, the reception of refugees – mostly Jews – was very informal, carried out by citizens and philanthropic institutions. The lack of government accountability and the economic and social consequences of the war directly influenced the precariousness of the infrastructure, which limited their independence and favoured the spread of diseases due to the lack of hygiene. The lack of privacy restricted each person's individuality and, certainly, influenced the safety of women and children, who remained exposed to the risk of suffering various abuses. Unfortunately, these groups were placed in these places to be excluded, exploited, controlled and, in many cases, brutally killed in the end.

Later many of these camps were used to receive other groups, including individuals repatriated from the Dutch East Indies (Joodse Werkkampen, n.d.) and Moluccans (Joodse Werkkampen, n.d.).

### ***Is this how homeland feels like?***

Shortly after WWII, another large influx of people occurred in the Netherlands. The repatriation of individuals from the former Dutch East Indies (today Indonesia), after the country became independent from the Netherlands, brought around 400,000 people to the country between 1946 and 1958 (Schrover, 2022). The group included Dutch descendants and 'Indos' (Asian-European descendants). One group among them were the Moluccans, soldiers of the just dissolved Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL), which would be temporarily deployed to the Netherlands.

### ***The former Dutch East Indies repatriates and the contract pensions***

The group of Indos that moved to the Netherlands were actively dependent on the government (de Jong, 2021). Thus, to discourage the arrival of 'Eastern-oriented people', there was a strict selection procedure, and the justification for this was the housing shortage in the country at the time (Schrover, 2022).

The 'returnees' were allocated in different ways. Some were housed in vacant hotels or holiday parks, others were placed in former WWII work camps such as the camp in Westerbork (de Jong, 2021). The former concentration camps were then renamed as 'residential centers' (*woonoord*) or 'reception centers' (*opvangcentra*), and the camp in Westerbork even had its name changed to 'De Schattenberg' (Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork, n.d.). The denomination changed, but the living conditions remained practically the same. The barracks were still inhabited by dozens of people sharing the same spaces, and not all parts of the houses were bathed in sunlight. Unlike in concentration camps, in residential camps there was a little more freedom. For example, in De Schattenberg residents could shop in a small grocery store just outside the centre. However, they could not cook themselves, having hot meals served in the central kitchen (Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork, n.d.).

The camps were still located in remote areas, far away from the city and the Dutch society, hindering the possibilities of integration and life building. Consequently, the residents relied on each other and, mostly, on government provisions. The interior of those residential camps (Figure 6) resemble the barracks from WWII. One room shared with many people, bunk beds very close to each other, hence, no privacy and silence, babies sleeping together with everyone else, and almost no space for anything other than moving between beds. The limited space and lack of proper storage causes clothes to be hanging wherever was possible, favouring a messy and unhygienic situation.

In 1951, The Schattenberg was cleared for the Moluccans (Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork, n.d.). The Indian-Dutch initially living there were then placed in so called 'contract pensions', a reception modality that generated contradictory feelings in people (de Jong, 2021). On one hand, there were the individuals who opened their homes for sheltering the repatriates doing everything to treat them well, making sure that nothing was missing. On the other hand, there were the cases when hosts and guests would not get along for long, mainly due to cultural differences. Sometimes opportunistic hosts would abuse of their power and certain obligations would be neglected. Not to mention the often filthy condition of the living units provided, like the bungalows offered by some, with old rags as curtains and heaters giving off a kerosene smell (de Jong, 2021).

*Figure 6* Repatriates of the former Dutch Indies in a temporary reception location



*Note.* Twee vrouwen en hun kinderen uit het voormalige Nederlands-Indië bevinden zich na hun repatriëring in een tijdelijke opvang. In de kamer staan stapelbedden en hangt wasgoed te drogen. Date: 01/01/1956. (Image number: THO-1077. Access number: 4147. Collection: Collectie Cock Tholens). Author: Cock M. Tholens. Copyright holder: Lieneke de Boer, under license Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). From: Stadsarchief Rotterdam (n.d.). Rotterdam. (<https://hdl.handle.net/21.12133/1CD42782CCFF486EB4296C3EBBA5ABB7>)

### ***The reception of Moluccans***

The stay of Moluccans was supposed to be a temporary condition, so the government did not give any assistance to this group of circa 12,500 people, not allowing them to work and not registering them in any municipality (de Jong, 2021), a sure way to prevent them from integrating with Dutch society during their ‘short-term’ stay. But the temporary arrangement became permanent, and in the end there were thousands of Moluccans living in precarious – social and material – conditions, far from the Dutch population, in the remaining camps used years before.

Besides the former WWII working camps, Moluccans were also housed in newly built residential areas. Figure 7 shows Woonoord De Biezen, a residential area built for Moluccans. It shows that there was no urban setting on the camp surroundings, apparently being a lost terrain in the middle of nowhere. A site surrounded by trees, but with very few of them inside close to the barracks, a space lacking greenery and shadow. All cold and plain.

