

**enaro**  
EUROPEAN NETWORK OF ASYLUM RECEPTION  
ORGANISATIONS

POLICY EXCHANGE

Holland – Sweden

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Please see also the COA web: [http://coaweb/cb\\_kgb/standaards/rapport.htm](http://coaweb/cb_kgb/standaards/rapport.htm)



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## 1 Introduction

This report is the result of my visit to Sweden organised in April as an ENARO exchange programme. But since my visit was nothing like the usual ENARO exchange, this report is different too. The exchange is usually meant for COA reception assistants who want to cooperate with their foreign colleagues to see in practice how the reception of asylum seekers is organised in the country they visit, and to gain inspiration for their own work and to write a report about it.

My idea was to exchange ideas with policymakers abroad. I am a policymaker at the COA Head Office in the Netherlands, and it was my aim to talk with colleagues in Sweden about various policies. Not only did I want to study the various policies on various issues but I also wanted to examine the process of policymaking and the way this is organised in Sweden. However, it turned out differently. The first part of this report describes my expectations and what it turned out to be.

Nevertheless, I received much information from many helpful people, and it gave me a fairly good idea about what we could learn from Sweden and even what Sweden could learn from us. This is described in the second part of this report. The recommendations for COA in the Netherlands are given in Chapter 3, and the recommendations for the Migration Board in Sweden in Chapter 4.

The ideas I gathered in Sweden were very useful to me, and I have already been applying them in actual practice. I do hope that my colleagues find this report useful, and that it may give them ideas to work on.

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## 2 Policy exchange

### 2.1 My visit to Sweden

As a policymaker at the COA head office I have been following ENARO activities for about two years. Whenever my colleagues were about to leave for participation in the ENARO exchange programme, I gave them a list of questions, was present at their presentations and read their reports when they were back again. The answers to my questions were usually on the operational level, and therefore not always useful for the purpose I had in mind. I came to the conclusion that exchange programmes should be horizontal; reception officers on the operational level with reception officers, policymakers with policymakers and maybe managers with managers on comparable levels.

To me it seemed that the diagonal exchange of information did not work. Moreover, I started to wonder how the process of policymaking was organised in other countries. As we are constantly searching for better ways of organising contacts with the field and for ways to let them participate in the process of developing policies I thought we could get ideas from other countries as they are dealing with the same issues. Since I am a policy official at the head office I wanted an exchange programme to meet policymakers at the head office in the country of my visit.

I had been trying to convince my co-workers in my organisation of the importance of an exchange programme for policymakers for almost a year and a half. When I heard that I could go to Sweden I was very pleased that my requests were having effect. But being so enthusiastic about the result I did not realise that I did not get the exchange programme I was hoping for. On my arrival in Sweden it turned out that I had the same programme as Dutch reception officers. It took me a whole week to find out what had gone wrong and how I ended up in Flen while the Migrationsverket Head Office was in Norrköping. At the end of the week I realised that there was still a long way to go for exchanging policymakers within the ENARO network.

The ENARO network started the exchange programmes only on the operational level for two reasons:

- the belief that one can really do the actual work on this level: working together with foreign colleagues and experiencing in practice a different way of working.
- the belief that 'best practices' are easiest to exchange on the operational level.

Personally, I do not share this opinion. I saw that there was little practical work to do by the reception officers, and they largely spent their time on talking about their work and about exchanging ideas and experiences. Neither do I believe that the exchange of 'best practices' is easiest on the operational level: I often saw people coming back with novel ideas that they thought could be implemented in the Netherlands, but were rejected, as they were not considered useful in the Dutch situation. I thought that, being a policy advisor at the head office, I was in a better position to use ideas from other countries and integrate them into our policies.

During my one-week stay in Sweden I came to the conclusion that the women who had organised my visit had more faith in the original philosophy of the ENARO exchange programmes, and this may have been the reason why I did not get the programme I had hoped for: an exchange programme with policymakers at the head office. Before organising exchanges with other levels, it is necessary to evaluate the principles of ENARO. I still think that exchanges on the operational level are a good idea but that does not alter the fact that exchanges can be more effective when combined with exchanges with policymakers and other positions.

