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Oral History  
Project

# Contributions to the city by refugees

A first analysis of the Specially Unknown interview material

Authors: Stasja van Droffelaar, Gerben Kroese en Saskia Moerbeek

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# Introduction

Specially Unknown is an oral history project in which, among others, 248 life stories of (ex)refugees have been collected and recorded through means of unstructured interviews. In these interviews, people that had to leave their country out of sheer necessity, tell about their lives in the Netherlands. At the start of this project in October 2013 the main title Specially Unknown was extended with the subtitle: *Contributions to the city by refugees*. A subtitle that caused some confusion. Did we mean contribute to the economy? And did we think that refugees should always be expected to contribute? And what if they don't?

We especially wanted to ask an open question with this subtitle. We wanted to find out what actually is a contribution, and we wanted to examine whether something could be said about the special ways in which refugees contribute to the development of our big cities. Our questions did not only refer to the literal statements of the (ex) refugees interviewed by us, we also wanted to look at new relationships that emerged from the interviews and at answers based on other tracks of our project (including a historical research and public presentations based on the stories). Moreover, we want to create a platform for refugees, especially in the artistic presentations based on the interviews, in order to contribute in that way.

In this memorandum we discuss a sub-question of the project: namely, based on the interviews and the interpretations thereof, what can be said about the contribution of refugees to Dutch society at large and to the development of the four major Dutch cities in particular.

Before we take a look at this question, we will give a short description of the interview part of the project 'Specially Unknown'.

After that we will take a more in-depth look at the different contributions of refugees based on three main categories: economic contributions, social/political contributions and art/cultural contributions. We conclude this memorandum, which stays fairly close to the interview material, with some general conclusions and additional research questions.

## Description of interviewees

During the project Specially Unknown 248 life stories of people that had to leave their country out of sheer necessity have been recorded on video and have been written out as literal as possible.

In the first part of the project, on which this memorandum is based, 200 people have been interviewed based on a topic list. Since the seventies until about 2012 they have fled from different parts of the world to the Netherlands, or they ended up in the Netherlands. Their motives to flee were related to political persecution, war and oppression of individual freedoms in their country of origin. During the second part of the project 48 interviews with recently arrived refugees have been added.

The first 200 interviews were held among people of different ages in the four big cities: Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht. This took place between October 2014 and July 2015. They all possess a legal residence permit and they were not born in the Netherlands.

Per city 50 people have been interviewed, divided over ten different refugee communities. At the start of the project, it was decided to address several communities in more than one city and others only in one of the four cities. The division of the interviews over the four cities was the following:

<b>Utrecht</b> Iranians Afghans Vietnamese Ethiopians	<b>Rotterdam</b> Iranians Ex-Yugoslavs <sup>1</sup> Chileans Iraqis
<b>The Hague</b> Iranians Afghans Somalis Congolese	<b>Amsterdam</b> Iranians Iraqis Eritreans Ex-Yugoslavs

This choice is based on: the size of the various communities (large and small), the continent from which they came (multiple continents), the period in which the refugees came to the Netherlands (spread over time) and the possibility to make a comparison between the different cities (based on the same group).

## Bilingual fieldworkers

The interviews have been carried out by bilingual fieldworkers. They received a six month training (one day a week) to prepare for conducting and developing the interviews and assisting groups for making presentations. Working with people from their own community gave possible respondents the possibility to tell their story in their own language. People that would rather not be interviewed by someone of their own community, could consult the so-called fifth fieldworker, which preferably did not belong to the communities chosen for the four cities. In practice more than three-quarters of the interviews were conducted in Dutch.

The recruiting of respondents was done by the fieldworkers themselves. For that they primarily have searched within their own networks. Beforehand it was reported that it was important to seek a balance in the number of men and women and the widest possible range in terms of age and educational level. A proportional distribution between the sexes was quite successful. Also in terms of age, there is a reasonable spread, though it varies greatly per community, because some groups came to the Netherlands more or less at the same age. A proportional distribution in terms of education is not really there. The majority of those interviewed have a higher professional or university level education. There are several explanations for this: the larger share of Iranians among the participants (Iranians are often highly educated), the greater the willingness among higher educated to participate

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of Bosnians ex Yugoslavs are mentioned in this list because representatives of this group indicated that this is a better collective name, because a part of the current Bosnians was already in the Netherlands before the Yugoslave Republic fell apart and because there are also refugees among Croatians and other communities.

in an interview and the enormous drive of many refugees to achieve the highest possible level of education in the Netherlands.

The field workers had to work very hard to find enough respondents. The additional registration with name, address and other data and the fact that the interview would be recorded on video deterred many candidates.

It is thanks to the persistence of the field workers that we now have such a rich collection of life stories of refugees from the four major cities and that these are now part of the archives and the urban heritage of these cities.

As expressed above, we would in no way create the illusion that the material of Specially Unknown is representative of the population of refugees in major cities, let alone for the Netherlands. The database that has been created by us, should above all be seen as a very rich collection of life stories, which offers numerous opportunities to conduct research, analyse the relationships, and formulate hypotheses at a high quality level. We invite scientists of diverse disciplines to use it.

## **Research question memorandum**

With this memorandum we are making a careful first attempt to provide an understanding of the significance of this material based on the question: What can be said about the contribution of refugees to the four major cities, based on the stories that they themselves tell about their lives in the Netherlands?

We have chosen 124 interviews from the database to be analysed. This choice is mainly based on practical grounds: we are still far from coding all interviews and analysing all interviews would be too time consuming for the purpose of this piece.

In this memorandum we only make statements about the total of the 124 interviews. We do not make comparisons between the cities or between the different groups of refugees. We hope to be able to do this in the near future, just as we hope that this base material will lead to further research and that it will be translated into social initiatives and new policy frameworks.

The interview materials on which this memorandum is based, has been coded and analysed by Stasja van Droffelaar and Gerben Kroese, both project officers of the project Specially Unknown. The undersigned is responsible for the consistency and the wording of the conclusions.

Amsterdam, 12 september 2016

Stichting Bevordering Maatschappelijke Participatie  
(Foundation for the Promotion of Social Participation)

Saskia Moerbeek (president)

# Contributions by refugees

During the interviews it has not been asked very directly what someone thinks is his/her contribution to the Dutch society and/or the city in which he/she lives. This is because very few people are able to immediately provide an answer to the question of what their contribution is. For a large part of the discussions the fieldworker only asked at the end of the interview, how the interviewee, looking back on the course of the conversation, would describe his/her contribution. In some cases the fieldworker first gave a kind of summary of what he/she had heard and then asked the respondent for his/her reaction to this. This often led the interviewee to the surprising insight that he/she contributed at all. Apart from the individual answers of the interviewees, the authors of this memorandum also looked at broader relationships in the overall interview material.

Overlooking the whole of the 124 interviews, a wide range of contributions by refugees appears. Obviously it is about providing an economic contribution by working, doing business and paying taxes, but also and almost more importantly, at least in the motivation of respondents, providing a social and cultural contribution. Some interviewees speak about influencing the image formation in the Netherlands and the importance of their view. Some talk about the effect of their mere presence in their environment.

Below we show the different contributions of the interviewed refugees and subdivide them into "economic contributions" (including paid work), "social and community contributions" and "artistic and cultural" contributions. At the conclusion we will take a more in-depth look at a number of insights that go beyond those items.

## 1. Economic contributions

### **Paid work**

Time and time again, the interviews show how important it is to have found paid work. When asking about the own contributions, paid work is often mentioned first, and at least it has been mentioned most. A paid job means that you are part of society and that you are taken seriously. And it means that you are able to support yourself, and can contribute to society by paying taxes, instead of receiving a social benefit. All respondents wanted a job as soon as possible.

For finding work, there are disparities between interviewees who came to the Netherlands as a child and interviewees who came later in life. There are also differences between people who come from a country where a high level of education and paid work are highly regarded and people who come from countries where this is less of an issue. Although we cannot discuss this in-depth in this memorandum, below we do provide an overview of the distribution by age and level of education.

