

Amsterdam

Sustainable and customised support from the start.

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Picture: © Municipality of Amsterdam

1. Abstract & Takeaways

Key Takeaways:

1

Rather than being on the lookout for “new” innovative approaches as funding organisations dictate, Amsterdam’s municipal actors focus on fine-tuning tried and tested methods.

2

Municipal actors in Amsterdam are proud that most staff working on refugee policies have firsthand experience with refugees, such as intake interviews.

3

Amsterdam’s impacts go beyond the city level, due to a mixture of public statements supporting migrant rights, and silent diplomacy with the more restrictive national government.

What is unique about the city?

Sustainable and tailor-made support: Amsterdam has longstanding experience with welcoming migrants and refugees. Since 2016, the municipality's inclusion measures for refugees – most notably the 'Amsterdam Approach' – have attracted the attention of policymakers and experts across the Netherlands and beyond. What sets Amsterdam apart from other progressive Dutch municipalities, is its focus on intensive, sustainable, and customised support to recognised refugees, starting from the moment of their first arrival in the city.

What is the focus of local migration policies?

Inclusion for documented and undocumented migrants alike: The 'Amsterdam Approach'¹ focuses on inclusion measures and tailored support for recognised refugees. The other pillar of Amsterdam's migration policy is its 'Undocumented Migrant Programme'². The city is particularly active on refugee and undocumented migrant social rights, access to social infrastructure, and on enabling refugee involvement in policy implementation.

What are the key factors?

Proactive city officials: Pragmatic, legal, and humanitarian considerations underpin Amsterdam's approach. Amsterdam's proactive administration and political officials cooperate with the city's civil society groups. These groups also pressure the municipality, and propose new and sustainable solutions for a more inclusive city for all Amsterdammers.

What are the most outstanding results so far?

Increased labour market participation and a programme for undocumented migrants: Labour market participation among Amsterdam's refugees increased from 31% in 2017 to 37% in 2020³ which is about 10% above the national average. Moreover, labour market participation of refugee women in Amsterdam (19%) is higher than in any other major Dutch city (5-11%), as of 2020. In 2018, the newly installed municipal executive board announced plans to secure the city's exemplary projects for recognised refugees through structural funding. They also announced an ambitious Undocumented Migrant Programme, which involves undocumented migrants and 25 civil society organisations. The story of Amsterdam's Undocumented Migrant Programme shows how the municipality, after years of struggles, showed a new political commitment to strengthening cooperation with civil society groups to jointly coordinate shelters.

¹ <https://www.amsterdam.nl/zorg-ondersteuning/ondersteuning/vluchtelingen/amsterdamse-aanpak/>

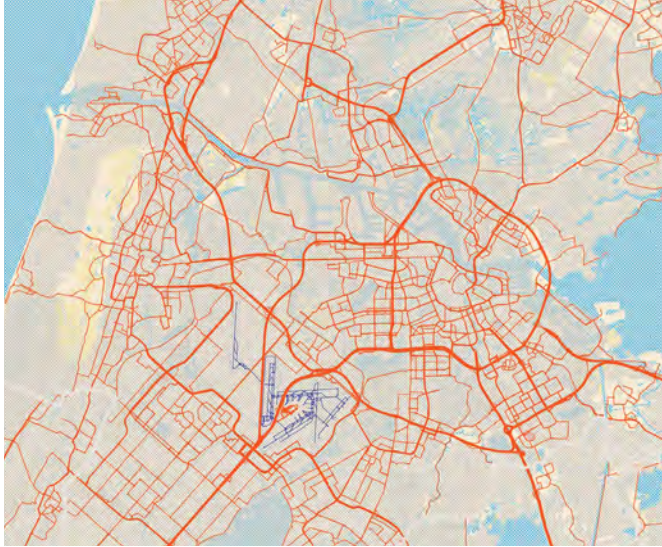
² <https://www.amsterdam.nl/zorg-ondersteuning/ondersteuning/vluchtelingen/24-uur-sopvang-ongedocumenteerden/>

³ <https://data.amsterdam.nl/artikelen/artikel/vluchtelingen-monitor-2020/27c6d0df-a64e-47ce-9011-7114d0a58599/>

Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

In the Netherlands, Amsterdam is at the forefront of municipal advocacy. For instance, it has focused on housing recognised refugees and relocating refugees from European border camps. Beyond Dutch borders, Amsterdam works through city partnerships with Athens, Barcelona, and

Berlin. The city's path to becoming a city of solidarity cannot be traced to just one historical milestone. It is a general commitment articulated by its (deputy) mayors and consolidated through international partnerships, network participation, and (silent) diplomacy within the Netherlands and beyond.



