

The elderly in exile

**Some findings regarding the
situation of older refugees in
the Netherlands**



ECRE

Good Practice in the Reception & Integration of Refugees

About the organisations...

Stichting **Bevordering Maatschappelijke Participatie - BMP** (The Foundation for the Promotion of Social Participation) is a Dutch project organisation operating both at national and European level. It was set up in 1986 as a supporting foundation for social action activities in the province of North Holland. Since 1992, BMP operates as an autonomous organisation aimed at promoting people's participation in the development of society. BMP is specifically oriented at following emerging social issues and developing methods which give people opportunities to realise their full potential as human beings, enabling them to take part on a equal footing in society's structure and development. BMP works with a permanent core group of four senior staff members who, if needed, are assisted by junior project advisers. The foundation board members are recruited from various social areas. BMP's activities are project based financed by national government departments, provincial authorities, local municipalities, the European Commission and private funds.

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) is an umbrella organisation for co-operation between European non-governmental organisations concerned with refugees. ECRE campaigns on behalf of its pan-European membership for humane and fair asylum policies. It also works towards establishing the highest standards of refugee protection and assistance in Europe, and to promote these good practices. ECRE is concerned with the needs of individuals who seek protection in Europe and contributes to the development of a comprehensive response to the global refugee problem. ECRE is a growing network, which has currently 73 member agencies in 30 countries. The work of ECRE is co-ordinated by the ECRE Secretariat, which is based in London. ECRE also maintains an office in Brussels, which is responsible for its activities vis-à-vis the institutions of the European Union.

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1. Introduction: a first study in the Netherlands

Between January 2000 and October 2002 a project named *Activerende verkenning naar de positie van oudere vluchtelingen* (Activating studies into the situation of older refugees) was carried out in the Netherlands. This project was developed by the *Stichting Bevordering Maatschappelijke Participatie (BMP)* (Foundation for the Promotion of Social Participation) at the request of a number of individual refugees and a few refugee organisations. The aim of the project was to:

1. Start an awareness process among older refugees regarding the meaning of ageing while in exile and the issues this involves.
2. Develop future actions for various public parties.
3. Start a subtle public debate about the situation of older refugees in the Netherlands.

Through this project BMP developed close contacts with Asylkoordination Austria who was the lead agency on older refugees in a project entitled "Good Practice in the Reception and Integration of Refugees – Analysing New Approaches in Policy and Practice" led by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). This publication is the result of that collaboration.

In this publication, a picture will be drawn based upon the results of the *BMP* study of the situation of older refugees. Attempts have been made to open up the Dutch experiences as much as possible to those interested from other European countries.

1.1 A study in three parts

The study in the Netherlands was carried out in three separate parts. First, interviews and group conversations were held with elderly from the Vietnamese, Eritrean, Ethiopian and Iraqi-Kurdish communities, who told their stories and ideas concerning ageing. This yielded a range of larger and smaller issues, which ageing refugees are confronted by. Second, city conversations were organised in four big cities in the Netherlands, namely *Amsterdam*, *Rotterdam*, *Den Haag* and *Utrecht* in order to discuss the results of the interviews and group conversations. Among others who had been invited to participate in the city conversations were local councillors, civil servants, refugee organisations and institutions in the field of social welfare services. It was examined in which way, on a practical level, they can pay attention to the situation of older refugees. Third, a national symposium took place in which the results of the study were weighed and judged on their implications for national policy.

They will never understand me because they don't have an impression of my world
(Iraqi-Kurdish refugee)

When *BMP* started the study there was hardly any awareness within the different refugee communities that refugees do become old too, and that ageing entails its own special issues for them. It was expected that the interviews and group conversations would lead to a cautious beginning of discussions about the elderly within their communities. But partly due to the efforts of the three interviewers from within the communities, it did not end with a cautious beginning. Instead, the discussion was actively taken up by several communities, and a large number of refugees eventually took part in the city conversations and the national symposium held on the 23rd of September 2002.