The distribution of the interviewees by age at arrival in the Netherlands is as follows:

<u>Age at arrival in the Netherlands</u>	
0 - 9 years	19
10-17 years	24
18 years and older	81

The level of education of the interviewees in the Netherlands is the following:

<u>Level of education in the Netherlands</u>	
not applicable	4
Primary Education	0
Secondary Education	0
Intermediate Vocational Training	21
Higher Vocational Education	46
University Education	33

Recent surveys<sup>2</sup> among refugees show that a considerable number of them is still unemployed after three years. The first 124 interviews for Specially Unknown show a different image: A big majority (87%) of the respondents had a paying job at the time of the interview. 13%, the majority of which were housewives, was unemployed. Of the interviewees that were younger than 18 at arrival in the Netherlands (43), eight were studying at the time of the interview, three were unemployed, all others (32) were working.

Below is an overview of the professions of the interviewees in random order:

*Mathematics teacher, Healing therapist, Theatre director, Medical analytical chemist, Owner of an event organisation company, Counsellor unaccompanied minor asylum seeker and youths with a mental disability, English teacher, Writer, Owner of a community development company, Project manager, Theatre maker, Musician, Poet, Owner of a scooter company, Policy advisor for local council, Application development and innovation, Judge, Employee of a paint factory, Owner of an Ethiopian restaurant, School psychologist, Garage owner, Policy adviser municipal district, Project manager at Anne Frank museum, IT manager, Interior architect, Application manager, Legal officer at a law firm, Purchase and sales manager, Family counsellor/youth counsellor at home, Film/documentary maker, Freelance writer, Welfare worker, Owner of an export company, Companion to disabled people, Jurist for local council, Economy teacher, Construction project manager/technical project manager, Senior consultant exploitation and maintenance, truck driver, all sorts of secondment and temporary jobs, Employee department for work and income, Manager logistics and purchase, head of the household service of a hospital, Employee/assistant director at a development organisation, Support provider for the unemployed, Spanish teacher at grammar school and university teacher gender studies, Social pedagogical employee, Beautician, Social cultural worker, Artist, Social worker, Precious metal trader,*

<sup>2</sup> Dourleijn, E. and J. Dagevos, *Vluchtelingengroepen in Nederland. Over de integratie van Afghaanse, Iraakse, Iraanse en Somalische vluchtelingen. (Refugee groups in the Netherlands. about the integrations of Afghan, Iraqi, Iranian and Somalian refugees)* Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (Dutch Institute for Social Research). 2011  
 Klaver, J. and A. Odé, *De arbeidsintegratie van vluchtelingen. Een verkenning van problemen en oplossingen. (The professional integration of refugees. An explorations of problems and solutions.* Raad voor Werk en Inkomen (Council for Work and Income). 2003

*Urban sanitation employee, Company lawyer + own counselling company, Coordinator/trainer/discussion leader, Bicycle mechanic, Hairdresser, entrepreneur, Pedicure, Librarian, Debts refinancing employee at social services, Senior policy adviser at the NVvR, at Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Social worker (family coach), Designer civil engineering, Chief editor of a website, Writer, Taxi driver, Lawyer, General medical practitioner, Guidance counsellor, Graphic designer, Farsi teacher, Project coordinator, Consultant, owner of a children's centre, Health care professional, Coordinator, Project employee, Pedagogic coach, Researcher/poet, Owner of a chain of gyms, P&O employee at University of Utrecht, primary school teacher, Jurist at public prosecutor's office, Media library employee, Engineer, Information risk manager, Pharmacist, Telecom engineer, Air quality reporter for national government, Mail order employee, Physics/mathematics teacher, Owner of an Ethiopian catering company, Social pedagogic help, Restaurant owner.*

## Finding a job

Thirty interviewees say something about how they found or tried to find a job. The stories show that the experiences about how easy or difficult it is for refugees to find a job differ. About half of the 30 indicate that it was fairly easy to get a job. But there are also those who, despite numerous applications and help from various authorities, did not find a job during a long time. After many years of big effort and determination, they often did succeed.

An Iranian woman that was trained as an art teacher in the Netherlands and subsequently did not succeed in that role because she could not handle the students, wanted to work more than anything.

*So I quit and started to look for something else, so I could find a job. I started webmaster studies at the Hogeschool Utrecht in Amersfoort. [...] And after a year I graduated as a webmaster. There was no work. I think I have sent almost a hundred application letters. Every day, I was calling companies looking for a job as a webmaster. But it was a market full of young webmasters that could make a beautiful website fast and cheap. They did not need me anymore. And I thought I needed to work. I cannot stay at home One day I just started walking through the Langestraat in the centre of Amersfoort and asked in all shops if they needed anyone. Well, finally there was a shop that had gone bankrupt and they needed a student for three months. I said 'I don't ask that much, if you hire me, I will work for the same salary' and they hired me.*

People in paid employment just as often found their jobs through their private network as through an agency or official authority, such as the UWV (Employee Insurance Agency). This private network often consists of people from their own refugee community, their own religious group and natives they met over the course of time. There are (highly skilled) people that pretty much visited every employment agency in the city, but only got a job came when someone from, for example, their religious community hired them.

The story of the ex-Yugoslav psychologist serves as an example of support from a private network and support of an organisation. She came to the Netherlands at the age of thirty. After studying here for two years an employment agency had arranged an interview at a medical children's centre in Gouda for her. They really want to hire her, but said that because of the additional costs of the employment agency, she was too expensive.



*And then I called the UAF (Foundation for student refugees) again. Because the UAF also has a Job Support department. And when I finished studying they said that if I ever need help writing or preparing job applications, I could contact them again. But okay, I had Tineke and Ton who did that for me. And I have never asked them for anything, but at that moment I called them again to ask what I should do. And then Job Support called the temp agency and I don't know what has been done or arranged, but I started in Gouda as a psychologist.*

A few people found work through an internship or work experience placement. One example is the Vietnamese Information Risk Manager, who started as a trainee and is still working for his first employer:

*After I got my degree I applied to a business and I am still working there, it's been twenty-three years now. Of course I started as a trainee, which is what they were looking for at the time. They called it company training trainee. And the training took a year and a half. So after that I could work as.. I first started as a programmer, then as a systems analyst, then system designer, then I progressed to project manager. Later I made a career change and I went into system security.*

An Iranian theatre maker, who nowadays prepares exhibitions for children in the Tropenmuseum (Tropical Museum), tells how he got this position through a colleague:

*At the time I had various jobs and one of those jobs was in a youth theatre. And I had a colleague that once told me: 'Hey, someone asked me if I know a theatre director for a job, do you mind if I give him your name?' It was during work meetings or something, so I wasn't really paying attention to what she said. I said 'Yes, great!', because I had so many jobs and I thought okay, yes, great. And then after a while the head of Tropenmuseum Junior, the children's museum of the Tropenmuseum, called me to ask if I wanted to work for them.*

Some interviewees noted that at the time they were looking for work it was easier to find, then at the time of the interview. A primary school teacher from Iran who finished her studies in July 2002 and was already teaching a class in September of that same year, got hired after her first job interview in Utrecht:

*So I immediately found a job, at the time it was also very fast. It was very easy to find a job, not any more. Now it is very difficult.*

Others say that they moved to the Randstad (the collective name of the four major cities) because they expected that the job prospects there were greater. A financial advisor from Somalia who grew up in Roermond and finished her studies in Cambridge says:

*I initially went back to Roermond, just as a basis, so to say. But actually, the fun positions for me were mainly located in the Randstad. Yes, actually that was the trigger for me, okay, it is very nice to be home, to live in Roermond, but eventually I will have to move. And then I took the plunge and after some detours I eventually moved to The Hague.*

## Barriers when looking for work

Barriers when looking for work that have been mentioned, arranged from mentioned most often to least often: (High) age, discrimination based on heritage, (insufficient) command of the Dutch language, health problems, studying, not having a residence permit and expressing political views during a job interview.