Population

862,965

Location/ region

North Holland, capital city

Mayor (party)

Femke Halsema (Green party)

2. Local background and context

Since 2016, the 'Amsterdam Approach'⁴ has captured the attention of policymakers and scholars, with a programme of inclusion measures and tailored support for recognised refugees. The other pillar of Amsterdam's migration policy is constituted by its 'Undocumented Migrant Programme'⁵. Together, they cover a broad range of measures and projects. The city is particularly active on refugees' and undocumented migrants' social rights, access to social infrastructure and on enabling their involvement in policy implementation. Independent research institutes⁶, national government actors⁷ and civil society organisations have recognised Amsterdam's progressive approach and its local solutions to shortcomings of national policies, such as the Dutch Civic Integration Act.

The 'Amsterdam Approach' to refugee inclusion came as a direct response to the critical commentary of experts⁸ on national asylum policies in 2016. These experts lamented the loss of valuable time due to long asylum procedures and the sequential structure of integration policies. These policies focussed first on civic integration before moving on to accessing work and education. Amsterdam was one of the first Dutch cities to develop an integrated approach to address housing, work, education, participation, and language learning simultaneously. Pragmatic, legal, and humanitarian considerations underpin the city's approach. Municipal political officials have declared Amsterdam a human rights city⁹, and cite human rights as the basis for some urban policies. They also highlight how Amsterdam has a special responsibility, as the Dutch capital, to contribute to refugee reception.

4 <https://www.amsterdam.nl/zorg-ondersteuning/onders-teuning/vluchtelingen/amsterdamse-aanpak/>
 5 <https://www.amsterdam.nl/zorg-ondersteuning/onders-teuning/vluchtelingen/24-uur-sopvang-ongedocumenteerden/>
 6 <https://www.kis.nl/sites/default/files/bestanden/Publicaties/factsheet-amsterdam-aanpak-statushouders.pdf>
 7 <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/downloads/document?id=e9788d4c-76e5-4ded-85a9-10a74222c2d5&title=Position%20paper%20Gemeente%20Amsterdam%20t.b.v.%20hoorzitting/rondetafelgesprek%20`Werk%20voor%20asielzoekers%20en%20statushouders'%20d.d.%2026%20maart%202018.pdf>
 8 <https://english.wrr.nl/bi-naries/wrr-eng/documents/policy-briefs/2016/02/16/no-time-to-lose-from-reception-to-integration-of-asylum-migrants/PB004e-No-time-to-lose.pdf>
 9 <https://www.amsterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/volg-beleid/diversiteit/>
 10 <https://www.amsterdam.nl/en/policy/ambitions/coalition-agreement/>

Inclusive Framing: Opportunities for all

Rather than framing inclusion measures in terms of integration, they are frequently linked to the municipality's ambition¹⁰ of creating a just city with equal opportunities for all. This positive frame extends to refugees, who city actors often refer to as new 'Amsterdammers'. While migration-friendly branding is not uncommon in Dutch cities, a striking feature of Amsterdam's approach is a 'story wall' on the municipal website¹¹. This story wall disrupts dominant framings that de-humanise refugees or portray them as helpless by amplifying refugee voices in the city without containing them within humanitarian narratives of charity and need. It also offers a glimpse of the broad spectrum of local inclusionary initiatives, including partnerships with local entrepreneurs, organisations, companies, and institutions like schools. Besides various practical objectives (see 3.1), Amsterdam's approach therefore also re-frames migration debates through refugee voices and reflections.

The story wall's positive framing sets the city apart from other Dutch cities. Still, it is only a small part of the Amsterdam's Approach. The city has committed itself to annual monitoring¹² of its policies for refugees, cost-effectiveness analyses¹³ of specific programmes, and popular support measures¹⁴ for these policies. Scholars and research institutes¹⁵ have also studied and evaluated its inclusion measures¹⁶. Some of Amsterdam's solutions and recommendations have been adopted nationwide, for instance by the advisory body of the Dutch government, the Council of State, in their expert opinion on the reform of the Dutch Civic Integration Act¹⁷.

The Amsterdam Approach

In 2016, the city started its Amsterdam Approach programme with 11 dedicated case managers, supported by a team of policy advisors. The municipality has since expanded this team, which currently comprises approximately 120 employees, including policy advisors, case managers, and job hunters. Like other municipalities, Amsterdam received financial assistance from the central government after increased refugee arrivals since 2015. It has applied for EU funding (e.g., ESF) for some of its measures¹⁸, but consistently allocates its own resources to develop and sustain innovative measures. In 2016, the municipality allocated 10 million euros to develop the Amsterdam Approach. After the left-wing local government coalition took office in 2018, it announced it would allocate 10 million euros annually to the Amsterdam Approach. Since 2019, the municipality has also allocated similar figures for inclusion measures for irregular migrants.

