

TOWARDS A STRUCTURAL PLACE FOR REFUGEE PERSPECTIVES IN POLICYMAKING

ENGLISH SUMMARY

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CONTENT

Why is there a need to include refugee perspectives in policymaking?	4
Refugee-led advocacy	5
The importance of refugee perspectives in various contexts	5
Creating space that allows for change to take place	7
Receptivity to 'unexpected' stories	8
Co-creation in daring spaces	8
Recognizing the expertise of the protective shell	9
Recommendations	10

TOWARDS A STRUCTURAL PLACE FOR REFUGEE PERSPECTIVES IN POLICYMAKING

ENGLISH SUMMARY

This text summarises the core points of the Refugee Academy report *'Naar een structurele plek voor het perspectief van vluchtelingen in beleidsvorming'*. [↗](#) In this advisory report, we provide conceptual tools for societal stakeholders that are involved in and committed to the inclusion of refugee perspectives in policymaking. Our report was written on the basis of previous research and knowledge that was gathered over the years within the Refugee Academy research group, supplemented with additional empirical data (interviews with refugee advocates and policymakers). The original circumstance that prompted our writing was a request by the Dutch Refugee Council (Vluchtelingen Werk Nederland), who asked the Refugee Academy for support in discerning challenges and opportunities for structural inclusion of refugee-led organisations and refugee advocates in Dutch policymaking. However, the final report is addressed to a large range of stakeholders, including refugee-led organisations and refugee advocates, policymakers at the national and local level in the Netherlands, main governmental and non-governmental organisations, research institutes and other relevant institutions.

Why is there a need to include refugee perspectives in policymaking?

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on how valuable refugees' perspectives and knowledge are, yet this has not translated into concrete ways in which experiential knowledge can be meaningful in policymaking. Life in displacement has led refugees to acquire myriad frames of reference, which in turn allows them to offer new perspectives on issues surrounding refugee policy. Their *in-betweenness*, an intermediate state between old and new lives, creates a dual perspective that makes it clear that nothing is self-evident. This results in contextual alertness that can function as a source of originality in policymaking. Refugees have the privilege of not taking structures for granted. The key is to translate this potential originality into strength and then use it concretely to create movement and connection in various social structures.

The 2018 evaluation of the Dutch Civic Integration Act of 2013 has shown that the current integration policy does not sufficiently address the reality of refugees in the Netherlands, which is why it is particularly advantageous for refugees to use their unique insights to challenge the (limited) views and (fixed) frameworks of policymakers. Without refugees' perspectives, policymakers cannot provide an adequate and inclusive policy that represents refugees' reality. Refugee-led advocacy can provide this perspective. The core message of our advice to policymakers (including NGOs) is therefore the following:

It is essential to invest in recognizing the added value of refugees' contributions for a better refugee policy.

The proposition that refugees' perspectives and lived experiences are themselves important for developing an inclusive policy is rarely discussed. That is why we pose the following three questions in this advisory report:

1. Why are refugees' perspectives needed?
2. Which types of perspectives are important in which contexts and how can we further conceptualize and differentiate the role of refugees as advocates?
3. What are the conditions for involving and strengthening refugee-led advocacy so that advocacy can make a real difference?

Refugee-led advocacy

We define refugee-led advocacy as the influencing of policy or public opinion by people with a refugee background who are also part of relevant refugee networks. There is currently a lack of clarity about the added value of the experiential knowledge that refugee advocates bring. In our advisory report, we therefore propose a new interpretation of advocacy that takes us past the old structure of consultation bodies and the corresponding expectation that advocates represent large groups. We, ourselves, advocate the necessity and the ability of refugee advocates to broaden policymakers' perspectives via individual and *embedded* stories as well as through thinking about how inclusive policy can be shaped. Refugees who have gone through different systems of reception and integration can best tell us what works (and what does not) in policy and practice. Their perspective is particularly relevant and necessary in the current integration challenges facing the Netherlands and Europe.

Refugees often do not directly participate in policymaking themselves, and they usually move in different social circles than policymakers. As a result, policymakers' horizon is limited when it comes to refugees' daily experiences within an asylum centre or in other contexts. This limited view is inherent in our system of policy development, in which the perspectives, knowledge and experiences of target groups with marginal positions in society often find little response in the policy itself. However, for policy to be inclusive, it is of great importance to get as close as possible to the world of the people who are the subject of the policy, through the direct participation of non-privileged groups in policymaking processes.