For me it was very interesting to be in Sweden together with a Dutch reception officer. We talked a lot about our jobs and about what we saw in Sweden and how this could be used in the Netherlands. In these discussions it was good that we could combine my theoretical and strategic viewpoints with her knowledge about methods and the way things work in practice. It is not advisable that two people with different

positions have the same programme (as we had) but it was nice to be based in the same town and have the possibility to meet.

I hope my visit and my experience will contribute to the further development of ENARO; I am convinced that exchange programmes are very useful for all of us.

### **3 Ideas for the Netherlands**

In the next chapters, I describe what I believe the Netherlands could learn from Sweden, and vice versa. First I communicate the useful ideas I picked up from Sweden to be used in the Dutch system, and then I will name some ideas that Sweden could use.

#### **3.1 One organisation**

The Dutch IND (Immigration and Naturalisation Services) is responsible only for the asylum procedure, and the Dutch COA (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) is responsible only for the reception of asylum seekers. In Sweden, the Migrationsverket is responsible for both tasks: not only the procedure but also the reception. Without speaking my mind about which system is to be preferred, I will explain the advantages of the Swedish system and what the Netherlands could learn from that. (the advantages of the Dutch system will be dealt with in the next chapter).

In Sweden, all information about the asylum seeker is accessible to all workers, reception officers, caseworkers and handling officers. They all communicate the same clear message to the asylum seeker. In the Netherlands we could see how far we can go in working together with the Immigration Services to have the same effect. The way we organised and the COA and IND co-operated in the 'Terugkeer Project' [Return Project] can be a good starting-point for exploring the possibilities for further collaboration.

#### **3.2 Knowledge of legislation**

It appeared that all staff of Migrationsverket know the legislation on their part of the work. They are aware that their decisions can have legal consequences and that they must apply the rules for making decisions. They usually have the law books on their desk and they use them as manuals.

In the Netherlands, most staff do not know all regulations about the reception of asylum seekers, and they are not always aware of the legal consequences of their decisions. The Rva (Regulation on Financial Support to Asylum Seekers) is not accessible to all staff, and seems to be only a matter that lawyers need to worry about. I believe that this must be changed in the Netherlands, and instead of hiring more lawyers we had better make the law more accessible to staff and increase reception officers' knowledge about this subject.

#### **3.3 Selecting accommodation**

In Sweden, asylum seekers can choose where they want to live: staying with friends or relatives or renting accommodations of their own. If asylum seekers stay with friends, they will receive the same monthly allowance as the people who live at the Migrationsverket's Centre, plus € 35 extra. Though € 35 is by far not enough to pay a month's rent, most people opt for arranging their own accommodations. For the rest, they have the same rights and duties as the asylum seekers living in the Centre. The Migrationsverket pays the travelling expenses if the asylum seeker is officially invited to the Centre for an interview or other important business.

The issue of accommodation is more complicated in the Netherlands. It is officially not compulsory to live in a reception centre, but many (both asylum seekers and reception officers) do not know that. However, asylum seekers living somewhere else receive only limited allowances from COA, so this option is only open to asylum seekers who have money of their own.

We intend to make some changes here. Firstly, all asylum seekers must be informed about the choice they have between living in the Centre with benefits, and living somewhere else without benefits. Secondly, we intend to stop the allowances for people who officially live at the Centre, but who are hardly ever present.

However, the Swedish system does have its drawbacks as well: living in too small apartments with too many people, problems with the municipality or with the neighbours. But I'd rather have this Swedish system also enforced in the Netherlands and offer asylum seekers financial benefits, even if they do not live at the Centre. After all, they are adults who are supposed to be capable of taking care of their lives and making their own decisions.

### 3.4 Reception

Sweden organises the reception of asylum seekers differently from the Netherlands. Accommodation for asylum seekers is not concentrated in centres but in apartments spread all over town, where living conditions are quite normal and allow asylum seekers to take responsibility of their own condition. The other system, letting all asylum seekers live in an asylum seekers' centre, is equal to letting them live in an artificial environment, which carries problems of its own. One of these problems is that it is hard for the residents to take responsibilities, especially in combination with the problem of not having the option of living somewhere else.