*Figure 7* Woonoord De Biezen



*Note.* Overzicht van barakken t.b.v. Molukkers op woonoord de Biezen. Ca. 1951-1975. Location: Barneveld, Netherlands. (Image number: BIEZ359. Collection: Fotocollectie Gemeente Archief Barneveld). Copyright: Frans Tomaso. From: Gemeente Archief Ede (n.d.). Ede. (<https://hdl.handle.net/21.12142/GEB469621>)

Even though the contract pensions were an interesting way of integrating the Indian-Dutch with the Dutch, they were not always home-like places where people would feel welcome. On the contrary, they were often an inhospitable and difficult environment, which separated the two groups more than it brought them together. The residential camps on reused WWII camps were no different from how they were in the past in terms of infrastructure, lacking privacy, appropriate space and sunlight, and quality of living. Their isolation from the rest of society remained a problem, but at least people were slightly more free to leave those areas to explore and they were not forced to work as previously.

Such situations sometimes raised attention and resulted in measures to guarantee the human rights of these vulnerable individuals, such as the United Nations (UN) Refugee Convention of 1951.

### ***The United Nations Refugee Convention (1951)***

The consequences of conflicts around the globe are always devastating for people, who lose loved ones, lose the security of their homes and everything else they had achieved until then. As if this destruction was not enough, when they flee to somewhere safer, in most cases conditions continue to be deplorable.

Observing the rising numbers of displaced people since World War I, and in an attempt to guarantee the human rights of the individuals in such vulnerable situation, several international entities created in 1951 a set of rules, laws and conventions that would protect those rights: the UN Refugee Convention, also known as the Geneva Convention. Together with

its 1967 New York Protocol it had been expanded and improved with regards to the protection and codification of refugees' rights and the international standards of treatment given to them (UNHCR, n.d.).

By signing the Convention, the Netherlands assumed the obligations outlined in the document, such as the principle of non-refoulment, which establishes that a refugee should not be returned to a country where their life and freedom will be threatened. In addition, it defines who is entitled to a refugee status and who is not, and the basic provisions to those considered refugees, such as housing, work and education. Obligations of refugees towards host countries are also established in the Convention (UNHCR, n.d.).

Although, nothing has been defined regarding the quality of the reception provisions (Dekker & Senstius, 2016, p. 9) This became apparent in the subsequent years, as the situation remained informal, with the government not directly assuming responsibility.

### ***The informal reception continues***

The post-war period was one of great tension in the Netherlands. Rebuilding the country and dealing with all the problems arising from this episode, such as the great housing shortage, influenced Dutch society's view of refugees and it was said that asylum policies had to be more restricted and rigorous, mainly after the arrival of thousands of repatriates from the former Dutch East Indies (Walaardt, 2023). But the amount of refugees arriving right after WWII were not that large, and in 1956, a total of 3,200 Hungarians fled a communist dictatorship and were openly welcome in the country, with large campaigns encouraging their reception (Schrover, 2022). Until the 1980s, the number of refugees seeking shelter in the Netherlands was manageable, and in addition to Hungarians, the country also opened its borders to refugees from Chile, Vietnam, Turkey, Ethiopia, Sudan and Sri Lanka (Walaardt, 2023).

### ***Hungarians in emergency shelters***

Who mostly campaigned in favour of the reception of Hungarians were companies across the country who saw their arrival as a solution for their shortage of personnel. The government, however, kept itself a step behind mainly due to the housing shortage affecting the state (Schrover, 2022). The reception and integration of the newcomers was arranged by privates, municipal government and local committees (Kerkhoven, 2022), and upon arrival they were temporarily placed in large halls such as the Jaarbeurshal in Utrecht, shown in Figure 8. From there, Hungarian refugees were taken to accommodation centres and hostels, to later end up in a municipality (Dekker & Senstius, 2016, p. 9).

The emergency shelters were built in industrial buildings, which generally have a ceiling height of at least 6 meters, which contributes to the lack of comfort, not to mention the internal temperature, which is not regulated in any way. The beds, usually bunk beds of dubious structure, were positioned side by side, with minimal space for movement between one another. As always, dozens of people sharing the same space, without any privacy and exposed to all types of noise and disturbances. From the image it can be seen that certain environments were delimited by thin partitions with openings that allowed free access between one space and another, again spotlighting the lack of privacy and security among refugees in such installations.