Some people experienced several barriers at once. An Iraqi precious metals trader that came here when he was 32, said it was difficult to find work for several reasons:

*Sometimes people look at my name or place of birth Baghdad and then put my CV away. [...] There is a lot of competition here. Look, by the time I had the degree necessary to work in this field, I was forty years old. Forty years is not attractive for an employer. For the administration and this kind of work they are always looking for girls or women aged 23 to 25.*

For a journalist from Bosnia, who came here at the age of forty-two, health problems played a major role:

*I wasn't able to speak Dutch. A total blockade... trauma... I don't know... so I could forget about journalism. The physical labour that I then did, did not bother me at all, all that mattered was that I could support myself and my family as a result of my work. [...] Then I injured my shoulder. I had an operation that wasn't successful, so I could not do any physical labour. I became dependant on sickness benefits and it was determined that I needed surgery again. Then the doctors diagnosed me with severe depression. I received therapy, and in the meantime, I had problems with my large intestine. After two years I was examined more thoroughly and was diagnosed with cancer. So depression, problems and surgery on your shoulder, cancer.. You cannot work anymore, even if you want to... Because I worked here for four to five years, I have received some sickness benefits and was labelled as unfit to work. I joined the Bosnian association and other associations, so I can contribute a little for as much as I can, as a reporter and cultural associate of the former Yugoslav Republic. So I can at least offer a little help in my native language for the functioning of the association and the integration. It has also saved me a bit of some thoughts of another kind...*

## Importance and perception of work

According to the interviewees, having a job is important to the extent to which they feel at home in the Netherlands. But if we take a more in-depth look into the type of work they do and the degree to which they feel valued, a more nuanced picture appears.

A significant part of the interviewees indicated that they are working below their level and they feel a constant duty to prove themselves in their work. According to them this is directly related to the fact that they are refugees and had to master a new language and culture later in life.

An Iranian radiographer, who came to the Netherlands at the age of twenty-two and found work in a hospital through other Iranians, told:

*In one way or another, I compensated my language deficiency with hard work, especially in the beginning. [...] I have been working for fourteen years, and only the last three years I really found my niche. Gradually and slowly I understood how everything fits together, because you constantly want to prove yourself... that I'm not dumb, that I'm not stupid, that I understand things, that I can do it. [...] A large part of your energy gets wasted in this way. If you get the space that here and at work you are an added value that will help a lot to say, I too am like you. [...] But unfortunately many people think that you do not understand anything, because you make mistakes when speaking the language. [...] But I really love my job. Coincidentally, the day before yesterday I had my annual evaluation, and they had no negative comments. Everything is perfect. That feels good.*

Sometimes the urge to prove oneself is also linked to being a woman: An Iranian application manager working in an academic medical centre:

*Yeah, I cannot say 'work without stress', never. You cannot find that anywhere. But overall I am satisfied. Actually, I have achieved a lot. And it's still a challenge for me to fight with the men. Yes... ICT jobs are still dominated by men. At least in my job there are only a few women. And as a foreign woman I still have to fight for myself. [...] I'm still at a lower level than my level of thinking because of the language and culture. If, at this age and with this experience, I were in Iran right now, I definitely would be working at the management level. And because I have that feeling, I am still fighting for a higher level. And there's a glass [glass ceiling] in that.*

Working under your level, according to the respondents, not only leads to stress and fatigue, but also affects your self-esteem. A writer who is famous in Afghanistan and works as a media library assistant, says the following about this:

*I think I can do more, I limit myself. That's what I'm doing is temporary, and not at all profound. [...] The feeling that I have to work, that is good. I feel worthy when I work and pay taxes to people who need it. But the work I am doing is below my level of education. I have studied law and then philosophy and I got a PhD. So I think I am more theoretical than practical, and I cannot do administrative work all day. That is not my job. It makes me tired, but I am happy that I have a job. [...] In Afghanistan, I was 100% myself in my work, here I am faceless when I go to my work and I am faceless when I come home again. [...] But I have to keep working. I have to integrate.*

## **Having a job is one thing**

The stories show that having a job is considered extremely important, but it often takes many years, if not decades, before the interviewees do work that they feel really suits them. The stories indicate long careers and many detours. Those long roads aren't only due to having to master a different culture and different systems, but are also due to the rules that refugees have to deal with. The story of an Eritrean restaurant owner is a good example of this:

*After I had asked for advice and I still wasn't getting anywhere after three months, I went to the Dutch Refugee Council and I asked to be a volunteer. It didn't matter what I had to do, all that mattered was that I got out of the house and was among people. I just wanted to work.*

*Well, that was my salvation. I became a park employee at the municipality Laren and in no time I became a popular boy in Laren. I worked from eight to five, and did so with pleasure, five days a week. Within a year I spoke Dutch and I could easily communicate anywhere.*

Later, when he had received a residence permit and a house and he had become a father, he got a paid job at a painting company. But the municipality of his new residence forced him to stop working in order to attend a language course and integration programs. He completed the courses in two months, after which he chose an ICT training. During that training, he did an internship at a foundation that tries to help troubled youth get back to school or to work through IT. The foundation immediately offered him a permanent job. He worked there for seven years:

*For me, it was also sort of a second reintegration program in my life. I mean, at that point I had children, but I did not know how to function as a father in society. I also did not know how society functioned towards me, and towards other people - I mean refugees, immigrants and natives. It was very educational. [...] But for me the work was simply too heavy. Because, as a refugee you are not only concerned with making money, but also with yourself, society, your finances, your children and your past. [...] And if you work with difficult young people on the one hand it is rewarding work, but on the other hand, you'll take all the problems with you and you have to be an example. It made me incredibly strong, but at one point I noticed I was deteriorating a little. Also, I wasn't young anymore and thought I had to do something that I like and where I can define my own pace. I wanted to start my own business.*

With the help of his employer, he then opened his own restaurant. About this he says:

*This is everything. People that know me from the foundation and outside of it still say that I can do better than this. Come on, they say. But who says that? This is where I feel better. Because this is for my mother, my family, my background, of which I just feel I am an ambassador. I receive people from all over the world. People come in from Maastricht to Groningen, from America to Australia and from all over Europe. I just feel at home here. So this means a lot.*

This quote illustrates many of the stories. The interviewees are constantly looking for ways to contribute to the Dutch society from their own backgrounds and based on their life history, in which the experience of fleeing always plays a role. If successful, they find a place where their background is an added value, then it creates the feeling of being at home. This added value can manifest itself in many ways.

An Afghan doctor who works in the Schilderswijk in The Hague, says he is better able to cope with the patient population that consists of 99% of immigrants, than his Dutch colleagues.

*I work in a health centre, with nearly 10 thousand patients and 5-6 doctors. [...] There are a lot of differences between immigrant and native populations. That immigrant population is a bit difficult. People visit the doctor very soon, for example for small things. [...] Natives always just want to know the cause of their ailment, but the immigrants usually just want medications. [...] That's really hard for Dutch GPs. They come to work there for two months and then they just cannot persevere. [...] I understand and answer some questions easier and I can reassure patients easier because of my cultural background. Not only knowledge plays a role here.*

An Iranian man who was involved in innovation in a company, tells how his different background plays a role in performing his work:

*When I was in business man, I had discussions with the CEO of my employer. I was responsible for innovation. And he just wanted to take less risk. And then there is somebody that says things have to change. Well, there you just had different [views]. Only he was really fed up with my persistence. Then he said he was going to teach me a nice Dutch proverb, and he was also proud that he was a Zaankanter. He said: 'Wow, welcome in Zaandam.. You should not throw away your old shoes before you have new ones.' And I said: Well Sander, fantastic, but now I'm going to enrich the Dutch language. 'Oh, nice,' he said. I said: 'As long as you keep your old shoes, you do not buy new shoes.' Yes, every time I speak to him, I say: 'Gosh, what about your new shoes? Do you have new shoes?'*

A Chilean woman quickly found work as a supervisor of a (Spanish-speaking) housekeeping crew in a hospital in Rotterdam. Because she as a woman had to flee an oppressive dictatorship, she very deliberately chose to lead in a human way.