### 3.5 Return policy

I must say that I was rather disappointed about the return policy in Sweden, at least about the part taken care of by the reception officers. It appeared to me that the procedure part was arranged quite well, though it was difficult for me to judge since I work for the COA reception agency and not for IND Immigration Services. I do realise that having too high expectations caused my disappointment; so far I had only heard enthusiastic stories about the 'success of the Swedish return policy'. But when asking the return officers, who do the talking with the rejected asylum seekers, they told me that there is not much they can do but to give rejected asylum seekers over and over again the same message that there is no point in staying and that they should prepare themselves to return to their home country. The return officers have the power to force asylum seekers to return, but their power is limited and can only be exerted in certain circumstances and under certain conditions. All in all, the return officer felt she had "no stick, no carrot" and that it was usually a matter of who was holding out longest.

Nevertheless, I found the combination of the two issues mentioned above very successful: the way the reception is organised and the possibility that the asylum seekers can select their accommodation. This way, they feel responsible for their own lives and, at the same time, will realise how difficult it is to find their way in a new country. I elaborated on this issue in the enclosed paper.

### 3.6 Working permit

Asylum seekers in Sweden who follow the 'normal' procedure are allowed to work from day one. The Migrationsverket can exempt them from the usual restrictions of working permit requirements. Asylum seekers in the Netherlands are allowed to work for 12 weeks in 12 months after having been in the procedure for six months and if they live in a reception centre. The **employee has to apply for a work permit**, which comes with a lot of paperwork and takes a few weeks. The Ministry of Justice intends to change the law about this. They assume that allowing the asylum seekers to work is not consistent with the new return policy: they still see working as an integration activity and not as a means of stimulating people to return. I personally see it more in the prospective of giving people the possibility to be responsible for their own lives. I would like to see that having a job fits in with usual expectations and that benefits, allowances or welfare money must be reserved for those who are unable to work. This would be

the normal situation, and is healthier and more respectful for the people. I even think it would help to make the return policy successful. I am afraid that this may be going too far for both countries, and will be partially implemented in so far as getting allowances only when duties are fulfilled. (see further on in this chapter).

For now, it is wise to examine how working possibilities can fit in with the return policy. Sweden, for that matter, had a proposal for changing the law, and this was discussed in the Swedish Parliament at the time of my visit. The proposal was to give permission for work only to those asylum seekers who have been helpful in giving information about their identity. The Dutch IND and COA could examine, together with the Ministry, the conditions under which asylum seekers can work, to make a work permit a tool for the return policy.

### **3.7 Asylum seeker's duties**

In Sweden, it is mandatory for asylum seekers to attend lessons, and they must also take care of their accommodation. It is also compulsory to meet the appointments with the handling and reception officers. We do not have this system in the Netherlands, but there are plans to introduce this practice next year.

We can learn from Sweden that we need to give asylum seekers an alternative to attending the courses. Many asylum seekers are willing to carry out duties and to do their share of the activities, but hate going to school. Forcing them is no use, as they may be physically present at school but cannot digest the subject matter. Sweden offers alternative activities, such as voluntary work.

### **3.8 IT**

The new IT system that has recently become operative appears to be a good system. I was very impressed to see that all appointments were registered, and that all staff could look it up. The system is particularly helpful in giving consistent information to the asylum seekers. I really hope that Dutch IT experts can study the Swedish system and develop a similar application to be used in our organisation.

Other staff in the exchange project have already mentioned this new IT system. I wonder whether they all refer to the same system, or if there are several new systems.

### **3.9 Day-care and playgroups**

Swedish authorities assume that parents are responsible for the care of their children. The Migrationsverket does not have any organised day-care for babies and small children when their parents are in school. However, parents can attend class at different times so they can look after the children in turns. A solution must be found for the single parent, but it is assumed that they arrange something with other parents. In the Netherlands, almost all reception centres have day-care facilities but this may change. Perhaps we can benefit from the experience they have in Sweden with this issue.

## 4 Ideas for Sweden

Not only did I see useful ideas for the Netherlands, but I also saw ideas that could be useful for Sweden.