*Figure 8* Hungarian refugees sleeping at the Jaarbeurshal in Utrecht



Note. Ontvangst van Hongaarse vluchtelingen te Utrecht. Gereedmaken Jaarbeurshal. Date: 13/11/1956. Location: Utrecht (city), Utrecht. (Image number: 908-1401. Collection: Fotocollectie Anefo. Author: Joop van Bilsen / Anefo. Copyright: Nationaal Archief, CC0.. From: Nationaal Archief (n.d.). Den Haag. (<http://hdl.handle.net/10648/a952a740-d0b4-102d-bcf8-003048976d84>)

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, newcomers had to register at the nearest Immigration Office and undergo interviews, being subsequently received by local institutions, churches and voluntary organizations. In 1979, these organizations united to form the Dutch Refugee Council Association - *VluchtelingenWerk* (Walaardt, 2023). Refugees usually got some benefits, but they had to figure out by themselves what to do and where to go, leading to extremely overcrowded contract pensions by the 1980s. The arrival of the Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka, in 1984, opened wide the chaos of the reception system, leading to the establishment of asylum seeker centres as known nowadays (Walaardt, 2023).

### ***The shout of the Tamils and the 'bed-bath-bread' policy***

Unlike the Hungarian refugees of 1956 and the Vietnamese boat refugees who came in large numbers in the 1970s (Walaardt, 2023), Tamils fleeing violence in Sri Lanka did not have the same luck. As the number of asylum requests increased, policies became more restrictive and many Tamils had their applications denied. As there was no pre-disposition on the part of the government to accept this group, mainly because of the misconception that they were

economic migrants<sup>2</sup> (Walaardt, 2023), Tamils were “thrown” around, without any assistance or benefits, living in overcrowded and inhospitable pensions. In addition, many were exploited by landlords and badly influenced by criminals who lived in their surroundings (Schrover, 2022).

*Figure 9* A group of Tamils in a pension in Amsterdam



Note. Enige honderden Tamils, vluchtelingen uit Sri Lanka, in pensions en kraakpanden, enige Tamils in een huis in Amsterdam Oost. Date: 18/02/1985. Location: Amsterdam, Noord-Holland. (Image number: 933-2405. Collection: Fotocollectie Anefo.) Author: Rob Bogaerts / Anefo. Copyright: Nationaal Archief, CC0. From: Nationaal Archief (n.d.). Den Haag. (<http://hdl.handle.net/10648/ad434788-d0b4-102d-bcf8-003048976d84>)

The overcrowding in pensions is depicted in Figure 9, where a tiny room apparently houses several men. They sleep in beds that are practically stuck together. In the centre of the room there is a table with chairs, next to the beds and with no room to properly move around. This kind of situation is extremely uncomfortable physically and mentally, because there is no room, freedom or privacy to carry out any other activity that makes the residents independent or that encourages their socialization with other people in society, such as inviting friends over or having romantic partners.

The lack of government assistance has a great influence on the fate of people who go in search for better living conditions in an unknown country, being a decisive factor in the direction these people take and how they integrate into society. However, it is important to emphasize that the physical environment interferes greatly on the way people strive after moving to a completely different culture. It has consequences on people's health due to the

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<sup>2</sup> An economic migrant is “a person who leaves their country of origin purely for economic reasons that are not in any way related to the refugee definition, in order to seek material improvements in their livelihood” (European Commission, n.d.).

quick and easy proliferation of diseases in cramped environments like these, a problem that affects people's daily lives, since they usually also cannot count on medical assistance.

This condition of helplessness changed as discontent with the differentiation made between Tamils and other refugees was externalized. Thus, in 1985 the Temporary Residence Regulations for Tamils (RvvT), also known as the 'bed, bath and bread' arrangement<sup>3</sup>, was created specifically for that group. The RvvT granted a benefit in money, food and clothing, but forced Tamils to remain on the pensions stipulated by the government. Meanwhile, the remaining refugees received social assistance benefits and could live wherever they wanted (Dekker & Senstius, 2016).

This resulted in intense protests by the Tamils, who even set fire to some of the pensions where they lived (Vooren, 2023), an action that triggered the launch of the basis for the first asylum seekers regulations in the country.

### ***The regulation of the reception of asylum seekers***

The protests of the Tamils set off the creation of the first regulations for the reception of asylum seekers, leading to the opening of the first four official asylum seeker centres in the country (COA, n.d.).

#### ***The reception regulations***

The National Asylum Seekers Reception Regulations (*Rijksregeling Opvang Asielzoekers - ROA*) was officially implemented in 1987 and applied to all asylum seekers, obliging municipalities to arrange housing for asylum seekers that were still on the process of getting refugee status in the Netherlands (ACVZ/ROB, 2022). But it became increasingly difficult to find housing for all the applicants that came on the following years, thus many people ended up in asylum seeker centres, the so called *asielzoekerscentra* (*azc's*) (Schrover, 2022). The increase in the number of applications resulted in the creation of more *azc's*, which are spread across the whole country. The asylum procedure became increasingly time consuming, and every time more people stayed in the *azc's* for longer periods (Schrover, 2022). With the housing shortage, the flow of people from *azc's* to municipalities was also every time harder, even the housing of refugee status holders was limited in this shortage context. So, the ROA was abolished in 1997 (ACVZ/ROB, 2022).