*In the beginning I wondered what would be my inspiration and my way of leading. So without oppressing the people, but with good results. [...] And I came to the conclusion that my leadership style would ensure that people have duties, but they also have rights. I guard your rights, but you have duties. And that is what you are paid for. [...] And within three years I was head of the department.. So including the evening shift, the morning shift, the operating room, the internal and external transport and the linen room. And after that we moved to a new hospital. [...] I had an old hospital that was still running and then the board asked if I could clean the new hospital with my staff. I said: 'yes, why not.' These are people who I trust 100% and I had a kind of army. But based on love and trust, that was so fantastic.*

And finally in this section, a man who fled Iran in search of freedom and a place where he would not be prosecuted for being gay. Since puberty, he engaged in philosophical issues and was thinking about the meaning of religion. In Amsterdam he became a mathematics teacher, but he taught his students much more than his subject.

*I still enjoy my job as a teacher. I transfer something. I also make them think about their existence, and we discuss anything and everything, even faith. But I always say, I don't know. I am a student. I only ask to doubt with me. [...] Of course, when I have to teach mathematics I do it. Results of my work also show that I am very good at it. But if I continually get gifts at the end of the year, from children who say they have learned a lot from me, also emotionally and in their development. [...] You cannot just say you teach mathematics. If you give a little bit of yourself, if you show yourself like 'here I am for you to explore together', the youth will appreciate it very much. Because they are also curious and looking for their own identity in one way or another.*

## Socio-cultural sector and independent entrepreneurs

If we look at the sectors in which the interviewees work, socio-cultural work shows up as the largest category, followed by 'independent', 'education', 'arts and journalism' and 'technology/ICT' and 'health care'.

Of the 108 people who work or have worked, there are 20 working in the socio-cultural sector and 19 started their own business.

That relatively many people are working in the socio-cultural sector has to do with several factors. The stories show that many refugees are grateful that they are alive. Sometimes they feel guilty with respect to the people in their country who did not make it. They also know what refugees go through and how much effort it takes to find your way in the Netherlands. All this causes them to feel a tremendous need to do something for their fellow refugees and for society in general. Presumably practical reasons also play a role here. If you do not speak the language well, it is easier to work with people that also do not speak it perfectly, than with people that constantly assess you based on your language perfection. In addition, the socio-cultural profession is relatively diverse.

Interviewees that work in other sectors (as well as people working in the social sector) often look for opportunities to be socially active outside of work. The reasons for this and the way in which they do it will be discussed in the next paragraph.

## Independent entrepreneurs

Among the 124 interviewees there are 19 independent entrepreneurs. Some of these entrepreneurs are active in the socio-cultural sector. They translate their desire to do something for others in setting up social projects or services for people in difficult situations.

Most of the independent entrepreneurs, previously had a paid job, but were dissatisfied with their jobs, or faced cutbacks. There also are a number of people that had a lot of trouble finding paid work and that is (partly) why they started to work for themselves... There are various entrepreneurs who more or less got involved on a voluntary basis to solve a social problem or to address injustice and that later turned it into a profession. Independent entrepreneurs often have more than one employment contract, they have freedom to do things their way and from their own perspective. Most of the interviewed entrepreneurs are successful, some will eventually not make it. It should be noted that these entrepreneurs are willing to do a lot of work and, especially at the beginning, to be content with little income.

A good example of someone who started for herself because she wanted to do something for others, is an Iranian social entrepreneur in Utrecht. About her organisation and the route she took, she says:

*I had made it as a manager in the business world, but in 2006 I realised that my heart was elsewhere. I had to build a bridge between my country and the Netherlands and wanted to give something back to the society in which I live. For men and women that only arrived here recently, it was very difficult to find a balance between the Netherlands and their own culture, I often saw a great distance. That originated the idea for TalenTonen (show languages) and*

*since then I've been doing that. I believe that we have been successful, I see people we have helped for years and that can now find their own way. And we are not like other organisations that do paperwork and just make some calls for people. We go deeper and offer a total package, because the people that come to us are often simultaneously have financial, social, linguistic and psychological problems. People are often placed under financial administration, we provide Dutch lessons, various trainings, individual counselling, a suitable mate when they need it, we make trips with people, eat together and talk a lot with each other. We go along to the doctor, the psychiatrist or the court with them, if necessary. To give them the feeling that they are not alone.*

## **Creating employment**

There are interviewees that, through projects or associations, are voluntarily or professionally involved in reducing unemployment among refugees. A small part of the respondents, in particular entrepreneurs, create employment themselves.

An Iranian manager of a chain of gyms is an example and he says the following about his contribution:

*I'm general manager of a chain of companies, a number of which I am co-owner of. So there I have achieved my success and that success is reflected by a nice house, a nice car, but also [...] by the team we work with. I think we have a total of about 300 people who work for us.[...] And over the course of time I have now hired many people, I offered them a permanent contract. [...] And therefore my influence in this society or in the city of Utrecht is big, of course, we touch a lot of people, directly or indirectly, but certainly also the staff we have and that is working for us.*

## **Paying taxes and consuming**

It has been said before, many interviewees are proud that they are paying taxes in the Netherlands. They mention this expressly as a contribution to the society. It is seen as a way of giving something back to the country that accepted them and gave them a chance. In addition to paying taxes, a number of people that spend money in the city in which they live, see this as a contribution and indicate this explicitly.

A Congolese biomedical scientist and project employee said:

*Contribute! Sometimes contributing has a financial connotation. At the moment I am working and I contribute taxes to the community. I am a tax payer like any other citizen. I also am a consumer. That's also a contribution to the companies and also for the community. [...] Contribute something in a direct way to the community? By means of taxes.*

## 2. Social contributions and volunteering

In addition to paid work in the health care and welfare sector, there are numerous other ways in which Dutch people with a refugee background offer socio-cultural contributions. This type of volunteer work takes many forms. There are numerous respondents that do volunteer work in the more traditional sense, such as helping at a nursing home or at a community centre. A portion of the voluntary efforts is aimed at general social issues, such as devoting oneself to the basic income, or being politically active. There also are respondents that are involved in making their neighbourhood more liveable and social.

Additionally, many people are active in their own group by organising cultural events, providing social support and work towards the empowerment of women. A number of respondents indicate that the proper upbringing of children is an important contribution to society. Another form of social contributions that are mentioned explicitly by several respondents is consciously influencing of image formation and narrative.

More than half of the 108 respondents is volunteering. Of these volunteers nearly as many people do 'general volunteering' as volunteering for fellow refugees, within or outside of their own refugee community.

Below is a list of the types of volunteer work done by the interviewees:

- *Active in the residents association, organises exchange programs for (former refugee) young people from different European host countries*
- *Active in the Iranian Women's Foundation and in the trade union*
- *Active in the church*
- *Management positions*
- *Involved school and sports parent, social cohesion in the neighbourhood.*
- *Collect for the Red Cross, volunteering in Vietnamese Buddhist community.*
- *Deacon in a Serbian orthodox church, guides youth, worked as an interpreter for Yugoslav refugees.*
- *Teaches mathematics on a voluntary basis*
- *Teaches computer courses at the Dutch Refugee Council*
- *Provides sports courses for Somalians and is a trainee for the Dalmar foundation, where he helps Somalians with all sorts of practical things*
- *Local councillor*
- *He has worked as a volunteer for Stichting JKB (Judicial Complaints Desk)*
- *has volunteered at a home for the elderly, is active in the church*
- *Helps refugees with paperwork, etc.*
- *In cultural juries and commissions of the local council, involved with the Rotterdam film festival*
- *Involved with refugees in the city through various foundations, own foundation Monditaal*
- *Is active as a volunteer (clean streets), is involved in a number of projects in the community.*
- *Member of D'66*
- *Member entrepreneurs table of the Rotary Club*
- *Member of environmental education centre, voluntary guest lecturer and homework supervisor*
- *Member of entrepreneurs association, art association, Oranjevereniging (association organising activities for public holidays, often involving the Royal family) and neighbourhood association; taught art classes for children*
- *Solve issues within the Somali community through local politics.*