NGOs and citizen-led initiatives, such as refugee rights organisations, play a key role in implementing and developing the city's migration policies. The Dutch Refugee Council, in particular, is a central actor as it has been contracted by the municipality to provide social support and coaching.

In the process of developing the Undocumented Migrant Programme (§3.3), over 25 civil society organisations and activist groups were involved,

¹¹ https://www.amsterdam.nl/zorg-ondersteuning/ondersteuning/vluchtelingen/verhalen/?pager_page=1

¹² <https://data.amsterdam.nl/artikelen/artikel/vluchtelingen-monitor-2020/27c6d0df-a64e-47ce-9011-7114d0a58599/>

¹³ <https://www.binnenlandsbestuur.nl/Uploads/2017/9/bijlage-MK-BA-Amsterdamse-aanpak-statushouders-.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://data.amsterdam.nl/artikelen/artikel/vluchtelingen-monitor-2020/27c6d0df-a64e-47ce-9011-7114d0a58599/>

¹⁵ <https://amsterdam.raadsinformatie.nl/document/8381353/1/09012f9782ce191f>

¹⁶ For a recent report in English, see the OECD (2018) report 'Working Together for Local Integration of Migrations and Refugees in Amsterdam'.

¹⁷ See Annual Report Amsterdam Approach (2020), p.6 and the summary of the Council of State.

¹⁸ <https://www.oecd.org/publications/working-together-for-local-integration-of-migrants-and-refugees-in-amsterdam-9789264299726-en.htm>

¹⁹ <https://refugeetalenthub.com/>

²⁰ <https://refugeecompany.com/>

²¹ <https://en.new-bees.org/the-traineeship>

²² <https://boostamsterdam.nl/>

²³ <https://www.warmwelkomamsterdam.com/>

alongside 60 undocumented migrants. For the Amsterdam Approach (§3.1), the municipality also works together with various NGOs and social enterprises such as the Refugee Talent Hub¹⁹, Refugee Company²⁰, NewBees²¹, and neighbourhood specific-initiatives and foundations such as Boost²² and Warm Welkom²³. Without the continued popular support for inclusion measures, political support, resources and the involvement of civil society, Amsterdam's approach to inclusion measures for its new Amsterdammers would have been like building castles in the air.

List of civil society organizations and initiatives

A list and short description of civil society initiatives, which are working together with the city administration or city government²⁴:

- [Amsterdam City Rights](#): independent think-tank by and with undocumented and refugees in limbo advocating for human rights, a project of Here to Support foundation
- [ASKV Steunpunt Vluchtelingen](#): an Amsterdam-based organization that provides legal assistance and social support to rejected refugees in the Netherlands
- [BOOST Amsterdam](#): community organisation and social meeting space where Amsterdammers with and without a refugee background meet and work together on inclusion
- [Dutch Refugee Council](#)
- [Here to Support](#): Here to Support engages in projects initiated by a group of artists and theorists in close cooperation with refugees in limbo. Here to Support does not primarily focus on providing humanitarian assistance, but it strives for emancipation of undocumented migrants.
- [HVO-Querido](#): a care organisation operating in Amsterdam and the wider region that offers shelter, supervised housing and daytime activities for people who (temporarily) cannot get by on their own
- [In My Backyard Foundation](#): Amsterdam community of newcomers and locals
- [NewBees Foundation](#): NewBees matches newcomers to traineeships with local entrepreneurs and organizations.
- [Refugee Academy](#): The Refugee Academy is an expertise lab of the Institute for Societal Resilience of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam dedicated to furthering the goal of refugee inclusion in society.
- [Refugee Talent Hub](#): an employer initiative that brings refugees and employers together with paid jobs as the goal
- [Refuge Start Force](#): network, community & recruitment platform in the Netherlands for newcomers, locals, organisations and companies
- [Support Group for Women without a Residence](#)
- [Ykeallo Foundation](#): offers practical support and an introduction to a local network for your refugees from East-Africa in Amsterdam.
- [Task group Council of Churches Amsterdam](#)

²⁴ Given the active involvement of civil society, social enterprises and culture and arts organisations compiling a complete overview is almost impossible. This list gives a general overview of the main organisations and initiatives.

- **We Are Here**: We Are Here is a collective of undocumented migrants established in 2012 to give visibility to and fight for the rights of undocumented migrants in the city.
- **World House**: The World house is a centre for information, advice- and schooling for people without a staying permit.
- **Warm Welkom Foundation**: introduces newcomers to their new neighborhood in a warm and accessible way by being a link between them, local residents and neighborhood organizations.