#### ***Reception in asylum seeker centres***

*Azc's* were deliberately placed in remote areas, to limit as much as possible the integration of newcomers (Schrover, 2022). One of the four first *azc's* opened in the country was in the city of Luttelgeest, and it was located in a bungalow park that was empty for 7 years at least (Dekker & Senstius, 2016, p. 18). Even being very simple, the condition of this place does already look more humane than other places used previously to shelter asylum seekers. The room depicted in Figure 10 shows that the structure of the reception facilities were becoming more liveable, with more natural light coming in and lighter surfaces creating a more pleasant

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<sup>3</sup> Nowadays, the 'bed-bath-bread' provisions (*bed-bad-brood voorzieningen*) are shelters offered to rejected asylum seekers while they wait for the return to their home country. There they get a bed, shower and food (RefugeeHelp, 2024).

atmosphere. Plants are seen hanging around and there is a fireplace in the back, indicating that potentially more care is being put into it.

*Figure 10* Azc in a bungalow park in Luttelgeest



*Note.* Opvang asielzoekers in bungalowpark bij Luttelgeest (Noordoostpolder) Date: 05/11/1987. Location: Luttelgeest. (Image number: 934-1244. Collection: Fotocollectie Anefo. Type: negative black/white). Author: Rob C. Croes / Anefo. Copyright: Nationaal Archief, CC0. From: Nationaal Archief (n.d.). Den Haag. (<http://hdl.handle.net/10648/ad65e28e-d0b4-102d-bcf8-003048976d84>)

Other centres founded in 1987 show an improvement in the quality – still not ideal – of the infrastructure of reception. An example is the former monastery that became an azc in the village of Sweikhuizen. A [photo](#) of the dining room there, which can only be visualized via the online Utrecht Archive due to copyrights, illustrates that the spatial quality has improved significantly over the years. The dining and recreation room looks organized and clean, with large windows allowing for a great amount of natural light in, making it a more pleasant environment to have meals. Although, apparently meals are served in a central kitchen on the back, depicting a lack of freedom for residents to cook for themselves.

Another [photo](#) from the Utrecht Archive, on the contrary, shows an asylum seeker using the kitchen of a shelter in Utrecht in 1988. Stoves and fridges are visible, showing that people can prepare their own meals, which is an important factor of independence and freedom, mainly in such a constrained and controlled environment.

Even though more centres would open as the number of applications would increase (Schrover, 2022), azc's were constantly deactivated if the number of applications decreased. But the numbers suddenly grew exponentially again, with no time left to build new centres, causing the well-known "refugee crises". It is at this moment that neglect comes to the surface and inhumane situations occur, with people living for many days in emergency camps without

minimal adequate infrastructure and exposed to many vulnerabilities. An example is the Luttelgeest azc itself, which in 1993 had an emergency camp built in its terrain, where around 500 people shared 65 tents for 3 weeks (NOS, 2015). In Figure 11, asylum seekers are in an open field, queuing to receive food under a tent, exposed to constant discomfort and lack of appropriate infrastructure.

*Figure 11* Asylum seekers queuing in emergency camp in Luttelgeest, 1993



Note. 1993: Asielzoekers in de rij voor een maaltijd in het tentenkamp in Luttelgeest. Copyright: ANP. From: NOS Nieuws (16/09/2015). (<https://nos.nl/artikel/2058036-al-vaker-tijdelijke-kampen-voor-vluchtelingen-in-nederland>)

Despite the limited evidence shown, it is observed that the implementation of regulations to structure the reception system for asylum seekers in the Netherlands proved to be effective with regard to the physical infrastructure available for these individuals in the 1980s. What seems to have worked against it were the moves that caused azc's to be constantly closed and reopened, without properly following the flow of refugees that sometimes decreased, but quickly grew again, generating consequences that, as always, hit the weakest side. And this was just the beginning of a long journey of repeating the same mistakes.

### ***The centralized reception system***

In the 1990s, the influx of asylum seekers rose significantly due to the Yugoslav Wars. It is estimated that approximately 70,000 refugees from former Yugoslavia came to the Netherlands between 1991 and 1999, however some went back (Schrover, 2023). This was by far the largest group of refugees in the 1990s, but not the only one. Among others, refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Somalia also arrived in that same period (Schrover, 2023), adding up on the surprisingly large numbers. These groups faced a system that was improving, but still had many flaws.

### *The consequences of a bouncing influx*

As mentioned previously, the system was not able to follow the inconstancy of the number of applications, leading to overcrowded reception locations. To cope with the shortage of shelter, the government tried out with host families, but the few cases in which privates gave shelter to refugees did not end well. So they opted to provide shelter spaces in hotels, schools and barracks, where the control over asylum seekers and over provisions for them was easier to handle (Schrover, 2023). An example of the barracks installations can be seen in Figure 11. By that time, the Dutch society was divided, with large campaigns in favour of refugees and large protests against them (Schrover, 2023).