The importance of refugee perspectives in various contexts

For decades, representation for migrants and refugees in the Netherlands has been through formal consultation and advisory bodies. Despite the connection it seems to provide, this outdated model perpetuates the expectation that such organizations represent entire communities, which is at odds with the diversity within groups and demonstrates an essentialist view of minority groups. This unrealistic expectation of representation ultimately undermines the credibility of refugee-led advocates. Currently, we observe a shift from the previous emphasis on collective representation to an increasing interest in individual stories from refugees. Refugees are often invited at meetings and gatherings to share their personal experience. However, the strong focus on personal stories bears the risk of reducing all contributions of refugee advocates to being no more than one individual story. Refugee advocates find themselves in a double bind: Either they are expected to formally represent whole groups, or their perspective is reduced to a personal anecdote, that could be replaced with any other individual refugee story, creating a 'box-ticking' effect (having 'someone' with refugee background at the table is enough to be able to show that that the refugee perspective was included).

In order to come out of this impasse, it is necessary to diversify the role refugee advocates and their contributions. In our report, we therefore propose a layered structure with three levels of refugee-led advocacy to highlight the various roles advocates can assume:

1. **Individual stories from refugees**, which can instigate a different mindset and resourcefulness among policymakers. Personal stories hold the power to shake up and break up routine processes, and the function of this form of advocacy lies in evoking empathy and reflection. Newcomers, especially those who have not been in the Netherlands for very long, have an important role to play in advocacy storytelling. Stories from refugees who are experiencing the direct effects of the current integration policy increase the empathetic imaginations of people who have not had such experiences, and they make the implications of policy measures on human lives tangible. Such stories are powerful and can surprise policymakers, causing them to question their self-evident images of refugees. These stories truly become productive once safe spaces are created in which they can fully come into their own.
2. **Embedded stories from refugees** who show a fresh perspective (contextual alertness) and whose stories are mirrored with those of peers from their network, who share similar experiences. Refugee-led advocates who, through their embedding in relevant organizations and networks, are able to relate one's own experience to a broader (policy) context are the second level of advocacy. An important characteristic of this group is *in-betweenness* or having an intermediate position. These advocates are also able to combine knowledge of their contextual background with knowledge of the context of Dutch policymaking and institutions, through which they can actively think about policy. They have knowledge sources and networks that are indispensable for an informed policy that matches the reality of the target groups. Because of this, they can make explicit the relevance of stories for policy development.
3. **A protective shell** formed by former refugees with an institutional memory who have a long history of influencing policy. This group possesses the historical memory of the challenges refugees (advocates) have faced in the Netherlands. They can support younger refugee advocates by encouraging them and urging them to make their knowledge relevant. Former refugees' knowledge of structural barriers and mechanisms can be of great importance in helping a younger generation gain traction and discover new strategies to better navigate the field of policy-influencing. The added value of intergenerational connections between advocates is visibly substantive in that there is a strong recognition of experiences between generations as well as a strong need to learn from each other's experiences. In this interconnectedness of stories lies the tremendous untapped potential that can bring about mutual inspiration and knowledge exchange.

These three levels together can form a powerful structure that creates a better connection between policy frameworks and the lived experiences of refugees. We argue that refugees as advocates have the potential to play a role at any level. However, the mere presence of potential does not signify the presence of demonstrable competence. In order for this potential to flourish, knowledge, structure and connection are needed. To this end, it is important to build various knowledge and reflection circles around the network itself. To mould the contribution of advocates from different levels into relevant forms of influence, further structural conditions need to be in place such as the responsiveness of policymakers and the willingness to invest in the long-term development and positioning of advocates in the policy field. Policymakers must learn to dispel stereotypical notions and break through stubborn

narratives that have emerged from the longstanding discourse of disadvantage (for example, that refugees mainly need help or that refugee advocates are less objective or less competent).

Creating space that allows for change to take place

The three levels of refugee-led advocacy can collectively form a powerful structure that ensures policy does more justice to the environment and needs of refugees. Numerous prerequisites must be in place before this can happen. First, it is necessary to look carefully at the space that refugee-led organizations and advocates are given in different contexts to actually make a difference. We distinguish between different 'participatory spaces' in which their contribution may or may not take shape. Sometimes participation is excluded from the outset and refugee-led organizations and advocates do not receive access to spaces in which policymaking takes place (*closed spaces*). Conversely, in *invited spaces*, advocates do get an invitation to contribute. They are guests in a structure of (explicit and implicit) rules and expectations that regulate their contribution. This differs from *created spaces*, spaces advocates shape themselves, such as a conference or event organized by a refugee-led organization to which they invite policymakers.