Not just the refugees proved to be sensitive to the subject of getting older - the enthusiasm of the organisations and institutions that participated in the city conversations was high as well. Since then, actors have risen in each of the four cities, which have stated that they are willing to take further initiatives in order to be able to respond better to the needs of older refugees. In addition, the city conversations have revealed a number of essential issues, which will need to be further developed in the future. One of these issues concerns the expectations, which governments and institutions may and should have about organisations run by refugees themselves. Another issue addresses the question of how to make sure not to lose sight of the international dimension, which is so determinant for the situation of refugees.

The national symposium was organised by *BMP* and by *Vluchtelingen Werk Nederland* (Refugee Aid the Netherlands), an ECRE member organisation that dedicates itself to the support and interests of refugees. One of the most important conclusions drawn from the symposium was that Dutch integration policy focuses too much on integration courses and the obligation to learn the Dutch language. This approach is not very suitable for older refugees. They consider it to be particularly important to be recognised as a person with its own history and its own experiences. Integration programmes that are individually made, and in which older refugees are paired with permanent Dutch professional coaches and/or volunteers seem a better approach for older refugees.

In the current political discussion, the word integration is much talked about. However, sometimes it seems as if integration refers to unilateral assimilation. *BMP* and *Vluchtelingen Werk* (Refugee Aid) consider it to be a two-sided process, which occurs at both individual and collective level, with a focus on the specific features that are connected with the refugee being. The main characteristics of the integration process are participation, communication and emancipation.

2. Who are the older refugees?

The group of older refugees in the Netherlands is characterised by enormous diversity. There are not only large differences in cultural background but also in the level of education and the ability to cope with daily life. Older refugees come, among other countries, from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Bosnia and Chile. Most of them came to Europe at a relatively young age and are now becoming aware that they are ageing. A smaller group had to flee at middle- or old age. Little data exists on the exact number of older refugees. Generally, refugees are lost out of sight once they have completed their asylum procedure and have their own accommodation. The percentage of the elderly among refugees is estimated at about 15% in the Netherlands. It is to be expected that over the next few years this percentage will increase relatively quickly because the large number of refugees who are in their forties now will then join the elderly.

2.1 The triple task of ageing

According to the interviews and group conversations, and the sparse literature about this subject, refugees seem to face a triple task when ageing. First, they just like anybody else, have to deal with the loss of physical functions and relatives that ageing involves. Like everybody else, they also have to fit their past into their present life. Second, older refugees, just like older migrants, have to find their way in a culturally unfamiliar environment that ascribes different meanings to the concept of old and in which the elderly are treated differently than they are used to. Third, older refugees have to find a way to come to terms

with the often traumatic experiences they have endured before and during the flight, and sometimes during the asylum procedure as well - traumas which will often only be revealed later in life.

If you don't speak a language, you won't be able to communicate and to make contact and therefore you don't belong to society. (50 year-old Iraqi-Kurdish woman)

2.2 A spectrum of issues

In addition to this triple task of ageing, there is series of other issues which older refugees are being confronted with, such as:

- the relationship with their children who have turned Dutch
- feeling homesick for the own country
- diaspora of relatives over many countries across the world
- a poor income situation due to incomplete pension build-up
- the complexity of rules and procedures linked with legal residency, reuniting of the family, etc.
- little social recognition

Considering these issues, it is actually astonishing to realise the amount of resilience older refugees have even though they face many difficulties and much grief, and how high their desire to contribute to society is in whatever way they can.

3. Between grief and resilience

During the symposium "The elderly in Exile", which was held on the 23rd of September 2002 at the Kurhaus in Scheveningen, Saskia Moerbeek from BMP gave a short introduction. In this chapter you will find parts of her lecture.

3.1 Which groups of older refugees can be defined?

Apart from the country of origin, older refugees can also be classified into a number of other categories. A three-part division can be made:

1. Refugees who came to Europe at a relatively young age and are ageing here now. The number of refugees in this group will increase rapidly over the next years;
2. Refugees who had to flee at an older age and have been living in a European country for just a short period of time, or might even still be in the asylum procedure;
3. Elderly relatives, mostly mothers and/or fathers of refugees who are living here, who are brought over to Europe by their children who would not be able to look after them properly otherwise.