*Figure 12* Asylum seeker in the bedroom of an azc, 1993-1996



Note. Afbeelding van een Bosnische asielzoeker in het Asielzoekerscentrum Utrecht (Joseph Haydnlaan 2) te Utrecht. Date: 1993-1996. (Catalogue number: 400814. Type: photo). Author: J. Lankveld. Copyright: Het Utrechts Archief. under license CC BY 4.0) From: Utrechts Archief (n.d.). Utrecht. (<https://hetutrechtsarchief.nl/beeld/C948CA0C541F5B6987FE7313E8EE1633>)

The physical aspects of the reception infrastructure did not change much throughout these years, but of course, not every azc was the same and some emergency measures took place, as mentioned before. Figure 12 shows a bedroom in an azc in Utrecht, between 1993 and 1996. Compared to the conditions faced by the Tamils in the pensions, the spatial condition improved. People have their own lockers (even though it looks quite small) and the space looks clean and organized. Unfortunately they still have to share their accommodation with strangers sleeping very close to each other. The beds are very simple and the mattresses look quite thin. It would be an understandable situation if this was really something temporary. The main issue is that dozens of refugees live in these accommodations for years, even after having received their refugee status.

### ***Foundation of the Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers (COA)***

Amid all the chaos, in 1994 the reception of asylum seekers was centralized under the umbrella of a single body: the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (*Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers* – COA). Until then, asylum seekers were being received by municipalities and accommodated by them in the azc's spread across the country, and this changed as the government became responsible for the reception process and infrastructure (material and immaterial) and municipalities were responsible for arranging housing for those who got a residence permission (COA, n.d.).

The COA is an independent agency for asylum reception falling under the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers Act (1994) (COA, n.d.). Changes in policies and influx over the years led to modifications in the spatial infrastructure provided by COA, which has its main location in Ter Apel. This is the largest Refugee Centre in the Netherlands and the starting point of the asylum procedure.

### **Ter Apel: the (re)starting point**

The city of Ter Apel, located in the north of the Netherlands, in the province of Groningen, has got a shelter for people coming from other places for many years. In the 17th century, the Kruisheren monastery used to open its doors to pilgrims and travellers. Centuries later, the monastery would be used as a shelter for Belgian refugees during the First World War (Meijer, n.d.) (Oud Ter Apel, n.d.). But it was only in the 1990s that Ter Apel really began its journey to become the “gateway” for asylum seekers in the Netherlands.

Location of Ter Apel in the Netherlands



### ***The first spatial reception infrastructure... for those who were not welcome***

In 1995, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – NATO decided to leave its depot established in Ter Apel for years, vacating a large building that could get a new use. The withdrawal of the NATO facilities was followed by the closing of another factory nearby the city, resulting on significant unemployment in the region (Meijer, n.d.). The sudden loss of working positions and the emptiness of large industrial halls, together with the overcrowded refugee shelters across the country, resulted in the opportunity to contribute to the cause of refugees, providing space for shelters and, at the same time, generating new jobs. So, in 1996, the former NATO depot began to house the first Departure Centre, where rejected asylum seekers would be placed to be prepared for return to their home countries (COA, n.d.). Thus, the history of the Refugee Centre in Ter Apel did not start beautifully as a place to receive the people who would later be welcome to integrate the Dutch society. Instead, it started off as the place where those who were not welcome to do so would be accommodated until the day of departure.

### ***When trends change, infrastructure changes too***

As time passed, the centre in Ter Apel began to also accommodate people who were in different phases of the asylum procedure, on a then so called Research and Reception Centre (*Onderzoeks- en Opvangcentrum - OC*), and circa 800 people were placed in caravans next to the NAVO depot. The location started to become a more important and central place in the immigration/refugee chain, receiving a Judicial Institutions Service penitentiary in 1997, and an office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) in 2001 (COA, n.d.).

The war in former Yugoslavia produced a large flow of refugees in 1999, and to cope with that, Ermelo and Ter Apel shelter circa 2,000 in tent camps (COA, n.d.).

The ever changing number of asylum requests and the shifting pictures observed, such as the increasing number of women and minors between refugees (Walaardt, 2023) required changes and expansions on the infrastructure over the years, culminating in an important asylum complex in Ter Apel. In 2010, with the start of the improved asylum procedure made by the COA (COA, n.d.), distinctions were made between '*central reception location – col*' and '*process reception location – pol*', both available in the Ter Apel complex, together with shelter for unaccompanied minor foreigners (amv) and a restrictive location (vbl) (COA, n.d.).

In Figure 13 part of the living units of the Ter Apel location in the 1990s can be seen. They were apartments made of wooden slats. Underneath the staircase there are bikes parked. Apparently, residents could live a reasonably normal life, getting around in the same way as the Dutch do, coming and going on their bikes and parking them in front of their houses. There are also some plants in front, which makes the environment a little less hostile, although it is difficult to predict this condition when such a small fragment of a much larger context is analysed. These shelter facilities and all other buildings in that terrain ended up being demolished when the Masterplan COA Ter Apel was realized, in 2015.