3. Selected local approaches

3.1 The ‘Amsterdam Approach’: inclusion measures for recognised refugees

The Amsterdam municipality has developed inclusion measures for recognised refugees since 2007. This longstanding experience enabled its municipal actors to immediately identify the shortcomings of national asylum and civic integration policies after the increased arrivals of refugees in 2015. In 2016, the Amsterdam municipality showed leadership by developing a programme of intensive, sustainable, and tailored support measures for recognised refugees, as part of its Amsterdam Approach. This support programme is time-sensitive in two ways. First, by already offering support to refugees who are still in first arrival asylum centres in the city. Second, by providing different types of support simultaneously, rather than consecutively, such as ‘dual trajectories’ that combine work experience and language training. What these attributes – ‘intensive’, ‘sustainable’, and ‘tailored’ – mean concretely is outlined below.

Intensive: complementary support measures from the start

The measures are ‘Intensive’ in that refugees in Amsterdam can receive up to three years of social support (counselling), starting from the moment of status recognition. The coaching focuses on developing a customised action plan, with short- and long-term objectives. The municipality was one of the first to negotiate an agreement with the Dutch Centralised Reception Authority (COA), ensuring refugees can start when they are still staying in refugee reception centres. The programme focuses on complementary measures in different domains (work, education, health care, housing, participation). ‘Intensive’ also entails ‘personal’, because dedicated case managers and social service workers support recognised refugees in Amsterdam. These case managers collaborate with the Dutch Refugee Council, job hunters, income consultants, and other specialists. In many Dutch municipalities, case

managers coach up to several hundred refugees. In Amsterdam, they counsel a maximum of 50 people at a time, to ensure personalised support.

Sustainable: Employment with long-term perspectives

In policy debates about (local) migration governance, concerns around the sustainability of policy measures loom large. Here, Amsterdam prioritises long-term and sustainable approaches over quick fixes. Job hunters support refugees in their search for long-term or fixed employment contracts, befitting their educational and professional backgrounds. In the Netherlands, municipal coaching normally ends when recognised refugees find employment and are no longer entitled to social assistance.²⁵ In Amsterdam, refugees can continue their coaching trajectory after they find work. The municipality monitors refugees' long-term job prospects and compares them to those of other residents. It also documents whether refugees receive temporary or fixed contracts and if they are still employed after 6, 12, and 24 months. The annual reports highlight how the labour market participation of Amsterdam refugees increased from 31% in 2017 to 37% in 2020.²⁶ By contrast, labour market participation by refugees in other major Dutch cities ranges between 22-29%, excepting Eindhoven. That said, tough times are approaching in the pandemic's wake. As 39% of the refugees that work in Amsterdam work in the hospitality and food sector, municipal actors expect they will be greatly affected. This also casts a shadow over the city's aim to have 50% of recognised refugees find sustainable work within their first three years.

²⁵ The emphasis on long-term contracts is also increasingly a concern in other progressive Dutch municipalities. That said, there are many municipalities where refugees are required to take up any work no matter how precarious and temporary. In the Netherlands municipalities are responsible for providing social and financial assistance to recognised refugees. In some municipalities, there are debates within the municipal council about the financial burdens of supporting recognised refugees. In these cases, the municipal policy often focuses on fast-tracking labour market integration, even if this means that refugees have to take up precarious and temporary jobs.

²⁶ <https://data.amsterdam.nl/artikelen/artikel/vluchtelingen-monitor-2020/27c6d0df-a64e-47ce-9011-7114d0a58599/>

²⁷ <https://www.kis.nl/sites/default/files/bestanden/Publicaties/barrieres-mogelijkheden-arbeidsparticipatie-vluchtelingenvrouwen.pdf>

²⁸ https://www.tweedekamer.nl/sites/default/files/atoms/files/atRIA_2019_gendersensitief_beleid_-_illustratieve_voorbeelden.pdf

Tailored individual support and attention for (extra) vulnerable groups

Still, Amsterdam's approach stands in stark contrast to many other Dutch municipalities, where refugees are often instructed to accept any work, even if undervalued, unskilled, and precarious. Many Dutch municipalities lack the resources or political and administrative will to offer refugees the time, space, and professional assistance to find suitable work or education tailored to their professional/education backgrounds. In Amsterdam's context, this tailoring also refers to group-specific considerations, such as gender sensitivity.

Dutch research²⁷ consistently shows that refugee women do not have the same employment opportunities, and that men often receive more support from municipalities. The latter is an unintended but problematic consequence of family unification and Dutch social welfare policies. Since 2016, more than half of refugee women arrived in the Netherlands through family unification procedures. If their partners were employed at the time of their arrival, there was neither a 'need' nor a legal requirement by the municipality, to offer them professional job coaching or other assistance (e.g., guidance to vocational training or higher education). As their partners work, they are not entitled to social assistance and by extension, some of these inclusion measures.