Participation in *invited* and *created spaces* does not guarantee that advocates will actually have the opportunity to contribute meaningfully. Formal inclusion (presence) in consultation structures does not mean the actual inclusion of perspectives. Even without *external exclusion* (where a factual structure decides whether to invite advocates to contribute their perspective), there are often still mechanisms of *internal exclusion*.

Several mechanisms limit the impact of advocates from minority or marginalized groups. **Tokenism** occurs when participants are given the opportunity to express their perspective, but their contribution has no impact because their presence mainly has a symbolic value. This is the case, for example, when policymakers or organizations only want to show that they actually listen to 'the voices of refugees'. Tokenism can easily lead to **co-option**. This happens when the advocate's contribution loses its original aim and innovative nature because it is incorporated into the already established frameworks and existing agendas of policymakers. Co-option can lead to some form of influence on policy but not necessarily in the initially intended sense and certainly without acknowledgement of the original perspective.

The influence of advocates' contributions in policymaking partly depends on how participants experience the spaces. In the **comfort zone**, someone feels comfortable without anxiety or discomfort. There are no new challenges or reflections in this (figurative) space to start a learning process. The other extreme is the **panic zone**, a space that is overwhelming and far from comfortable. In this zone, people experience stress and anxiety. Learning is impossible because people are forced to expend all their energy on coping with stress and panic. In between is the **stretch zone**. In this space, things can be unknown and can become uncomfortable, but there is room for a learning process. A daring space (described below) is by definition a stretch zone.

In this advisory report, we consider it an important aim to design **daring spaces**. We see this as an addition to the distinctions between participatory spaces. Daring spaces are spaces where co-creation takes place between advocates and policymakers and where they constantly strive for the creation of stretch zones. In other words, daring spaces are safe spaces where there is enough delay and confidence to allow for friction and where discomfort is considered productive.

Receptivity to 'unexpected' stories

Besides a critical consideration of participatory spaces, more is needed to make contributions from all three levels of advocacy. The effectiveness of contributions is related to the following conditions:

1. The competences and skills of advocates
2. The receptivity of the recipient field (persons, practices and structures)

At the **first level** of advocacy, the advocate must be a good storyteller so they can evoke empathy. At the same time, the recipients of the story must be aware that unexpected stories can act as an important source of insight that questions their own assumptions. An open attitude stimulates reflection on policy assumptions. Moreover, those who want to use refugees' stories must recognize the value and the power of (unexpected) stories. They must learn to take advantage of the 'disruptive' element in such stories by actually initiating the reflection on that element. The advocate's storytelling ability and the recipient's open attitude converge in the *stretch zone*, where they are moderated by experienced moderators or through another suitable methodology. The stretch zone, in its essence, is a space that facilitates the productivity of uncomfortable or unexpected stories; it is a required condition for making room for contributions from the first level of refugee-led advocacy.

Co-creation in daring spaces

Specifying the conditions necessary for the inclusion of **second-level** advocates is the most important part of this advisory report. This group is fed by the narrative contributions of advocates operating at the first level and supported and nourished by the protective layer of advocates at the third level. Therefore, they can play an important role as contributors to and co-shapers of policy. However, refugee-led advocates are currently not directly involved in advising policy, partly because spaces for policymaking are often *closed spaces*. Because of the fragmentation in the field, policy makers and advocates cannot easily find each other and if they do a real connection is not guaranteed. Even within *invited spaces* actual inclusion of perspectives of refugees does not take place. Moreover, policymakers, more often than not, choose to ask only large and established organizations to the table, organizations that largely consists of people with no personal refugee background. This means the added value of second-level advocates and their organizations is not seen, and they often cannot develop into fully-fledged discussion partners.

At the other end of the spectrum lies *created spaces* designed by refugee-led advocates who develop programs and determine the priorities, thereby shaping the agenda and rules of those spaces. In refugee-led spaces, the priority is the perspectives and needs of refugees, which are often based on stories from a network of fellow comrades.