*Figure 13* Living units at the COA Ter Apel in the 1990s



Note. Woonunits Ter Apel jaren negentig. From: Van NAVO-depot tot asiel complex, by Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers, n.d. Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers (<https://www.coa.nl/nl/van-navo-depot-tot-asielcomplex>)

### ***A brand new built environment for the COA Ter Apelerven***

A new agreement with Vlagtwedde city council in 2010 consolidated the basis for the COA Masterplan in Ter Apel, a large modern complex that would be built to replace the old facilities (COA, n.d.). The new complex, called COA Ter Apelerven, which began construction in 2015 and was officially handed over in April 2019 (COA, n.d.), offers an extensive program (Figure 14) serving a maximum of 2,000 people. It was designed by the Dutch architecture office De Zwarte Hond and developed by BAM.

Figure 15 and Figure 16 show that the centre is structured like a small village, with houses in the unmistakable Dutch style of red bricks rowhouses. Between the houses, as also seen in Figure 14, there is a large open area with sports fields and space for recreation. It can be seen that quality standards have increased considerably, with a spatial infrastructure that allows more engagement in development and leisure activities, contributing to the improvement of the quality of life in there. In addition, the space has a school and medical centre, which are crucial facilities for the development and progress of people and maintenance of their health in such a delicate context.

**Figure 14** The program of the Refugee Centre Ter Apelerven



Note. [The program of the Refugee Centre Ter Apel]. From: COA-opvang Ter Apel, by De Zwarte Hond, n.d. De Zwarte Hond (<https://dezwarthond.nl/projecten/coa-opvang-ter-apel/>)

**Figure 15** Sports field



Note. [The sports field at the Refugee Centre Ter Apel]. From: COA-opvang Ter Apel, by ScagliolaBrakkee / Pit Film, n.d. De Zwarte Hond (<https://dezwarthond.nl/projecten/coa-opvang-ter-apel/>)

**Figure 16** Housing units



Note. [The housing units of the Refugee Centre Ter Apel]. From: COA-opvang Ter Apel, by ScagliolaBrakkee / Pit Film, n.d. De Zwarte Hond (<https://dezwartehond.nl/projecten/coa-opvang-ter-apel/>)

In each of the housing blocks there is a communal service area, equipped with washing machines (Figure 17), which enables residents to maintain a routine as normal as possible, also encouraging their independence. The housing units offer an apparently well-equipped kitchen (Figure 18), with refrigerators, stove, sink and dining table, which are essential facilities, especially for those who are building a new life on a foreign country.

Unfortunately, an infrastructure like this is not enough when many other centres are necessary to handle the number of people in need of them, but are constantly being shut down. The centre in Ter Apel houses maximum 2,000 residents, but the number of individuals in COA accommodations ranges around the 20,000, meaning that the majority of asylum seekers are allocated in other cities, which sometimes do not offer the same quality in facilities.

Since the 1990s, the large centres that housed refugees were dismantled under the reason that it was too expensive to keep a centre with no use (Schrover, 2022). Sometimes a centre would close because the contract with the municipality has ended (COA, n.d.). It was also said that the relocation of status holders to municipalities would happen faster if the space in *azc's* was limited (Schrover, 2022). However, this is not what has been happening. On the contrary, the flow of status holders from *azc's* to housing in municipalities happens on a low pace, and centres are shut down either way, generating huge deficits of shelter when the amount of asylum seekers increases again. Episodes such as in 2015 and in 2022 illustrate the consequences of this catastrophic dynamic.

**Figure 17** Laundry room



Note. [One of the laundry rooms of the Refugee Centre Ter Apel]. From: COA-opvang Ter Apel, by ScagliolaBrakkee / Pit Film, n.d. De Zwarte Hond (<https://dezwartehond.nl/projecten/coa-opvang-ter-apel/>)

**Figure 18** The kitchen in one of the living units



Note. Een keuken in het azc. From: Nieuw asielzoekerscentrum in Ter Apel geopend, by RTV Drenthe (19/04/2017). (<https://www.rtvdrenthe.nl/nieuws/120890/nieuw-asielzoekerscentrum-in-ter-apel-geopend>). Copyright: RTV Drenthe.

### ***The fluctuating numbers and the infrastructure that (does not) keep up with them***

In 2015, the Netherlands experienced an unprecedented crisis, primarily due to the Syrian war, with over 43,000 people seeking asylum, almost double the previous year's count (CBS, 2016). Municipalities were prompted nationwide to provide space for 750 people on the same day (NOS, 2015). Two years before there were already signs of a great influx of asylum seekers, with a long-time-not-seen 1,600 applications received in only one month (COA, n.d.). For that, centres reopened, but others closed. And so it went until 2015, when the crisis blew up, with an average of around 1,000 asylum requests processed every week. Emergency shelters were then deployed by municipalities in pavilions and unused buildings (COA, n.d.).