- *Help migrants from Yugoslavia and other countries with immigration. Teach language courses for these immigrants.*
- *Entrepreneurs organisation during festive occasions, etc. within the city*
- *Supports unaccompanied minor asylum seekers*
- *Established the organisation 'Wij voor vrede' (we for peace) for all nationalities from the former Yugoslav Republic.*
- *Organising cultural events, started a children's workshop*
- *Treasurer of the Eritrean Association*
- *Has been politically active (SP)*
- *Politically active in local council*
- *Radio work and news of Bosnian association*
- *Gives numerous presentations about religion and life questions*
- *Keeping the living environment clean*
- *Sometimes also active as an interpreter for Somalians.*
- *Foundation for the support of immigrant woman, collecting, help at school and in a home for the elderly*
- *Started a foundation to support immigrants and refugees in several ways.*
- *Helped set up two foundations that offer free legal advice and is working on a third.*
- *Planning to open a children's farm*
- *Lots of volunteer work (management of the Dutch Refugee Council, workshops and lectures, Amnesty International, Foundation TalenTonen)*
- *Lots of volunteer work: sports club, other ways of bringing people together*
- *Association that advocates for the blind and visually handicapped*
- *Keep (loitering) youths of the street through boxing, organises neighbourhood activities*
- *Help highly educated woman find a job through IBM and guide dropouts back to school. Fifty management positions*
- *Chairman of Amnesty International in The Hague; board member of the Dutch Association for Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women*
- *Chairman of Association of Afghan writers in exile*
- *Volunteer at the Dutch Refugee Council, Amnesty International*
- *Volunteer at community centre*
- *Volunteer work (teaching dance classes to children, sports with woman at centre for asylum seekers)*
- *Volunteer work at the Allende Centre and Vluchtelingenwerk Rijnmond*
- *Volunteer work at foundation for Iranian woman, volunteer work at Galerie Uithof*
- *Volunteer work at the Dutch Refugee Council (counsellor)*
- *Volunteer work within the Afghan community*
- *Volunteer work in the church*
- *Volunteer work in the theatre, film theatre and library*
- *Volunteer work at her daughter's school*
- *Volunteer work at different locations, Samen 010 (Together 010), Stichting Rotterdams Ogedocumenteerden Steunpunt (Foundation Rotterdam Support Point for Undocumented Persons), Stichting Welkom in Rotterdam (Foundation Welcome to Rotterdam)*
- *Volunteer work for parks department*
- *Volunteer work for the church and the table tennis association*
- *Volunteer work for Vietnamese association and help people integrate better*
- *Works for an Iranian radio station in the Netherlands*
- *Works on a voluntary basis for an authority that supports carers*
- *Provide workshops at centre for asylum seekers*
- *Very involved with the neighbourhood and neighbourhood initiatives*
- *Devoted to basic income*

- *Is part of two women's groups in the neighbourhood, guides parents in better handling their children, is part of the parents' council of a primary school.*

## Motives for volunteering

The motives to volunteer are very diverse. The reasons that are indicated are:

- wanting to give something back to the Netherlands
- wanting to do something for the own community or refugees in general
- learning the language and accelerate integration
- a road to a job
- fight boredom
- Sometimes inspired by religion (more often among Christians than among Islamic refugees)
- give meaning to own existence

Often it also is a combination of motives.

As with paid work, it should be noted how much effort our respondents put into their volunteer work. An Iranian man already was volunteering in the Central Library in Amsterdam while he was staying in the centre for asylum seekers in Crailo.

*And I also did not receive any volunteer's reimbursement from the library for the first few years, so I rode my bicycle from Crailo to Amsterdam, 30 kilometres. And at the end of the evening I would ride my bicycle back for 30 kilometres. [...] Because I really wanted to do something.*

Another example is the mathematics and physics teacher from Vietnam that does all kinds of volunteer work as a pensioner:

*When I was teaching here I have made a technical dictionary together with my wife for mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology students. It was presented to the then Minister of Education, Mr. Brinkman, in Nieuwspoor in The Hague. He expressed his admiration. [...] I am a member of an environmental education centre in Nieuwegein, about growing, about vegetables, about the environment. I also volunteer as a guest lecturer and, for example, taught about renewable energy at schools. I also liked it. Nearby, on Tuesday nights I teach children in the neighbourhood that have difficulties with mathematics and physics. There are students from the first class of secondary school to the graduating class. I like the work.*

Volunteering during the first years in the Netherlands can play an important role in building a network and learning the language. It is a way for newcomers to increase their still small world in the Netherlands and to be busy, and for them and established immigrants, it is a way to give back to (others in) the Dutch society and to try to improve their living environment.

A Chilean man who came to Rotterdam at the age of 45 tells about how volunteering changed his life:

*When I arrived the hairs on my head were black. After a year my hair was grey. Without doing anything. I kept asking myself: what am I doing here? I have had so many fights with my wife. I did not want to stay here. I really wanted to go. Until I met Paco, who said: what you should do is learn the language and integrate into society. [...] Then I went to a foundation where they help the elderly near IJselmonde. There I helped the elderly by going for a walk with them, do grocery shopping, they asked if I could hang wallpaper, and I had done that with my grandfather since I was eight years old. So hanging wallpaper, painting. And that is how I got to know the Dutch society. They [the elderly] spoke with me, they wanted to know where I came from. And they liked it when I talk about my country.*

The general volunteer work is also really mentioned as volunteering by the interviewees. Being involved with the own community or refugees in a broader sense is seen as something so obvious, that it often is not referred to as a volunteering. Sometimes volunteering is a stepping stone to finding a paid job.

An example is the Somali project coordinator who, from his own cultural and religious background, finds it natural to do something for others -and specifically other Somalis. His volunteer efforts did not go unnoticed and he was asked by the municipality to continue working for a salary. He also set up a private foundation with a number of colleagues:

*During my studies I was very active within the Somali community. We organised activities for young people and I was also volunteering in an association to help young people with a refugee history in The Hague. And then we have also done a study in cooperation with The Hague University, because there were many little issues involving Somali youth in The Hague. Based on the results of that research a project to guide young people to work and training arose, and coincidentally somebody of the city of The Hague asked me to lead that project. [...] But that project focused on young people without involving the parents, and the problem must be tackled at the root. So then we ourselves took the initiative to do research among Somali parents in The Hague. After this study, we concluded that parents needed guidance, and with a few colleagues we decided to set up this foundation. In recent years we have focused intensively on the khat problem.*

## **Active in one's own neighbourhood**

10% of the respondents says to be socially active in their own neighbourhood. Not everyone calls this a contribution or volunteering. Additionally, there are many people that clear away garbage or cut hedges for example. And there are people who mainly see their contribution in their attitude towards others.

A policy adviser from the former Yugoslavia says:

*Well, you know what I find so crazy, that I still often hear people say that people in Amsterdam do not say hello to each other. I really don't get that. I have lived here for over a year and know all my neighbours. [...] And I always greet people in the street and they greet me back. [...] It is that easy. I think we could make quite a big difference with that, if you would only let others know that you see them.*

Some interviewees focus on particular groups of people in the neighbourhood. The unemployed mother that helps other mothers to look after children in the neighbourhood, the philosophic all-rounder that offers assistance to patients with schizophrenia in his environment, the social entrepreneur and ecologist that set up a project for newcomers to the area, the sporty taxi driver that wants to get loitering youths of the street by giving them boxing lessons, the cultural businesswoman organising meetings for other women and parents from the neighbourhood, and so on.

Others are less focused on a specific audience. They work consciously on projects and initiatives to connect different groups of the population with each other and to turn their own neighbourhood or district into a place where they themselves and other people from different backgrounds feel at home. They do this out of a sense of ownership of the area and would like others to feel ownership as well.