There are two significant pitfalls accompanying advocates on the second level:

First, the strong focus on the individual story creates a tendency to confuse the role of this second group with that of individual refugees who can tell a story to reinforce a specific message. This turns the story into a decoration instead of a perspective that can enrich or change a message. Furthermore, when an NGO or lobbying group is looking for 'suitable' refugees to 'include' in their policy influencing activities, there is often a tendency to try to strengthen the lobbying objective by emphasizing a particular aspect of refugee's personal story. This ignores the specific value

of embedded stories and layered knowledge of this second level of advocates to influence dominant structures and mindset.

Second, the notion of objectivity limits refugee-led advocates' involvement in decision-making. Objectivity can be understood in different ways, but many people link it to having sufficient distance from the subject matter. There is a strong assumption that experts (such as scientists, advisers and journalists) without a displacement background are more objective than refugees when it comes to issues such as inclusion, integration or reception. This image is dominant not only among policymakers but also within academia, which regrettably quickly reduces the perspective of an expert with a refugee background to a specific and individual view or to a personal story, while the perspective or story of someone who has 'the necessary distance' is considered more objective and therefore more valuable. This assumption underestimates the fact that no perspective comes out nowhere. All perspectives are historically shaped and contextually situated in people's live worlds.

For institutions aiming to work with refugees at all levels, it is crucial to be aware of these underlying mechanisms. It takes an open attitude, a certain kind of receptiveness to learn, to gracefully interact with refugee-led advocates, and to look beyond imposed labels of 'non-objective' and 'incompetent'. An appreciation of **polyphony** is therefore essential. Polyphony implies the actual admission of a diversity of voices, especially those voices that are often considered deviant. Otherwise, people with a different perspective may choose to keep it to themselves and conform to the dominant view. Valuable knowledge is lost when that happens. This is why we stress the importance of *co-created spaces* where co-creation can take place between advocates and policymakers. *Co-created spaces* must be designed as daring spaces in which it becomes possible for participants with different positions to compare their experiences. In such spaces, there is both respect for different positions and the possibility of spotting one's own blind spots through a different lens.

At the second level, advocates must have different types of awareness: practical awareness (understanding how the system works), reflective awareness (seeing the connection between their personal experience and societal structures) and relational awareness (mirroring their own experience with the stories of other refugees). Advocates operating at the second level are able to make their *in-between* position productive by becoming translators between various contexts. In addition to these competencies, numerous skills are required to increase these advocates' impact. For example, they should have collaborative skills to aid them in thinking about lobbying priorities and shaping policy – what does and does not work and how things can be done differently – in collaboration with others.

It is important that refugee-led advocates embrace the added value of not only their positioning but also their knowledge of the structure, while also being critical of it (so their *in-between* position), so they can move in Dutch society as reflective navigators. Also, historical knowledge is crucial to becoming good navigators – the experiential knowledge of the older generation of advocates is of great importance for this. It is essential to give advocates from previous generations a prominent place in the infrastructure.