The *first category* is one that easiest spring to mind. Many people know somebody from this category who, for over 20 years sometimes, has been living in the host country. The *second category* is much more difficult to portray. The number of elderly concerned fluctuates constantly. Their lives are all about asylum procedures, possible deportation, the wish to be allowed to stay and feeling homesick for the country they had to leave behind. From the limited number of conversations that have been held with people from this category it seems that age, often without them realising it, is an important factor in their lives. The older they are, the larger the break in their lives will be, caused by their flight. Quite a past lies behind them and they carry a head full with experiences, which they can hardly express here and

which are very often considered as being irrelevant. For them, the switch to the new, to the situation of somebody who has to learn everything all over again in a new culture is often psychologically very difficult. Another issue relates to them being poorly motivated for mastering the new language and for getting acquainted with the new society. The prospect of getting a job is often very low and also because they have been in the host country for just a short period of time they obviously are strongly oriented towards the (political) situation in their country of origin. It is this group which runs the highest risk of becoming isolated.

Very little can be said about the size of the *third category*. Every refugee in Europe has considered the thought of bringing over his or her parents. Many of them have tried as well. Examples in which everything goes well and in which the elderly, although very old, do manage to secure a situation within the family can certainly be mentioned. But very often the elderly are just not being able to integrate. They do not speak the language, they cannot communicate with their grandchildren and they have totally different opinions from those of their relatives.

3.2 Individual differences

Besides these “group characteristics”, large individual differences also exist between older refugees. Many of them have been highly educated in the country of origin but have never been able to find a job at their level in the European countries. This affects their sense of self-esteem and at a later age their self-understanding as well. Others, in particular many women, never had the chance to become educated because of for example wartime conditions in their country or because of cultural, political and economical circumstances. Some have been able to come to terms well with the experiences faced during their flight, whereas others, especially at an older age, are being confronted with the traumas from the past.

3.3 Two paradoxes

When talking about older refugees it is important to keep in mind that large differences exist in background, length of stay, flight experiences, and level of education. The results of the study actually show two paradoxes regarding the group of older refugees: first, concerning the relation between individual and group, and second, regarding the relation between grief and resilience.

Regarding the relation between individual and group: the previous section shows that so many different factors are determining the situation of older refugees, that it seems as though it does not concern a group but only individuals. But these individuals come from cultures where one thinks more in terms of groups and one is not used to being approached as an individual. Moreover, a lot of similarities can be found in the situation of the elderly, so a specification as a separate group, which deserves distinct political attention in the field of living, care and social participation, seems justified. The first paradox of older refugees can in other words be described as them being individuals who especially need to be approached in group terms.

The second paradox concerns the relation with on the one hand problems, grief and loss, and on the other hand resilience, ambitions and self-awareness. It cannot be denied that the life of many older refugees has been marked by grief over what they have had to leave behind, and by pain because life did not turn out the way they had hoped for. On top of that come the many losses of relatives and other loved ones they have to cope with. Despite this difficult personal past, many refugees, and certainly the elderly too, show an enormous resilience. They want to do something with their lives and want to make the most out of the opportunities they have in Europe.

When the situation of older refugees is more or less objectively looked at, a sad image appears of people who are isolated and marked by life. It is this picture that appeals to sentiments such as "*we have to do something for those vulnerable people*". When older refugees themselves are speaking, it turns out that they do not want to be seen as pitiful people at all, on the contrary, they are aiming to apply their abilities and experiences in the society. The second paradox of older refugees also entails that their actual circumstances justify an appeal for help and additional care, but that their aspiration is to be recognised as a valuable human being who does not need more help than anybody else. Therefore two things are necessary. First, groups themselves should be given the opportunity to communicate with one another. Second, there should be an open and interested society, which is receptive to older refugees and their opinions, so as to better respond better to their needs.

3.4 Difference between older refugees and older migrants

Often the question is being asked what the difference is between the situation of older refugees and older migrants. On the basis of the study's results two fundamental differences can be mentioned. The first difference regards the social networks within the own group. For the older refugees, especially for those within the second and third categories, these are smaller and less branched. Therefore, the possibilities for older refugees to appeal for volunteer aid are very restricted. The second difference relates to the impact of the flight on life afterwards. Unlike migrants, refugees have been forced to leave their countries because of war, violence or political persecution. In practice, it appears that the experiences faced during the flight stay with people for the rest of their lives and are even stronger experienced as one becomes older. As a consequence of this and other factors, the relation to the country of origin is experienced completely different by older refugees than by older migrants.