However, the worst was still to come. With the war in Ukraine in 2022, 35,535 people requested asylum in the Netherlands (UNHCR, 2023). Even though the total number of asylum applications that year were smaller than in 2015, the reduced reception capacity resulted in at least 700 people sleeping outside under tents for days in unsanitary conditions (InfoMigrants, 2022).

The inhumane situation, depicted in Figure 19 and Figure 20, goes completely against the minimum standards of reception established by the European Union Agency for Asylum – EUAA (former EASO) in their guidance on reception conditions (EASO, 2016). Within many, the guidelines oblige the provision of a minimum of 4m<sup>2</sup> per person in accommodation, and this is far from being the case in this circumstance. People were left sleeping all together on the dirty and cold ground with no proper beds, exposed to humidity and other weather conditions. Furthermore, it is possible that the separation of single people of opposite genders did not occur, as established in Indicator 6.2 under Standard 6 of the EASO Guidance, which requires protection so that access of individuals of opposite genders is not permitted in the respective facilities. If there was no separation between men and women, women would be dangerously exposed to the risk of gender-based abuse.

After this episode, the Dutch Council for Refugees filed a lawsuit against the Dutch government, citing precarious conditions and health hazards (InfoMigrants, 2022). Even though people do not have to sleep outside in Ter Apel anymore, in 2023 many of them had to spend the night on the waiting room of the IND office there, sleeping on chairs and mattresses (NOS Nieuws, 2023), not being able to shower, brush their teeth and exposed to the risks of no appropriate fire-safety measurements (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2024).

Sad outcomes like these result mainly from the lack of reception places in the country, that are nothing less than the naked truth of a policy that rejects these people in extreme vulnerability. Until February 2024, when the Spread Act (*Spreadingswet*) came into effect (Rijksoverheid, 2024), there was no law obliging municipalities to provide shelter, it was believed that this would happen willingly, voluntarily (Boer, 2024). But the rejection of part of the population over the reception of refugees and the construction of new *azc's* put a lot of pressure on politicians, meaning that this has not been happening. These situations show how much the system – and us as society – failed, reaching the point where no traces of humanity were left to minimally support people in one of the most developed countries in the world.

The fact that Ter Apel is the only registration centre (*aanmeldcentrum*) in the country, makes the situation even more complicated, overcrowding the place extremely fast and resulting on people being exposed to unacceptable living conditions like those in 2022.

**Figure 19** Asylum seekers sleeping under tents in Ter Apel in 2022



*Note.* Images of people camping outside the Ter Apel asylum reception center has sparked fury across The Netherlands. From: Housing crisis, politics behind Dutch asylum disaster, by Vincent Jannink, n.d. DW (31/08/2022). (<https://www.dw.com/en/dutch-asylum-center-disaster-housing-crisis-and-politics-to-blame-for-ter-apel-crisis/a-62979784>). Copyright: Vincent Jannink / ANP / picture alliance

**Figure 20** Asylum seekers spending the night under tents in Ter Apel



*Note.* People sleeping in front of the Ter Apel asylum center in the Netherlands. From Netherlands: Court rules accommodation for migrants is inadequate, by Vincent Jannink, n.d. InfoMigrants, 21/12/2022 (<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/45550/netherlands-court-rules-accommodation-for-migrants-is-inadequate>). Copyright: Vincent Jannink / ANP / IMAGO.

### ***“Noodopvang is de nieuwe norm”***

Normally, in case of overcrowding of the reception system, (crisis)emergency shelters ((crisis)noodopvang locaties – (c)no) are deployed in several municipalities. The aim is for people to stay as short as possible in these locations, because they are temporary shelters with lower level of quality and facilities, where residents have even less privacy, freedom to cook or opportunity for daytime activities (COA, n.d.). However, according to reports by VluchtelingenWerk, people stay every time longer in this type of shelter, with the *cno*'s being addressed as “the new norm” (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2024).

The [last report](#) published by VluchtelingenWerk in 2024 informs that currently there are 31,000 people living in 150 emergency shelters and 59 crisis emergency shelters for even one and a half year (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2024). The report shows the living conditions of those (non-)temporary shelters, which are often deployed in boats, hotels, halls, tents, containers or old buildings. From the 20 shelters investigated, the spatial infrastructure mostly lacks minimum privacy for residents and proper sanitary facilities.

The lack of privacy is usually experienced in the sleeping areas, which sometimes do not comply at all with the EASO standards, such as the requirement of sleeping areas with walls, ceiling, window and door, or the minimum 4m<sup>2</sup> per person with an individual bed. In 12 of the shelters the lack of privacy is reported, and it is a result of the often cramped rooms shared between many people. Single men sharing the bedroom with strangers report not being able to decide at what time to sleep or wake up, or not being able to pray as they wished (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2024). Even between family members of different ages there are privacy concerns. Since the sleeping areas do not have partitions, children, teenagers and adults often spend entire days together in a room. Although, there is no requirement regarding partition walls in sleeping units on the EASO guidance.