Amsterdam was one of the first municipalities to recognise this problem and to ensure that partners can benefit from inclusion measures. Recognising the need for more gender-sensitive coaching,²⁸ the municipality also developed a training program for case managers to sensitise them to the risks of gender stereotyping and cultural essentialism – essentialist understandings of ethnic groups that perpetuate us/them thinking.²⁹ Other measures include ‘buddy’ projects for refugee women, strategic partnerships with organisations specialised in gender inequality, and empowerment training. In 2020, the municipality expanded its current vocational training offer (that included various internships in the industrial, construction, and logistics sectors), through a more gender-sensitive, broader focus. Amsterdam city actors can be cautiously optimistic, as these measures appear to have yielded the first results:³⁰ labour market participation of refugee women in Amsterdam (19%) is higher than in any of the other major Dutch city (5-11%) as of 2020.

3.2 Amsterdam Administration’s Culture of Welcome: refugee perspectives on policy implementation and design

Building structural capacities and resources

Some of the most exemplary features of Amsterdam’s approach are also quite mundane. Rather than constantly being on the lookout for ‘new’ innovative approaches as funding organisations dictate, Amsterdam’s municipal actors focus on fine-tuning tried and tested methods. Amsterdam’s policy advisors and frontline social workers share office spaces, which enables quick adaptability to changing external environments. As one policy advisor puts it,³¹ “ministry officials never see the struggles of refugees first-hand or experience the smell of sweat that lingers in a consultation room, where a Syrian man just spoke about his wife who is stuck in a camp like Moria and cannot reunite with her partner”. It is this proximity and insight that the city also brings to conversations with national policymakers and ministry officials. Municipal actors in Amsterdam are proud that most staff working on refugee policies have first-hand experience with refugees, such as intake interviews.

The refugee advisory group

The municipality has also taken direct action to build capacity and diversity in its local administration. In 2016, Amsterdam was one of the first Dutch municipalities that supported setting up a Refugee advisory working group (in Dutch, a Refugee Sounding Board Group). This advisory group issues recommendations on policy design, implementation, and communication. Some of its members include Amsterdammers who arrived as refugees decades ago, bringing institutional memory and long-term perspectives. Policy advisors in Amsterdam note that the city’s Refugee Advisory group proved essential to the municipal response to COVID-19. They enabled early recognition of new challenges and facilitated the delivery of timely and translated information about

²⁹ For more information on the risks and challenges of cultural essentialism, see the [Council of Europe guide](#) on ‘the Intercultural City’.

³⁰ <https://data.amsterdam.nl/artikelen/artikel/vluchtelingen-monitor-2020/27c6d0df-a64e-47ce-9011-7114d0a58599/>

³¹ Interview for this study, November 2020 senior policy advisor municipality of Amsterdam.

³² <https://www.resilience-institute.nl/en/blog/refugee-academy/towards-a-structural-place-for-refugee-perspectives-in-policy-making-english-summary/>

restrictions and support. After the 1980s, refugee advisory councils were common on a national level, but this approach was ultimately abandoned in 2011 and never widely implemented in Dutch municipalities. Refugee advocates and academic experts³² have repeatedly criticised this gap, and in 2020 called for a more structural place for refugee perspectives in policymaking.

The Young Professionals Traineeship Programme

In 2017, Amsterdam launched a Young Professionals Traineeship Programme³³ (YPPS) for recognised refugees. As part of this paid two-year programme, trainees complete several internships within the municipal organisation. Besides becoming acquainted with the municipality and its work culture, they receive customised language lessons at the University of Amsterdam. Through the programme, the municipality also hopes to inspire local entrepreneurs to offer similar traineeship opportunities. Finally, the municipal administration has worked on building capacity and diversity within the broad team involved in the Amsterdam Approach. Approximately one-third of the account managers and job hunters have a first- or second-generation refugee ‘background’. Refugee perspectives are thus incorporated at all steps of the policy cycle.

3.3 Amsterdam’s support for irregular migrants: a fresh start against a troubling horizon

Since 2012, Amsterdam provided support for irregular migrants in the form of Bed, Bath and Bread shelters. Pragmatic and humanitarian considerations underpin this emergency social assistance, but it also came as a response to the visible activism of undocumented migrants in the city as part of the ‘We Are Here’ movement.³⁴ We Are Here is a collective of undocumented migrants established in 2012 to give visibility to and fight for the rights of undocumented migrants in the city. The Amsterdammers squatters’ movement, NGOs, churches, and activists supported groups like We Are Here. While We Are Here opposed exclusionary national policies, it struggled for legal recognition and citizenship and made claims in Amsterdam, often addressing the Amsterdam city government. For many years, We Are Here and the municipality were involved in a conflict over support for undocumented migrants beyond emergency assistance. This conflict sometimes resembled a cat-and-mouse game, as We Are Here would self-organise shelters for irregular migrants in squatted buildings across the city, which ultimately would be shut down by the municipality and the police.