4. Social participation: a vital condition

Older refugees run a high risk of becoming socially isolated, as despite their efforts many do not succeed in mastering the language of the host country. For elderly newcomers it is even harder to learn a new language, since the incentive linked to finding a job, often is not there for them. But, language is not the only problem. Cultural differences and prejudices are likewise barriers to integration. The BMP study indicates that older refugees who do speak the language, barely have contacts with native residents either. They often have the feeling that native people are not interested in them and the older refugees often do not understand the mentality of the native population either.

4.1 Few social safety nets

Most of the refugee communities are relatively small and the members often live far apart. Therefore, the social safety nets within the communities are often poorly developed. From the study it shows that most parents consider the relationship with the children to be the most important measure from which to judge their own well-being. When the children grow older, problems within the family do arise because, according to the parents, they behave too uninhibitedly and they do not show enough respect for the authority of the elderly. Once the children have left the house, sometimes little social life remains, even if the children try as hard as they can to give their parents some attention.

Every Wednesday morning we work as volunteers at the social office in the area. We help immigrants including Vietnamese... Sometimes we help the disabled in the neighbourhood. (68 year-old Vietnamese man)

All these circumstances cause older refugees to have few possibilities to shape their own life. The interviews and city conversations indicate that the isolation is often seen as deadly. Many yearn for a social life in which there is recognition for who they are.

4.2 Breaking the isolation

In the group and city conversations many suggestions have been made about ways in which the older refugees' isolation can be broken. A selection of these suggestions are:

- language courses aimed at the elderly
- possibilities to meet one another within in the own group
- exploring Dutch society
- excursions to Dutch caring facilities
- oral information regarding the situation and living conditions of the elderly
- possibilities to describe one's own course of life
- developing special programmes for the integration of older refugees

The policy regarding refugees has always been aimed at them coping on their own and finding their own way to the regular care institutions once the asylum procedure has been completed. Given the large social isolation faced by many older refugees, the question arises whether this policy does not lead to enormous social problems and whether other, more creative ways to accomplish communication with older refugees, might need to be developed.

5. Communication with assisted-living-institutions can be improved

The older refugees who have taken part in the *BMP* study struggle with several health problems. In some cases it concerns relatively severe conditions as a result of cerebral haemorrhage, cancer, heart complaints etc. Although some of them would definitely benefit from health services for the elderly, they are ill informed about the possibilities in this field. Usually, they do not have any notion of the concept of homecare, or know what a nursing home is like. And even if they do, they foresee all kinds of problems with the language and with the discrepancy in mentality from the Dutch. Experiences with GPs and hospitals do exist. The communication with the GP is mainly experienced as being negative. Sometimes, the doctors have so little time for their patients that these are not even able to tell what is wrong with them. The refugees also have the feeling that little if any sympathy exists for their situation and background. The experiences with the hospitals are more positive. The quality of the care is considered to be high, although the system itself is frequently described as being 'professional but cold', in the sense that there is no real interest in the clients and care workers are detached from the people they assist.

My last wish concerns the commune for the elderly in *Hoorn*. It would be my dream to have a house up there and to be able to work day and night in favour of our fellow-countrymen. A little Saigon in Hoorn, with a Vietnamese shopping centre, a library with Vietnamese books, CD's and videos. I think this is the best way to break the isolation of many older Vietnamese people. (62 year-old Vietnamese man)

5.1 Lack of practice...

Institutions in the field of mental healthcare, homecare, nursing homes and housing corporations (which in the Netherlands manage many rental houses in the social sector) indicate that in practice they have little if nothing to do with older refugees. The same thing actually applies to the institutions and projects specifically aimed at (elderly) immigrants. Only *Algemeen Maatschappelijk Werk* (General Social Work) and an institution such as *Stichting Pharos* (Institution Pharos), which aims specifically at the healthcare for refugees, do mention older refugees being among their clients.