In large halls the discomfort is even greater. In addition to the lack of privacy, there is no natural light hitting the sleeping areas, just fluorescent lights that are only turned off at night and affect residents as there is no ceiling over their heads on the sleeping units, as provided for in the EASO guidance. Therefore, some residents tie sheets around their beds, for protection from light and from other people (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2024).

Sanitary facilities do not meet the standards of EASO in half of the shelters in case. Sometimes toilets and showers have to be shared by too many people, becoming filthy and most of the time working poorly or not at all. In addition, these facilities are often located outside and far away from the sleeping areas (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2024).

The impact that physical infrastructure has on the lives of people living in such circumstances is enormous. As seen, even the simplest thing as being able to go to sleep at any time or the simple need of some alone-time in a more intimate place is completely obstructed by the way the environment is structured. And, in some cases, the fault lies not only with the institutions that do not follow the norms, but also with the norms themselves that do not provide a solution to certain problems. What remains is the conviction that the reception system is most of the time far from providing the dignified living standard provided for in the Reception Conditions Directive.

## Conclusion

The reception of refugees in the Netherlands initially took place through initiatives by local residents and institutions such as churches and NGOs. Without any regulation, depending on the goodwill of a portion of the population, and without assistance from the government, the reception took place in a very informal way. During World War II, when there was a small contribution from the government through the provision of land for the construction of the first refugee centre in the country, the main intention was to maintain control over the newcomers. And the precarious living conditions in the work camps where refugees were housed put their health, integrity and safety at risk, especially women and children.

Gradually, the government began to get involved in issues related to refugees, but more as a way of maintaining control over them and deliberately preventing their integration, building shelters and housing for these groups in remote locations, without access to public services and far away from the local population. The government support, which was far from enough, often left people adrift, without support to build their new lives and become contributing and well-integrated citizens. Some forms of reception through the integration of refugees with locals did not work, as in the case of the pensions, which were not always managed by good-natured citizens and ended up becoming a big nightmare, mainly due to overcrowding, precarious facilities, negligence on the part of hosts and problems caused by culture shock.

As laws began to recognize and guarantee basic rights to refugees, the situation evolved. The creation of the ROA provided a leap forward in terms of support infrastructure upon arrival, as it was the basis for the creation of asylum seeker centres as we know them today. During the period in which the ROA was in force, municipalities were obliged to provide housing for newcomers, something that actively contributed for this happening. Although the housing shortage led to a collapse of the reception system as a whole, resulting in the abolition of the ROA in 1997 and overcrowding of refugee centres, accountability through legal means made a big difference. It was clear that, until the establishing of the Spread Act in February 2024, there was no judicial support guaranteeing that municipalities fulfil their role in offering shelters and/or housing in an amount capable of supporting the often overwhelming numbers of asylum seekers entering the country. Therefore, stricter laws are needed with regards to the responsibility that must be assumed by nations and their respective municipalities.

State control of the reception system is not always problematic. In fact, it is important to guarantee a quality standard in reception infrastructures that can be experienced by everyone, regardless of where in the country they are. But this only works with well-defined and, above all, humane policies and norms that consider people's individuality and the complexity in the context in which refugees find themselves. Although there are situations of neglect and non-compliance with norms and quality standards established by law, the norms themselves still require much improvement. The standards established in the current directive, for example, are not always well thought out, as is the case with sleeping premises which are not required to have individual partitions, generating privacy issues.

The lack of privacy has been one of the biggest problems since many years ago, at least since the Second World War. In the conditions experienced in shelters, people are unable to develop their individuality, and do simple and basic things in everyday life that require more intimacy, such as praying, meditating, inviting friends, or even dealing with their own sexuality.

This lack of privacy comes mainly from a physical infrastructure that results in several people sharing the same environment, even being complete strangers, from different cultures, or of different ages. It is a constant discomfort.

As previously stated, the reception infrastructure is deliberately designed to be temporary. But what is temporary often becomes permanent, which is the current case in emergency shelters where people have had to live for a year and a half or more. In the case of the COA Ter Apel, the infrastructure in general, especially new buildings, meets the requirements in the EASO Guidelines. What seems to be the biggest problem is the lack of space for all the asylum seekers arriving daily. With a limited number of places at its main location in Ter Apel and a completely overcrowded national reception system, humanitarian disasters like the one in 2022 start to happen. Furthermore, the centre in Ter Apel also suffers the consequences of being the only registration centre for new asylum seekers. It is clear that the current system cannot support the constant variations in the number of new asylum applicants.

Centuries of experience with the reality of refugees, not only from the Netherlands, but from several other countries, have not yet been able to establish a system capable of withstanding the fluctuating numbers of people arriving in search of safety, due to inhumane actions by the society itself and its dominant masses. As seen, this is not the first time that numbers have increased in an alarming manner, having had negative effects on the national reception system and drastic consequences for people. And, unfortunately, it will not be the last one.

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