

Community sponsorship of resettled refugees in Dutch municipalities: a sustainable alternative!

Impact report Samen Hier pilot Rotterdam

Now that Dutch municipalities oversee integration again, there is room for residents to be involved in the reception of refugees. The municipalities are confronted with the challenge of providing a diverse group of people with tailor-made support to find their way and feel at home in our cities, towns and neighbourhoods. The existing support of Dutch people can be used for this.

Community sponsorship gives this public support a concrete perspective: groups of five residents can invite a refugee (family) to their municipality, where they can establish themselves from day one. For an entire year, the groups offer support and involve their networks so the newcomers can quickly settle and build sustainable relationships. Positive experiences from Canada and other European countries show that it is an innovative model for durable integration. Justice & Peace thought it was time to explore it in the context of the Netherlands and developed the first Dutch community sponsorship initiative: Samen Hier. Since 2019, Justice & Peace has matched 72 groups of five residents with a newcomer or newcomer family in their city.

In December 2020, we joined forces with the Municipality of Rotterdam, COA (The Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) and two partner organisations¹ for a pilot in which two groups of Rotterdammers each welcomed a resettled refugee. The experiences with *community sponsorship* for resettled refugees in Rotterdam are very promising. All those involved see an added value in this approach and a public-private collaboration for the reception of resettled refugees.

For municipalities and partners, Samen Hier was:

- A welcome addition to the existing capacities to physically find their way around the municipality. They emphasise that a lot of work has been taken off their hands through the support of the Rotterdam groups. This support goes further than practical help: groups offer a bit of security and warmth and increase access to cultural and social facilities in the city.

1 Foundation Rotterdam Verwelkomt Vluchtelingen (Rotterdam Welcomes Refugees) and VluchtelingenWerk (the Dutch Council for Refugees).

“As a city, we have been taking in resettled refugees for a long time but in the beginning it lacked intensive guidance. This group had a lot of questions in the beginning. In the past, they called me 24/7 about all kinds of things. There was a gap that could easily be bridged by a group.”

(Employee at the Municipality Rotterdam)

“A practical example is the furnishing of the house. VluchtelingenWerk can give someone tips on where to buy furniture. The added value of the group is that they can really support with furnishing the house. They can take on things that VluchtelingenWerk cannot do and more than that.”

(Employee at VluchtelingenWerk)

- A concrete way to increase long-term social support for refugee reception by actively involving residents.

“Support in society can only be increased by bringing Rotterdammers into contact with refugees. Something that works very well in Canada, while in the Netherlands barely anyone knows a refugee.”

(Employee at the Municipality of Rotterdam)

For residents, Samen Hier was:

- An accessible way to help shape the reception of resettled refugees in The Municipality of Rotterdam. The groups of residents look back positively on their Samen Hier year. For the first few months, they committed their time and network mainly to support the newcomers in practical matters, such as applying for a bank account and health insurance. The groups also undertook social activities, which led to a close bond for the rest of the year, and for the future.

“It costs a lot of energy but it also has a lot of value. It is truly an enrichment for our lives. We do it with a lot of pleasure.”

(Rotterdammer)

“We will definitely keep in contact with each other. If everything goes right, we want to form a new Samen Hier-group with Abdalla² as the fourth group member.”

(Rotterdammer)

For newcomers, Samen Hier was...

- Tailor-made support for practical matters, learning the Dutch language, making well-considered choices and achieving personal integration goals.

“For a long time, I knew nothing about Rotterdam, except the name of the city: Rotterdam. ... The group took me outside, told me about the city, as a sort of teachers of the city.”

(Newcomer)

“The group has also told me a lot about the Netherlands: about the habits and customs in this country and where I need to go if I need to arrange something.”

(Newcomer)

- A way to come into daily contact with other Dutch people through the network of the group members and to introduce their own network to the group. During the year, the newcomers, and vice versa the group members, got to know new people through each other's networks.

“During Ramadan, in May, when there was Eid al-Fitr, Abdalla – he is really a fantastic host – had invited a bunch of friends and then he cooks for everyone. We were all sitting at the table together and then I just fit in”.

(Rotterdammer)

- A feeling of being seen and not being alone. Both newcomers emphasised how important it was that, next to the different organisations, there was a group of Dutch residents ready for receiving them. Not only for practical support, but also for security and warmth.

“The group feels like family and like friends: like family because they always ask how I am doing, what I did today, what I ate. They give me attention like family does. And also like friends because we do fun things together, laugh together, they give me tips about the language.”

(Newcomer)

The 5 conditions for the success of community sponsorship of resettled refugees:

- An open and flexible attitude of everyone involved;
- A clear task- and role division;
- Regular moments to coordinate between everyone involved;
- Utilising the pre-departure phase for a good match between the groups and the newcomers;
- Stimulating equality and agency in the training and supervision of the groups.

Justice & Peace makes the following recommendations to municipalities*:

1. Offer residents a concrete way to actively contribute to the reception and integration of refugees in their city through community sponsorship.
2. Invest in decent preparation and guidance in collaboration with civil society.
3. Make a careful match between groups and newcomers, in which preferences and backgrounds of both sides are considered.
4. Put equality and agency at the centre.

** Justice & Peace developed Samen Hier, including manuals and tailor-made supervision for municipalities and partners that want to set up community sponsorship.*

For more information about Samen Hier and resettlement, visit www.samenhier.nl or contact us at info@samenhier.nl



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