The Somali social entrepreneur and ecologist that has been mentioned earlier, is also active in the neighbourhood in The Hague where he lives:

*I have been a board member of the residents association for five years. In addition, I was part of the work group liveability and I was a factor for other groups and residents, in connecting natives and immigrants. [...] We organise activities for the residents and if there are complaints or questions we address them. [...] We have set up a beautiful project called 'Welcome Home', to welcome those who have come into the newly built houses and connect them and the residents association. We also inform them about where they can go and where the library and pharmacy are, for example. In everything I do I was or wanted to be a unifying factor, but you have to do that to improve something, to contribute.*

A good example of such a person who feels co-owner of the neighbourhood where he lives and that puts a lot of energy in neighbourhood innovation is a Bosnian interior designer:

*Until now I' have been a very involved neighbour of the Indian neighbourhood in Amsterdam East, I am involved in many activities to make life better in this part of Amsterdam. [...] And perhaps because of the success of the Meevaart community centre where I also am involved, I often get visits from other parts of the city, from other cities and even from abroad. People giving a tour knock on my door and say that I should introduce myself and give a short speech. [...] The success of the Meevaart lies in the massive involvement of all types of people with different backgrounds. It is completely different from the classic cliché of what a community centre is. So a place where people play cards, dominoes, drink tea and sit around doing nothing. This is a bustling centre with heaps of activities, in line with international developments and innovative ideas on how to live together in society.*

As with paid work the interviewed refugees seek a way to create a space to make them feel part and even co-owner of that environment through their commitment to their environment. The space that they want to create and the way in which they fill it are automatically different from the traditional forms of community work.

## **Raising children**

A small part of the respondents talks about raising their children, within the context of contributing to the city. They speak about raising children to be good people that in turn will contribute to society.

Much more interviews show a strong focus on the future of the children, without being immediately appointed as a contribution. This focus is certainly linked to being a refugees (many people are fleeing because of the future of the children) and to their own position as a newcomer, that cannot always find work at his own level. If you have doubts about your own possibilities and career prospects it is logical to project the expectations you might have once had to onto your children. But it's not just about career prospects, also raising children to be good people and good citizens is seen as fundamental for the future.

Sometimes concrete examples are mentioned, like a Chilean father who in addition to his work with the elderly and organising a Chilean football club, also mentions the contributions of his now adult children:

*I see my work with the elderly as a contribution to the city. And... that my children could integrate in society. And now they are contributing themselves. [...] Today my son is involved in integration through sports and his children. My daughter as well, through museum visits and other activities.*

Other parents expressed it more in general, like the Afghan academic counsellor, that in addition to her volunteer work for a foundation that supports schools in Afghanistan and the Refugee Foundation mentions raising her children as a contribution:

*I chose to have children because I really wanted it myself, I just had a desire to have children. But I think your contribution is ultimately that you bring really good people into the world that do something good here. If you give them a good life, and they ultimately become good people that can give something back.*

There are also respondents that see their involved parenting as a form of a contribution. They talk about their voluntary assistance during activities at the school of their children, for example, about being there for other (single) parents with regard to babysitting and transporting children to sports activities.

## **Educating is choosing**

Refugees who (further) educate their children in Netherlands are faced with the question of how to strike a balance between the norms, values and parenting styles that are important in the country of origin and those in the new country. Sometimes they are the same. Sometimes they are not.

Almost all respondents indicated that they want to prepare their children for a life in the Netherlands. The Dutch way of dealing with each other is characterised by him as 'direct'. People here openly say what they think, as opposed to the dealings in their country of origin. Most interviewees see the benefits of this 'immediacy' and 'openness', even though they are not used to it themselves. Children should be made aware of Dutch manners that are seen as more efficient but less warm. An Iranian film maker tells:

*One thing in Iran that I really cannot stand is the whole Tarof [social norms]. All those social codes just irritated me. I really was thinking 'Well, just be normal'. Or that you have to eat, while you are not hungry. Or that you wake up in the morning and then want to do something.*

*Well, it is not easy to get it done. It takes so long. Then first we extensively do this and then that. There simply is no planning in the day, so to speak. While here you plan. You only plan in the Netherlands. And you are used to it.*

An element which the interviewees almost all seem to hold on to is the respect that you expect from children towards their parents, but also towards their teachers and towards the elderly in general. It is explained that one is used to negotiating more with the children, but the final word is up to the parents. An Eritrean woman who came to the Netherlands at age 7 talks about the way she educates her children.

*I think I enter more into a discussion with my children. In the sense that you let them choose what they want. Do you want to do your homework now, so we can do that in the afternoon? [...] Those are the kind of discussions I have with my children, I do let them choose themselves. While with my parents it was: 'this has to be done and it will be done'.*

The same woman who considers herself as very Dutch, answers the question about what is still Eritrean about the education of her children as follows:

*Well, one of the things where I see a very big difference [with a Dutch upbringing] is respect for your parents, how do you deal with your parents? So in that sense I do want them to receive a little bit from the Eritrean upbringing. So you don't talk back to your parents. You can argue with each other, but your parents are still your parents.*

An Ethiopian woman from the surrounding area of Utrecht found that the way in which she educates her children is also appreciated by the Dutch.

*They [her children] are not like other children. [...] This is also confirmed by the Marenaars [residents of Maarn]. They say 'How did you raise them? They truly are humble, helpful'.*

An Iranian man who arrived here as a little boy of seven years old tells how he handles both worlds in his work.

*I see it as a positive point, namely that you can switch easily between two cultures. But on the other hand, you can also weave a bit of the Iranian culture in with the Dutch culture. People are charmed by that. [...] That is my experience. Because I work in a store. I use it a little of that directness, but also the polite Iranian culture. I see that people, for example the Dutch, love it. They don't know it. It is giving a lot of attention, which is what they love. That is very respectful.*

## **Political contributions**

Part of the interviewees highly appreciate the Dutch political system, especially because of their background, and therefore are voting loyally and they want to be politically active. But there also are respondents that because of their experience with dictatorial regimes or a corrupt political system - sometimes combined with the changing political climate in the Netherlands - no longer believe in politics. This expresses itself in not voting (anymore), or cancel party membership out of protest and looking for other ways to bring about social change.

About 10% of the respondents has indicated that they are active in politics. This involves a variety of forms. There are people who are (have been) a member of a political party, a council or advisory board for the City Council, people that address certain specific interests or issues within and outside of politics and there are people who are in the Netherlands that focus(ed) on politics members in the country of origin. (This last group is not counted as being politically active in the Netherlands).

The most common political activity is targeted representation of a particular interest or directed to raise a particular social issue. Think of the Iranian lawyer who is politically active because she feels that it is unfair that a group of former refugees cannot naturalise by new regulations, or the Somali controller that raises the evictions of Somali children to the Hague municipal politics. Some have achieved their political ambitions by going into politics. Others are still thinking about it.

The motives mentioned for political activity are almost always the same: Everyone wants to do something for others or change something and is convinced that this can be achieved through politics. In practice, some devote themselves to public affairs and others mainly focus on improving the situation of refugees.

An example of someone who in his own words has a "political heart" is the controller from Somalia that wants to give up her job to focus entirely on her political ambition:

*My motive to go into politics is the fact that with politics you can make quite a difference for people, huh. And that can be very small from, let's say, the demolition of very old houses and simply put decent affordable housing there, to the foreign policy of a country. And basically anything in between. And if you're just a good politician and you have people's best interest at heart, yes you can get quite a bit done. That's quite a noble pursuit, yeah that would be great. [...] Of course as a local councillor or politician you can choose to specialise and choose a specific focus. With my experience in coaching asylum seekers I can of course defend their interests politically and in any case ensure that something happening with it.*

The changing political climate in the Netherlands is often discussed in the interviews. The discriminatory attitudes of Geert Wilders hit the interviewees' right in the heart and they regret that his ideas are adopted by the other parties. In their perception the Netherlands used to be much more tolerant. Some indicated that they do agree in some respects with the PVV, but not with the way ideas are expressed by Wilders.