### 4.1 One organisation

Having one organisation for all tasks has certainly advantages: all information is easily accessible for everyone, and it is easier to find each other and work towards the same goals. The disadvantage is that one of the tasks may be in danger of being overlooked. I had the impression that the procedure side is better developed than the reception side, but I may be wrong, as I did not have so much time to study this issue.

Although everybody knows that the reception of asylum seekers is a task carried out by the Migrationsverket, it is remarkable that their own website did not mention this. The website says the following about the Migrationsverket:

The Migration Board is Sweden's central government authority for aliens' affairs. This means that we are responsible for

- permits for people visiting and settling in Sweden
- the asylum process, from application to a residence permit or to a voluntary return home (*återvändande*)
- citizenship affairs
- helping out with voluntary return migration (*återvandring*)
- international work in the EU, UNHCR and other collaborative bodies
- ensuring that all the relevant public authorities work together satisfactorily.

### 4.2 Knowledge of legislation

I have already mentioned in Chapter 3 that we can learn much from Sweden in this respect. There is a lack of knowledge about legislation in the Netherlands, but in Sweden the way of thinking may even be too judicial. Like in the Netherlands, the Swedish Migrationsverket can make its own policies as long as it stays within the framework of the law. In the Netherlands we have policy advisers who think about how to use this space and advise the management on internal policies; in addition, Dutch policy advisers participate in the Ministry's process of policy development. Sweden follows more or less the same line, albeit that all policy advisers seem to be lawyers trying to find the best a way to follow the law, and then translating the law into a set of working instruction for the officers in the country.

### 4.3 Policies and policy development

Unfortunately I could not form a good picture of how the policymaking process is organised in Sweden. I had the impression that the Head Office's staff are very much focussed on the law and on making sure that all members do their work according to the law. Policymaking is up to the management in the regions and to the local heads of divisions.

I didn't see any local policy advisers to support the management in this. However, this does not mean that there aren't any, but I did not meet them. I understood that the new general manager intends to give less freedom in this respect to the lower management and has it in mind to make the organisation more uniform. More uniformity in Sweden would be a good thing, as there are many differences between the regions, and the distance between theory and practice seems big. Policymakers are always in two minds about uniformity: uniformity gives clarity, but restricts creative minds of the lower management by not giving enough space to make their own decisions. I think it is interesting to see how both organisations are looking for a compromise.

#### **4.4 Return policy**

In the Netherlands, allowances and accommodation are stopped when the asylum application is definitively rejected. This is tough, but at the same time very clear. When I was in Sweden I realised that I'd rather have it the Dutch way. In Sweden, allowance is never stopped and continues for as long the asylum seeker is in the country. This, I think, is rather strange: on the one hand saying that somebody is not supposed to be in the country, and on the other hand supporting them financially to stay. Another option is to give people money when they return to their home country. This has already been practised in the Netherlands, and may also be useful for Sweden. It provides the return officers with a stick and with a carrot.

#### **4.5 Working possibilities and allowances**

As already stated in the enclosed paper I had the feeling that Sweden is a very attractive country for asylum seekers. All asylum seekers are allowed to work from day one. They are offered a (place in a) normal apartment in town and receive monthly allowances. The allowance will be stopped if Migrationsverket finds out that the asylum seeker has money of his own or that he is working. But hardly any steps are taken, as there is no method for checking a person's financial position. And even if Migrationsverket knows that the person has salaried work, they stop the monthly allowance but continue to pay the rent, even after the asylum seeker is rejected. And as far as I know, no firm steps are taken if they discover that they work illegally.

I cannot say that these issues are perfectly organised in the Netherlands. The policy on work and income was my field for more than two years. Much has been done, and much needs to be done, and even more cannot be done because of political resistance. But all in all I believe that it would be interesting if somebody from Sweden studied how the policy is implemented in the Netherlands. However, it is beyond the scope of this report to elaborate on this.

#### **4.6 Logistical process**

Logistics is not my field and we have experts on this matter. I am sure that a visit by Swedish specialists to exchange ideas with our specialists would spark off an interesting debate.