Balancing demands of local activism and national restrictions

Since 2018, Amsterdam’s political officials and policymakers created a political environment that is more open to these struggles and claims, including to those of more recent initiatives (Amsterdam City Rights, Here to Support³⁵), but the city also remains embedded in restrictive

33 <https://www.amsterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/werkenbij/traineeships/traineeship/>

34 <https://wijzijnhier.org/tijdslijn/squatting-and-the-undocumented-migrants-struggle-in-the-netherlands/>

35 <https://www.amsterdamcityrights.org/>

36 <https://usercontent.one/wp/www.amsterdamcityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/lezing-pim-fischer-2-september-2019.pdf>

national citizenship regimes. Amsterdam municipality has therefore received compliments and criticism³⁶ for the way it has positioned itself regarding the increasingly restrictive national government and the citizenship struggles of undocumented migrant groups. Amsterdam's current 24-hour shelter for undocumented migrants continues to embody some of these tensions but has also been recognised for finding exemplary solutions.

Sustainable perspective for irregular migrants

In 2018, Amsterdam's newly elected left-wing coalition government announced plans to create 24-hour shelter places for 500 undocumented migrants³⁷ as part of its broader Undocumented Migrant Programme. In these shelters, migrants can stay for up to 18 months and work on a sustainable solution through professional assistance. This may include obtaining legal residence, migrating on to another country, or returning to their country of origin. Irregular migrants are protected from detention during their stay in these shelters. As most Dutch municipal shelters for irregular migrants only provide emergency social assistance, Amsterdam has joined a small group of cities with Utrecht, Groningen, Eindhoven, and Rotterdam. Amsterdam's shelter is one of five pilot 'National Immigration Facilities (LVV)³⁸ supervised by the Repatriation & Departure Service of the Ministry of Justice and Security, in cooperation with municipalities.

Involving refugees in policy processes

An exemplary feature of Amsterdam's approach to the LVV is the direct involvement of 60 undocumented refugees and over 25 NGO and activists' groups, through working sessions at the start of Amsterdam's Undocumented Migrant Programme. The municipality subsequently adopted a facilitative rather than coordinating role, and enabled a coalition of NGOs and activist groups to take charge over the implementation of the LVV shelter. This external coordination platform³⁹ works together closely with municipal actors and its activities are funded by the municipality and ministry as part of the LVV pilot. In 2020, Here to Support, one of the civil society organizations that supports undocumented Amsterdammers, proposed to establish an Undocumented Advisory Board⁴⁰ to continue the direct involvement of undocumented persons in the implementation of the LVV project.

While Amsterdam's shelters for undocumented were large-scale in 2019 compared to the decentralised accommodations offered in Eindhoven and Utrecht since late 2019, it has since closed almost all the larger facilities and opened smaller shelters. In terms of numbers, Amsterdam has committed to supporting the largest number of undocumented migrants (500) of any Dutch city. This is also in part why the municipality has set a maximum period (18 months), with the idea that over time more undocumented persons receive professional support. It is a strategic, but contested decision, because of the five pilot municipalities, only Amsterdam and Rotterdam (6 months) set a maximum term. Activists and NGOs noted that in 2020 it often took a long time before a

37 https://assets.amsterdam.nl/publish/pages/927542/uitvoering-splan_24-uursopvang_ongedocumenteerden.pdf

38 <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2018/11/29/akkoord-over-landelijke-vreemdelingenvoorzieningen-lv-v%E2%80%99s>

39 <https://rqa.nl/>

40 <https://www.heretosupport.nl/klankbordgroep>

case manager was appointed and tailored support was provided to LVV residents, in part due to the Covid-19 pandemic. They have therefore expressed their concern with this 18-month limit.

A shelter for refugees with Dublin status

Another striking feature of Amsterdam's approach was the additional commitment to opening a shelter for people who are otherwise refused in other shelters, namely people with a 'Dublin' status. This group of 'Dublin claimants' includes asylum seekers who have entered the Netherlands through another EU country and who, according to the Dublin regulation and Dutch immigration authorities, should have applied for asylum in this 'first' European country. Amsterdam relied on its own resources (3.3 million euros) to finance this pilot between July 2019-April 2021. The impetus behind it was in part pragmatic, to offer shelter and emergency social assistance for six months, but also to search for a sustainable solution. In 2019, the municipality offered to examine to what extent this group could be incentivised to return voluntarily to their Dublin country or country of origin. In December 2020, city officials announced the pilot would not be continued and the shelter closed in April 2021. They reached this conclusion⁴¹ after an evaluation of a Dutch independent research centre⁴² showed the pilot's core objectives (return to Dublin country) were not realised, although this report noted other positive effects. City officials expressed their disappointment, but also their commitment to continue temporary emergency assistance to vulnerable people with Dublin status. Amsterdam continues to develop its own approach, even if it is sometimes hemmed in between the strict demands of the ministry and the request of NGOs (see quote below), who point towards the European Convention of Human Rights for unconditional access to shelters.