Sometimes dissatisfaction about the rise of the political right in the Netherlands and the decrease in tolerance lead to concrete political contributions. An ex-Yugoslav IT manager that was a member of the City Council of Amsterdam for four years, expresses it as follows:

*When I was in the city council I wrote a lot, opinion pieces, especially in the time of the rise of Pim Fortuyn and all that, what has now become Moroccans bashing. I really needed to counteract it. I thought, yes, this is so bad for the Netherlands, for society. I really saw exactly the same mechanisms as those I saw in Yugoslavia before it collapsed. The media are also playing the exact same role, the very same politics that does not know what to do with it and a quantity of emotions, which I found really quite frightening. And that was exactly the reason for me to become a councillor. I really thought, very naive, I have to save the country.*

A rural politician from Iran explicitly rejects distinguishing people the way the PVV does. The main reason he mentions for "his love and passion for politics" is to mean something for people and society from within politics. He is worried about the current developments:

*Especially in recent years, I see that there are very strange things happening in politics. Like the government we have known Rutte I, with the VVD, CDA and tolerance partner PVV. I really thought that was unacceptable in terms of human rights and constitutional state. A constitutional state in which everyone is equal and has freedoms. But a real distinction between people based on ethnicity, nationality, colour or religion was made. Yeah, look, I fled to a country where those things are equal. I thought 'that isn't possible in my free the Netherlands. So I started protesting, through publications, the media and debates. And I have also written an open letter to Prime Minister Rutte, in which I explained exactly what he is doing wrong in the light of human rights and ensuring their international law. And my letter was also published in the Volkskrant. Well, then there was a huge debate. The important thing is that that debate is refuelled every time and shakes people up, making people aware of what they should do. [...] At one point my own PvdA entered into the government in 2012 and started to do crazy things, such as criminalisation of illegal residence. Well, then I started my petition and my action. My petition went like clockwork. [...] But there are also other things happening, for example, that children of asylum seekers are locked up in when they arrive at the border detention. So very fundamental, so essential. Luckily, that is now off the table, but we have to keep fighting.*

As mentioned, the past in the country of origin and the own experience as a refugee play a role in the political choices of the interviewees. For political refugees this is obvious, but it is also addressed among refugees who have fled for safety reasons. They defend the interests of unaccompanied minors, against criminalisation of illegal residence, they fight the label "nationality unknown" and generally fight against various forms of social exclusion and injustice.

There are also interviewees who see that the situation in the Netherlands goes in a direction that they know from their country of origin. For example, this is said by an Iranian entrepreneur from The Hague:

*When I came in '87 to the Netherlands, I thought it was fantastic how people were loyal to their leader, to politics. I grew up in an atmosphere in which politics cannot be trusted. And what I see, unfortunately, is that it is happening here as well. And that is very sad because this is an impoverishment of this society. The enemy is within us, not outside. I am the biggest enemy of myself. For me Rutte is exactly the same as Rohani. Exactly the same as Ahmadinejad. Exactly the same as George W. Bush. Exactly the same as Jacques Chirac. I see little differences. Only we are listening selectively. Look at this book. The New Asian Hemisphere, Kishore Mahbubani. The man analyses the rise of capitalism. The pillars on which the Western democracy is based. How will a nation work and what are the lessons? What does Asiz do differently than Europe and the West? And are you also talking about a double standard. If Ahmadinejad denies the Holocaust, the world is standing on its hind legs. While if the MEP Marine Le Pen does so, yes you hear a few politicians, but nobody is leaving the room. This situation makes me sad, sometimes angry. Then I calm down again. This evokes some emotions within me. I quit. For example, I do not vote anymore. Disrespect for politics. [...] I see a new movement rising in the*



*world, which in fact will lead the way to a new way of life. And I try to contribute to that movement.*

## **Image perception/ influencing narrative**

The presence of refugees has affected the image perception in society, at an individual and collective level. Having a different perspective plays a role anywhere, anytime. Of the 124 respondents about 12% said they are explicitly involved in changing perception and influencing the social narrative. This involves among other things: making people think about the current intolerance in the Netherlands, making people aware of the country of origin (including events, people and stereotyping), conducting an active campaign for a particular ideal. Some do it informally through personal interactions, others really seek publicity.

Someone who clearly wants to make people in the Netherlands aware about the country they come from is the Chilean reintegration consultant who says:

*I think I have done an important job in Rotterdam through festivals, sometimes just by giving interviews or by making people aware of what Chile is and what Chile means, and that we are Chileans. That we aren't forgotten people that we haven't all gone back to Chile.*

Someone that sought the (social) media and politics to address a social problem is a jurist coming from Iran:

*In June last year I started this initiative, and it's called "nationality unknown". And that has to do with the fact that when you're a refugee your card mentions your nationality as unknown. That was also on my card. Because your nationality is simply not known. And that produces a lot of questions at parties, at school, at work. You run into a lot of things. And in 2007, a large group of 27.000 refugees received their residence permit at once through a pardon. And they would then normally be able to naturalise after five years of valid residence, so they could get their Dutch passport in 2012. Only in 2009 the rules were changed suddenly and they must provide a birth certificate and passport from their home country in order to naturalise. And those are papers that a refugee simply cannot provide easily or that have been lost along the way. And without those papers it is impossible to naturalise, so your nationality remains unknown. And then you will run into a lot of limitations, regardless of the emotional story, the fact that not everything is legally correct and the powerlessness it entails. [...] We simply started on Facebook, and the aim is to create awareness about this. And thus to send a political signal, 'Hey, this is not right, there is a social problem that requires a solution.' And we have already accomplished a lot. I was able to realise a partnership with the Dutch Refugee Council, I have had contact with different politicians, we operate on social media, I gave lectures and short presentations at the University of Utrecht, and I've been on TV.*

An Iranian fashion designer and exporter is an example of a person that primarily describes his contribution as 'showing people different visions':

*I think I can show people how differently people with different backgrounds can live. I for example have many friends of different nationalities. But when you sit down together, if you're*

*going to cook food or if you exchange with each other, the other person is thinking 'how nice'. About things they do not have in their tradition. That may just be a contribution to the city, right? That you seek to show different perspectives to others. [...] Every time we talk with people, with you, with a woman, with a criminal on the street, they go home with a different mindset. And yes, I am kind of a key figure who transformed understanding of people in Rotterdam.*

A social entrepreneur from Iran, who operates in Amsterdam East, says:

*I am part of a network that takes me seriously and would like to invite me and that's partly because of the person I am, and because of the way I talk and think. And I have been a co-determiner of the narrative of this city. [...] But the effect is in your attitude. How you as a resident of Amsterdam deal with other residents of Amsterdam at a given time and how we speak to each other about what it means that the city belongs to all of us. What does it require from you and me, of the way we should deal with each other to shape that shared ownership of the city horizontally and equally? And I will play a role in that for as long as I have the energy.*

### **3. Artistic and cultural contributions**

As many as a quarter of the respondents mentions his/her artistic and cultural contributions as essential to his or her person. These are contributions to literature, art, theatre, film and music. There are professional poets, film-makers, playwrights, musicians, graphic designers, designers and artists among those interviewed and there are people who do not work directly as an artist or are identified as such, but that once have written a book or made a film or that attach great importance to the music or the poetry they make as an amateur.

Some of the respondents were artists in their country of origin and have fled for that reason. Others have only emerged as an artist in the Netherlands when the conditions forced them to think (again) about the training they wanted to do or the type of work that suited them. It goes for almost all artists that their artistry is linked to social engagement.

An Iraqi-Kurdish poet from Utrecht who had to flee because of his poetry tells how through his background his contribution differs from the contribution of other poets.

*In the poetry group to which I belong, I am the only one who was born in another country. Instinctively I feel quite different, yes. Some things have become self-evident because I have now been living in the Netherlands for a long time. 'Hey man, how are you?', that sort of thing. But of course, when it comes to how they think, how we live, it's different from what I think. In our work, I do see differences. But that's also good. [...] I write differently because my poems have a whole different perspective. Another imagination, a different approach to life. And yet described in the Dutch language. That is the contribution. I hope.*

Other interviewees also say that they show a different perspective through their work. By making a film that does not show the stereotypical image of Afghanistan, for example, or a painting in which Chilean colours and styles are processed, a CD where 'oriental' instruments and music styles are mixed

with European classical music, a book about life in an Iranian women's prison, dresses inspired by Somali wedding traditions, and so on.

Like socio-cultural initiatives and entrepreneurship, being an artist provides room to process the own backgrounds and to experiment with forms in which identity and individuality can develop. The individuality of artists with a refugee background is generally valued positively in the eyes of the respondents. But there is also someone that was discouraged by teachers at the art academy to make the influences of their own cultural background visible.