Partly due to the lack of information, hardly any specific needs in the field of care and housing have been expressed from within the different refugee communities. The needs that are brought up by the older refugees mainly concern the areas in the supply of information and social participation.

If there is a good political climate and the economy rallies and enough homes for the elderly exist, then I will return. (44 year-old Kurdish man)

5.2 ...But a willingness to act

Several institutions, as well as a few housing corporations, have indicated that they are definitively willing to act on to the wishes and needs of older refugees and would like to examine the methods that would best suitable to achieve this. The biggest problem mentioned by the institutions is their inability to reach the older refugees. They do not know where they live and they are not equipped with the means to locate them. If the people do not come to the institutions themselves, they will simply not be noticed.

6. Return and situation of the elderly in the countries of origin

Many older refugees are dreaming of the possibility of returning to their country. Various motives contribute to this. For example, the belief that one can contribute to the build up of the society in the country of origin. Or because the elderly are being so much more respected in the country of origin together with the possibility of avowing one's religion in a way that suits one. Another reason relates to one's memories being there and to the recognition of past odours. And particularly because one naturally is to be considered as being somebody.

6.1 Emotions and reason

When thinking about returning, balancing one's emotions and reason is considered to be extremely difficult. Pictures from the past, dreams and rationale considerations about insecurity, underdevelopment and a lack of medical care, are often mixed up. The wish to return is not as strong within all groups. The Vietnamese in the Netherlands for example, mainly indicate that they do not want to return, maybe only to be buried there. The idea of Vietnam still being a communist country does play an important part in this decision. Many Iraqi-Kurds state that basically they would like to return, but that they have considerable doubts about the security and the political situation in their country. Because of rational considerations most of them will probably stay in the Netherlands.

At night my wife had a feeling of somebody peering through the cracks in the doors. (67 year-old Vietnamese man)

Eritreans and Ethiopians often say that they eventually will return, but the number that really do is very small. The Somalis interviewed as part of the city conversation in *Rotterdam* are very definite in their wish to return. If Somalia is no option then they will go to a neighbouring country.

6.2 Refuge in the region of origin: elderly and very vulnerable

The situation of the elderly who find refuge in the "own" region seems to be extremely fragile. Stories and studies (among others from the UNHCR) show that especially the 20-40 year-olds are best at 'keeping going' in the refugee camps. The elderly are often overlooked and especially those who get separated from their families often find themselves in miserable circumstances. From refugee camps that have existed for a long time, it appears that as time goes by the population is often made up of the elderly and children. Especially the strong people leave and try to build up a new life somewhere else.

6.3 A psychologically demanding effort

In practice there are few examples of older refugees who have returned to their country or region of origin. The rare examples that do exist show the difficulty of securing a situation in society when one has been away for so long. The mentality in the country of origin has changed. The family survived for years without him or her, and without realising, the returnee has changed much as well. In addition to this the children often stay in the host country. In other words, if only for the psychological aspect, returning home is yet considered to be quite a task. Apart from this, other factors, such as political instability, poor economic circumstances, no or little medical care and a poor infrastructure so for example money cannot be transferred, play an important part.

I sometimes felt like an outsider there. I quickly felt very lonely. Actually my friends are the Ethiopian women who are living in the Netherlands. Besides, I haven't got the feeling that the Dutch accept me as being one of them, but that is a different story. (Older Ethiopian woman)

For some years now a re-migration law exists in the Netherlands. This law provides for an allowance for people above 45 years of age who return to the country of origin and who were unemployed in the Netherlands. One of the conditions attached to making an appeal to this law concerns them giving up their Dutch nationality. Those who have returned but change their mind can decide within a year to go back to the Netherlands. In practice, hardly any refugee makes use of this opportunity. Among others this is linked with the previous condition and with the lack of medical care.

Several communities have proposed the idea of developing return projects specifically aimed at the elderly. Within the Ethiopian community for example, housing projects for the elderly, to which is linked a minimal amount of care from for instance a nurse, are being considered. Such projects could be financed if the allowances of those who return are put together. Finding a piece of land for building such projects hardly ever is a problem. Also within the Iraqi-Kurdish communities ideas exist about developing return projects for the elderly. A lot depends though on the future political developments in Northern Iraq. An important part is also played by the power of the organisations run by the refugees themselves. So far, hardly any partnership has been developed between refugee organisations and development organisations. Such a co-operation seems important in realising return projects. Because older refugees from within a certain country often live spread out over

Europe, it seems obvious to combine forces at a European level and explore the possibilities for voluntary return for older refugees from within a wider setting.