41 <https://amsterdam.raadsinformatie.nl/document/9436170/1/09012f978320c212>

42 <https://www.verwey-jonker.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Evaluatie-pilot-Dublinclaimanten.pdf>

43 Here to Support engages in projects initiated by a group of artists and theorists in close cooperation with refugees in limbo. Here to Support does not primarily focus on providing humanitarian assistance, but it strives for emancipation of undocumented migrants. To make them seen, heard and essentially, to put them in charge of their own lives again.

“The asylum policy under the Dutch Minister of Migration Broekers Knol is tough, offers no space for compassion, and is inconclusive. Many people end up on the streets without shelter, which goes against the European Convention of Human Rights and its commitment to guaranteeing shelter and healthcare for all. This pilot, aimed at guiding people during their return to their Dublin country, was under great pressure. We recognise this and understand that the city of Amsterdam alone cannot resist it. It is not only up to Amsterdam, but also other Dutch cities to ensure that human rights are not violated. The humanitarian safety net is lacking everywhere, because access to shelter is made conditional everywhere, resulting in the exclusion of many.”

Response of “Here to Support”⁴³ initiative to the termination of the Dublin pilot, December 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the plight of undocumented Amsterdammers more pressing and visible than ever. The struggles of Amsterdam's different undocumented communities, including those without a refugee background, garnered increasing public and political attention in the pandemic's wake. In 2021, the Amsterdam Ombudsman published a report on the experiences of undocumented Amsterdammers, which the municipality is currently drawing on to further develop its Undocumented Migrant Programme .

3.4 ‘Free in, free out policy’ – Safe reporting and other protections against the detention of irregular migrants in Amsterdam

In Amsterdam, the police have developed the only known national example of official ‘firewall protection’ for victims of crime in Europe, as part of their ‘Free in, Free out’ policy. The name ‘firewall protection’ was first coined by Sanctuary cities in the US and Canada. Here, it refers to policies that enable migrants, who have been victims of or witnesses to a crime, to enter a police station to report the crime, and be guaranteed to freely leave without being arrested or detained on account of their irregular status.⁴⁴ While Amsterdam’s ‘Free In, Free Out’ firewall policy began in 2013, it was extended to other Dutch municipalities and introduced nationally in 2015. Scholars⁴⁵ point towards some of its limitations, most notably that the policy exists largely as an informal arrangement. But overall, they recognise it as a European best practice for safe reporting.⁴⁶ These studies⁴⁷ also highlight how these measures stem from both pragmatic and rights-based arguments. Less known, but equally pertinent, are the municipality’s arrangements⁴⁸ with the local police to not patrol around local organisations that provide legal counselling and other assistance to irregular migrants.⁴⁹ This practice is based on an informal decision of the police senior management and agreement with the mayor, and is also in place in a few other Dutch cities (e.g. Utrecht).

4. Advocacy and network activities

⁴⁴ Timmerman, R. I., Leerkes, A., Staring, R., & Delvino, N. (2020). ‘Free In, Free Out’: Exploring Dutch Firewall Protections for Irregular Migrant Victims of Crime. *European Journal of Migration and Law*, 22(3), 427-455.

⁴⁵ <https://cris.maastrichtuniversity.nl/en/publications/free-in-free-out-exploring-dutch-firewall-protections-for-irregul>

⁴⁶ Timmerman, Leerkes & Staring (2019), p.18. *Compas Report*

⁴⁷ <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/CMISE-Migrants-with-Irregular-Status-in-Europe-Guidance-for-Municipalities.pdf>

⁴⁸ <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/ce0b/e277f7ef30c89273f147f043a90ded836112.pdf?ga=2.250112006.1007758223.1609258676-1594188808.1606481990>

⁴⁹ *Policy memo*, 26th of May 2020, Amsterdam municipality

Amsterdam has historically been a nexus of trade and migration. The city’s path to becoming a city of solidarity cannot be traced to just one historical milestone. It is a general commitment articulated by its (deputy) mayors and consolidated through international partnerships, network participation, and (silent) diplomacy within the Netherlands and beyond.