Recognizing the expertise of the protective shell

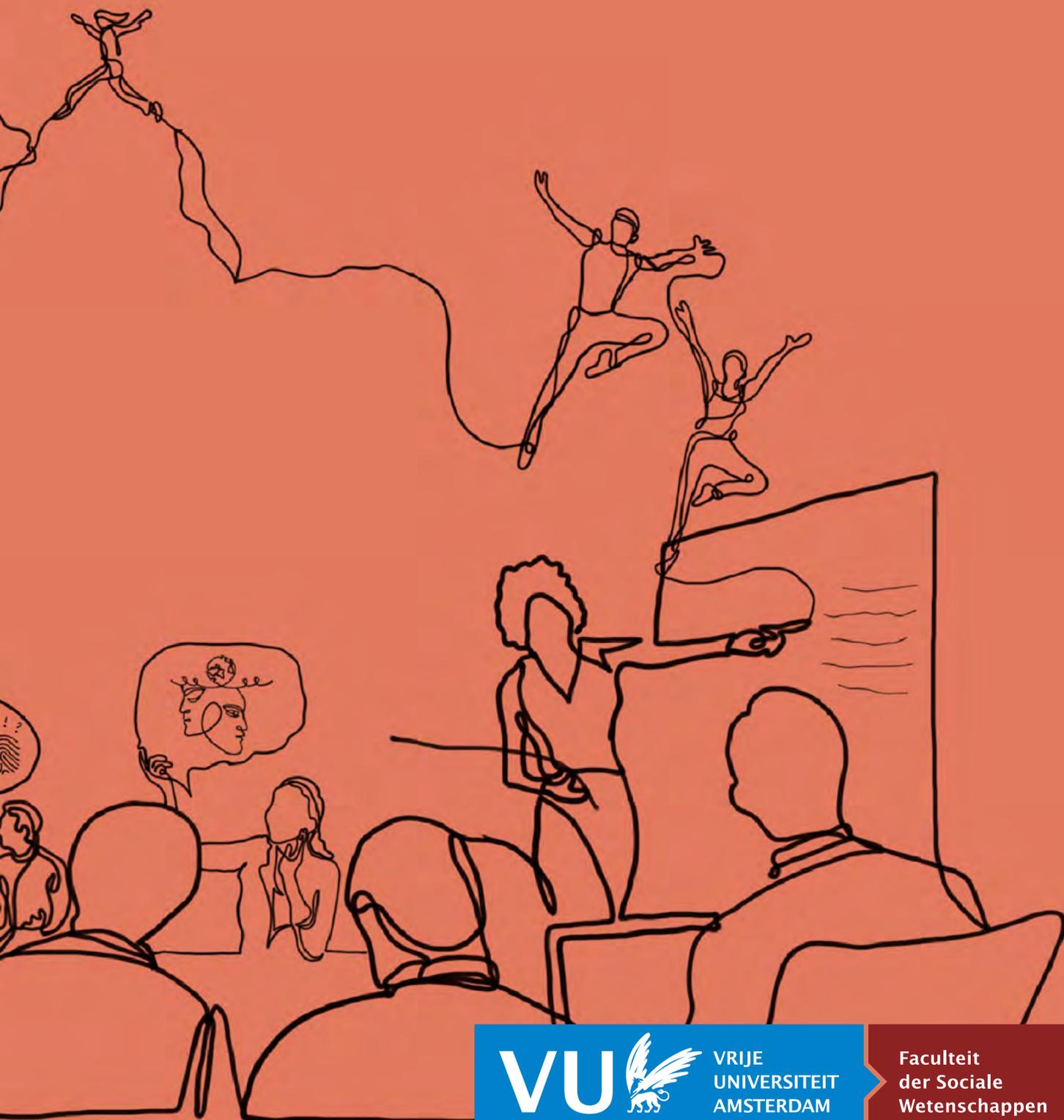
The earlier generation of advocates, the **third level**, supports and councils for the other two levels, but it also has a programmatic function – it provides the infrastructure of knowledge and reflection for refugee advocates. Recognition of the

expertise of these third-level advocates needs to be shown in the form of financial remuneration for their tireless efforts rather than continuing in merely praising them by giving them awards or asking for their free advice as experts all the time. Such actions not only frustrate older generation advocates but also erode the significance of their experiences and stories. One of the key strengths of third-level advocates lies in their capacity to help younger generations develop more resilience, because of their knowledge of the robustness of the structure to change. This knowledge will help the second level advocates to be more realistic about their efforts and possibilities in changing the structures and level their enthusiasm. This can be achieved by giving these experienced (third level) refugees a prominent place within the reflective infrastructure advocates. In short, this level's commitment should not be purely voluntary, but paid. This should become an example for other institutional or organizational bodies to follow.

Recommendations

To summarize, in our advisory report, we advocate for the construction of a cooperative structure in which refugee advocates can contribute to an informed policy that aligns better with the living environment of refugees. We formulate seven recommendations for this. These are not directed towards a specific party but rather towards the entire field of organizations and policymakers who are active in refugee-related matters.

1. Create an up-to-date overview of refugee-led organizations and refugee advocates (mapping) – this is an essential step.
2. Ensure that this mapping arises from a real network of relationships, through regular recurring meetings.
3. Create more awareness about the meaning of refugee-led advocacy and its associated roles.
4. Provide support (also financially) for the development of a network in which the three levels reinforce each other and advocates have spaces in which they can develop the necessary competences.
5. Invest in light coordination of the network.
6. Invest in daring spaces so that input from advocates is effective and can provide added value.
7. Invest in the competences of policymakers, in the advocacy departments of NGOs and in other parties that are necessary in order to make room for advocates' perspectives and for reflecting on each group's own thinking frameworks.



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