7. Further initiatives

Several institutions and organisations have indicated that they would like to develop further initiatives for getting in touch with the group of older refugees. The *Gemeentelijke Gezondheidsdienst Rotterdam* (Municipal Health service in *Rotterdam*) for example wants to study the extent to which the information courses concerning healthcare that exist for older migrants, might also be adapted for older refugees. In *Drachten*, the local *Stichting Welzijn Ouderen* (Organisation for the Welfare of the Elderly) together with the local *Stichting Vluchtelingen Werk* (Organisation for Refugee Aid) want to take the first steps towards establishing possibilities for older refugees within the region to meet each other. As part of the integration policy, the city of *Utrecht*, among other things, wants to give attention to the education of this group. The city of *Den Haag* is thinking about developing special integration programmes for older refugees.

Apart from these necessary further initiatives, the *Stichting BMP* (*BMP* Organisation) has recently started the project *Levensloop Oudere Vluchtelingen, LOV*, (Life course of the Older refugees). The aim of this project is to examine by means of a structured approach the life course of older refugees in such a way that building blocks can be laid for an empowerment programme, which is directed towards individual expression. The *LOV* project consists of two elements:

1. A quest for those events in an older refugees' life that are suitable for expression through various creative methods.
2. An experiment in which, on the base of several methods of expression still to be tested, a programme will be developed that enables refugees as well as the organisations that work with them to tap the great strength of this group and facilitates their participation in society.

8. A few findings

At the end of the "Elderly in Exile" national symposium, Nel van Dijk, director of the LBL centre of expertise for age and society, and the chairperson for the day, drew a few conclusions that primarily relate to the Dutch situation but which might apply to other European countries as well. First, she stated the importance of the continuation of consultation with older refugees concerning their situation. Many examples have been given which can be developed further, and it would truly be a shame if all the knowledge and skills shared during this symposium would be lost. As far as the projects are concerned she stressed the point that this working method leads to short-term activities. "*Something nice has been set up, which then is dropped again.*" The continuation of good initiatives has to be guaranteed through secure funding. As a way of conclusion, she mentioned the following points:

- It is rather striking that a support organisation such as *Vluchtelingen Werk Nederland* (Refugee Aid Netherlands) does not pay specific attention to older refugees.
- It is a good thing that so many people from different backgrounds, such as local authority services, organisations of refugees, institutions in the area of care services and others, were all together for today.

- Importance should be given to the statement that if people 'feel at ease here they are integrated'. This is not just the responsibility of the refugees, but of the Dutch society as a whole with its different institutions and organisations.
- Much has been said about isolation and the wish to participate. Nevertheless, hardly any proper answers to this question have been given.
- There are some examples of encouraging good practice, such as in the city of Den Haag, where a Dutch organisation of older persons, with a Surinamese woman as go-between, without any problems realises community-housing projects for older migrants and refugees.
- In addition, the project named "An encounter with foreign women", provides a useful method for older refugee women, to find their way into Dutch society. In this project volunteers visit the women on an individual basis. The aims of these visits are to teach them Dutch, develop new friendship relations, and to inform the women about the way Dutch society works and accompany them in the outside world.
- The issue of self-organisations for refugees has frequently come up. A statement that has often been made is the need for further development and support of the self-organisations. It is wise though to keep in mind that this will not always be positively received by the host community.
- Another very important remark made was that in the current political climate, state institutions have to take the lead in shaping political attitudes by making it very clear that they are open to older refugees.
- And finally, there are older refugees who at the end of their lives would like to return to the country of origin to sum up their lives. Responding to this understandable desire for voluntary return could be a task for non-governmental organisations working in the refugee- and development field.

Colophon

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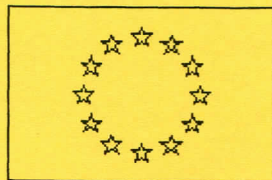
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