Close to home, Amsterdam’s policy advisors and political officials take part in various national networks and initiatives. A recent example is the ‘Dutch Coalition of the Willing’, a solidarity campaign of Dutch municipalities that mobilised for the relocation of unaccompanied minors from refugee camps in Greece. Amsterdam officials are particularly active within this campaign and collaborate with other progressive municipalities to exert pressure on the Dutch Ministry of Migration to change its position on Greek relocation requests. Policy advisors and political officials also work together on mobilising support through governance networks, such as the Dutch Association of Municipalities (VNG). Amsterdam’s municipal actors take part in other (ongoing) consultations

between the Ministry and municipalities, such as on support and shelters for irregular migrants, a more integrated and sustainable approach to housing recognised refugees, and developing the new Dutch Civic Integration Act.

“Amsterdam wouldn’t be the city it is today without the contribution of migrants throughout its history. A proactive role in the welcoming and reception of refugees is an integral part of the identity of the city and its citizens. On a European level it is of paramount importance that cities are facilitated in working together to help people in need that are seeking asylum. We therefore underline the message in this statement and support the five demands that are being made.”

Statement by deputy-mayor Rutger Groot Wassink, Palermo 24th of June 2021

International solidarity between European cities

Beyond Dutch borders, Amsterdam collaborates with Barcelona, Berlin, and Athens to exchange knowledge in migration governance. In 2014, Amsterdam’s political officials signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Athens, through which the cities address challenges related to refugee reception. Barcelona has intensified collaboration as part of the Fearless Cities initiative and municipalist movement. This resulted in, for instance, a shared letter by mayors Halsema (Amsterdam) and Colau (Barcelona) in September 2020, in which both mayors urged for greater solidarity—stating their cities are ‘ready to help.’

Apart from these city-to-city partnerships, Amsterdam’s policy advisors and political officials participate in various international networks. Amsterdam chairs the EU Partnership On Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees and is a member of the Fearless City network and municipalist movement. The city has joined the Solidarity City network and Eurocities’ working group on Migration and Integration. Amsterdam is also a signatory to different solidarity declarations, such as the Integrating Cities Charter,⁵⁰ Eurocities Statements on Asylum⁵¹ (2015) and Relocation of refugees from Greece⁵² (2020)

Beyond taking part, Amsterdam’s mayors have been an important driving force behind some of these partnerships and networks. Amsterdam chairs the EU Partnership on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees. Current mayor Halsema is known for taking a public role in migration matters. During her time as an MP and Green party leader, she published the essay ‘Nowhereland: a new light on Migration’. Since he took office, Deputy Mayor Groot Wassink, responsible for Social Affairs (including migration policy), has also positioned himself as an outspoken progressive city official and champion of municipalism.

⁵⁰ www.integratingcities.eu/integrating-cities/charter

⁵¹ urban-intergroup.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/declaration_capitals_mayors_meeting_2016_amsterdam_20160420-1.pdf

⁵² <https://eurocities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Public-Statement-from-European-Cities.pdf>

Silent diplomacy with the national administration

While Amsterdam’s political officials position their government as centre-left, national politicians in The Hague have expressed their concerns about what they see Amsterdam’s leftward drift. Still, this standoff between The Hague and Amsterdam should not be overstated. City officials have signed several solidarity declarations, but advocacy efforts for

the most part involve silent diplomacy. As deputy mayor Groot Wassink explains, Amsterdammers ‘tend to declare a republic and for The Hague, we are ‘the guy you love to hate’.⁵³ The everyday reality, however, is that Amsterdam’s policy advisors and political officials work together intensively and frequently in multi-level governance settings with the Ministry and centralised agencies (e.g., national immigration authorities).

The city’s translocal activities in migration governance reflect the challenges it faces and its commitment to creating a just city with equal opportunities for all. Amsterdam’s inclusion measures for refugees make it a pioneering municipality in progressive migration governance (see 3.1-3.3). The municipality’s political officials have positioned Amsterdam internationally as a capital city with a special responsibility, and tradition of solidarity. That said, ultimately their tone is pragmatic and poised, as illustrated by deputy mayor Groot Wassink’s commentary on the Amsterdam Undocumented Programme:

“I’ve never had the illusion that I could fix the failing asylum policy with this plan. The solution for that does not lie with the municipality. This plan is a step in the right direction, not a permanent solution, and people will always be left out”.⁵⁴

53 Interview (Dutch) with deputy mayor Groot-Wassink on grenze-loos.org, 1st of March 2019,

54 Ibid.

The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of 28 progressive, solidarity-based cities and their strategies in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful local approaches to their migration policies.

Moving Cities is a project from Seebrücke, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and Heinrich Böll Stiftung, funded by Robert Bosch Stiftung and Stiftungsfonds Zivile Seenotrettung and supported by many more initiatives.

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