It is striking that many people tell relatives in their childhood had a significant influence on their choice of using art as a form of expression. A brother who was in a theatre group and took his younger brother that was curious, a mother that, once she found that her daughter was interested in drawing and art, bought books and materials for her, a father who played proud and encouraged his sons since childhood to do so as well, and so on.

A Vietnamese telecom engineer tells how his father has influenced his passion for the saxophone:

*I feel a lot of passion for music. That is actually caused by my father. When I was about eight or nine years old, he bought a saxophone. And since then I always had the feeling that I should do something with it. Yes, when I finished the MTS, I decided to learn to play. Yeah, that was a dream for me to achieve that. [...] Subconsciously I feel the emotional bond with my father through the saxophone. Yes, he appreciates it very much. And I also think it is a wonderful instrument.*

Or the poet that is famous in Afghanistan, who describes the influence of her literary and artistic family and her proud parents with gratitude:

*At our house we had magazines, books and stories about very serious issues. I was really lucky to grow up in such a family. I am still especially proud of my father and my mother. [...] Every time I went somewhere to recite poetry, my mother was so happy that a month long she talked about it with everybody. [...] My mother did not have the chance to read poetry, to act anywhere. She saw herself in me. She was so proud of me. She talked to everybody about me: 'My daughter is a poet. She writes very nice poems, and also books.' And my father was proud of my poems, because he also was a poet himself. He also has a collection of poems and he grew up with poems, with grandmother and grandfather who both only talked in the language of poetry. My father was also my friend.*

Another familiar pattern is that almost all people link the art form they practice as a hobby or a profession to emotional processing. Respondents say that poetry, painting, making music or acting is the main outlet in their lives. It gives them strength to translate their feelings through an instrument, canvas, poem, book, movie or theatre play and it helps them discover who they are.

A resident employee of an Anthroposophic foundation for handicapped people, from Bosnia, processes his traumas as a former military, among other things, through playing the guitar. He describes his relationship with his guitar as follows:

*Music brings out the best in me. [...] My guitar is my best friend, who always stands by me, in good and bad times. I can express myself and my feelings with it. Then I can be who I am. Together with my guitar. [...] The guitar and I are inseparable, for ever.*

An Iranian accountant and artist who paints and writes:

*Painting for me was a nice hobby and when I arrived in the Netherlands I also did it. I have also had many exhibitions here. I wanted to express my feelings with colours and that was just my thing. It was the only thing that could make me happy.*

Art forms are also used to discuss social issues or to enrich the lives of others. Sometimes this is done by amateurs, sometimes by professional artists.

Like the social entrepreneur that fled from Iran who wanted to counter the arrival of centres for asylum seekers in 1987 (due to the ghetto-like character) and chose the means of theatre, among other things.

*So we performed throughout the country with issues relating to refugee status and so on. And our group was called Zwarte Komedie (Black Comedy). We have been active until 1992, 1993, I think. Yes, we have performed a lot.*

Or the Chilean visual artist and poet, who in addition to his work at the Rotterdam art foundation and his own exhibitions and publications, established a children's workshop:

*Yes, I am very much concerned about the fact that, for example, in Delfshaven there is a generation of children growing up with the feeling that art and culture in the city of Rotterdam actually is for other people and not for them. Within their own families art and culture is not a big theme. They do not visit the theatre or a museum in Rotterdam and they don't attend cultural activities within the city. They are too much involved in religion and only go to meeting places of their own community. But the city of Rotterdam is big, diverse and rich in art and culture. So that is why I started a children's workshop. To help a little bit, to give children the feeling that they have more opportunities than the ones they are told about at home.*

Or the Iranian painter, who in addition to her exhibitions and voluntary lectures on art and geopolitics, guided clients with disabilities in drawing and painting:

*I was a supervisor at the day care centre. And I have been able to get people out with this initiative and that was really something very positive and great for the group and for myself. Yes. My husband and I have brought the drawings and paintings of all those clients to a large room in Amersfoort and hung them there. [...] And yes, that isolated group of people came there, and they were impressed with their work. That was fun. But further I was really looking for places where I can do these things. And all unpaid.*

## Conclusions and follow-up questions

The 124 analysed interviews in which people from ten refugee communities tell their life, with an emphasis on their time in the Netherlands and their perception of the city where they live, provide an extremely interesting picture of their contributions to the Dutch society in general and the development of the four major cities in particular.

The material shows a largely positive picture about the contributions of refugees. That's not surprising, since it is they themselves who are speaking. However, this does not mean that everyone only spoke in positive words about contributions. There were enough respondents who thought they did not contribute at all, because they had never thought about themselves in that way.

That, the researchers who watch the stories with more distance, mostly describe the contributions of the interviewed refugees as positive has to do with the enormous perseverance and resilience that emanates from almost all interviews. Respondents, each in their own way, seek to conquer their own place: through work, volunteering in their own communities, by art, by setting up their own business and so on. With this and with their social commitment, they contribute to the vitality of the city and they play an important role in the reception and integration of newcomers.

When we look at the kind of help that is mentioned, we can separate these in contributions at the level of 'thinking', of 'doing' and 'being'. The *thinking* is more about concepts such as human dignity, justice and freedom, about the pros and cons of political systems and the question of which way social change can come about. The *doing* of the interviewed refugees relates mainly to work, entrepreneurship, social activity and artistic contributions. The list of ways in which they, in addition to their work, committed to their community or to the wider society is impressive. The *being* of refugees in the four cities has an impact on their environment, also in their own experience. People react to their presence and their being different sometimes forces them to take action to change existing images. In a sense, the contribution at the level of being can also be described as negative. The fact that there are refugees leads to negative reactions and feelings of insecurity among people who do not know them. These reactions have an effect on politics that chooses a direction that frightens most refugees.

According to the interviews, you cannot escape your own life history as a refugee. The fact that you ever fled, and the reason why, continues in your thinking and doing, even if you do not want it to. An ICT professional in Iran can, when asked about his contribution, just refer to his work as an ICT specialist and choose which group he considers himself to be in. That same ICT specialist in the Netherlands cannot escape the fact that he is seen as an Iranian and as a refugee and that he also considers himself to be part of the two groups. This fact colours his existence and the answers that he gives when asked for his contribution. Therefore, there is no one among the interviewees who has not in any way linked to the question about his contribution to his history as a refugee. Many refugees derive tremendous resilience from finding their own ways to realise their existence and worrying about the fate of others, because of their experiences some become, as it were, paralysed and see their lives come to a standstill from the moment they have left their country as refugees.

What makes a refugee substantially different from a migrant or a Dutchman, is the being an exile. For an exile axioms fall away because he rejects the system where he comes from and, moreover, has

primarily no chosen to leave his country. The position of being an outsider makes a refugee look differently at his new environment, than the "established". By his 'being' the exile challenges the status quo and looks for new ways to contribute. It is striking in the material how many of the refugees we spoke to are looking for a space where they can be themselves, where they can forge their experiences from the country of origin, of the fleeing and of integrating into a new society to a new whole.

Not only the life story of the interviewees, but also the context of time and place of the society in which they found themselves, affect the way in which they contribute. The character of the city and the organisation and societies that exist therein also define the content and the form of the contributions and can also affect the further development of the identity of the refugee. Refugees who arrived during the seventies, mainly organised mainly in (politically motivated) interest organisations. Refugees who come now find a city in which paying jobs are no longer so obvious and in which young people from different backgrounds come together in startups and network-like partnerships that offer plenty of room to experiment with identity and individuality. In that sense there is a clear interaction between refugees and the cities in which they live. Through their pursuit of space for their identity and other perspectives they contribute to a broader urban development and the vitality of the city. In turn, that broader urban development contributes to the development opportunities of refugees.

This memorandum is based on a portion of the oral history material which has been collected in Specially Unknown. That same material and the interviews that have not yet been coded, providing a basis for many other research questions. Examples of this are:

1. Are there differences between refugees from the various communities and what are these differences about?
2. Are there differences in the way the interviewed refugees experience the relationship with the various cities and how does this manifest itself?
3. What is the significance of the material to substantiate or even change the current integration policy? What lessons can be drawn from the stories that are of interest for the integration and well-being of new refugees?