

Creating “Shelter Cities” – The Experience in The Netherlands

24 April 2015, by Chris Collier

Introduction

In the last few years, the NGO Justice and Peace has spearheaded the establishment of “shelter cities” in The Netherlands. In these cities, programmes have been or are being established to provide temporary relocation to HRDs at risk for a period of 3-6 months. Since 2012, eight shelter cities have been established. This document is a brief description of these developments, illustrating how shelter cities can be set up. Hopefully the experience in The Netherlands can be useful for NGOs, universities and national governments in other European countries seeking to expand the European shelter city network, previously envisioned in EU policies. For those needing further information, the name and contact details of the responsible staff person at Justice and Peace are provided.

EU policy and initiatives

In advocating for the creation of a shelter city, reference can be made to “Ensuring Protection – European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders” (2008), which states that “providing measures for swift assistance and protection to human rights defenders in danger in third countries, such as, where appropriate, issuing emergency visas and facilitating temporary shelter in the EU member states” is a form of practical support for human rights defenders. In 2009, the Czech Presidency of the EU promoted a “European Shelter City Initiative.” Little information is available on this initiative. However, EU institutions, such as the EEAS and the European Parliament,¹ and EU member states, highlight it and refer to it as being an initiative whereby EU member states provide quicker visas and temporary shelter to HRDs at risk. As such, EU member states can be encouraged to join this initiative.

National government policy

Achieving support from the national government is important in creating “shelter cities.” National governments can provide for quicker issuing of visas to HRDs at risk, can provide funding for the costs related to the provision of temporary shelter, political support for the programme, etc. This support can be highlighted in policy documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Support from the national government can be achieved through lobby and advocacy activities towards the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Another method is to identify political parties who support the idea and encourage and help them to introduce a resolution in the national parliament calling on the government to join the shelter city initiative.

In The Netherlands, a parliamentarian of the Green Party, after obtaining the support of parliamentarians of four other political parties, introduced a resolution in the national parliament in December 2010 calling on the national government to join the “Shelter City Initiative.” In May 2011, the government responded, saying it supports the initiative by issuing short-stay visas more quickly to HRDs at risk. In a policy document a year later, it

¹ For example, in an EU human rights report in 2010, http://eeas.europa.eu/human_rights/docs/hr_report_2010_short_en.pdf, p.8

stated that it supported the “European Shelter City Initiative” elaborated under the Czech EU Presidency in 2009. In practice, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs is involved in the selection of HRDs to whom shelter is provided, provides substantial funding for the programme (€500.000 during 2015-2017), and has arranged a procedure for quickly issuing visas to the HRDs concerned.

Efforts led by Justice and Peace

The creation of shelter cities in The Netherlands has been spearheaded by the NGO Justice and Peace. The NGO developed funding proposals for the programme and got the support and involvement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, cities, and local NGOs and universities in the implementation of the programme. After a one year pilot in The Hague that started in September 2012, the programme has spread to the cities of Middelburg, Nijmegen, Maastricht, Utrecht, Amsterdam, Tilburg and Groningen. Justice and Peace raises awareness about the programme through its international network and receives and assesses applications. It set up an independent committee composed of a representatives of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and NGO/university representatives - to select the HRDs to be hosted according to agreed criteria. JPNL also helps the HRDs arrange a visa.

Getting the cities involved

The involvement of cities has had its basis in action by the city council, consisting of representatives of local political parties. City Council members who support the shelter city idea have introduced a resolution in the council to this end. Justice and Peace has contacted council members and encouraged and supported them to introduce such a resolution. The social-liberal and progressive political party “Democrats 66” has taken a leading role in the city councils. In cooperation with other political parties, especially the Green Party, it has successfully introduced resolutions in the city councils of The Hague, Nijmegen, Utrecht, Amsterdam and Groningen. The resolutions

- describe the role of HRDs, the situation of HRDs at risk, the need for temporary relocation
- the relation of the proposal to EU (“European shelter city initiative,” etc.), national and city policies/practices.
- the objectives of creating a “shelter city,” what it will offer to the HRDs
- how these objectives will be achieved (resources, activities)
- the number of HRDs to be hosted per year and the duration of the relocation period
- the different partners in the project and their roles
- the benefits to/involvement of the city’s population
- estimated cost to the city and how it will be financed
- proposed wording of a council decision

The texts of the resolutions, such as for Groningen and Amsterdam, can be found on the Internet.²

²Groningen: https://groningen.notudoc.nl/cgi-bin/showdoc.cgi?action=view/id=1089342/Shelter_City_Groningen.pdf,
Amsterdam: <http://d66amsterdam.nl/download/141014Sheltercity.pdf>

Key supports provided to HRDs

The key elements that should be offered to the HRDs are: accomodation, a local support person (about 20 hours/week), coverage of living expenses and travel within The Netherlands, health insurance, capacity-building opportunities (computer, language, security, media or other training), medical/psycho-social treatment, opportunities to broaden his/her professional network, possibilities to continue his/her human rights work, and opportunities to raise the human rights awareness of the local population.

A dedicated support person

One local organization has taken responsibility for implementation in each city. It has been an NGO, or a university. They have appointed or recruited a support person, based at the organization, sometimes on a volunteer basis. The organizations have provided work spaces, to enable the HRDs to continue their human rights work, albeit at a distance. As examples, Justice and Peace has provided a support person and work space to HRDs temporarily relocated to The Hague. In Middelburg, at little cost, University College Roosevelt has provided a work space, and an undergraduate student volunteered to be the support person for the sheltered HRD. In Utrecht, Peace Brigades International will employ an intern to provide support to the HRD. The tasks of the intern, similar to the task of the support people in other cities, are:

- accompaniment of the HRD in daily activities
- organizing public meetings featuring the HRD and his/her experience
- arranging and accompanying the HRD to meetings with policy-makers, politicians and NGOs
- writing informative briefings about the HRD
- coordinating with other stakeholders in the project (the City of Utrecht, Justice and Peace, etc.)
- financial management and project administration

Funds provided by cities

In The Netherlands, the total cost of sheltering a HRD for three months is estimated at around €30,000. The role of cities has been mainly to provide a portion of this funding (all or part of the local costs such as a local support person, accomodation, daily allowance, training, production of information material, etc.) The Hague provides €50,000/year for sheltering three HRDs. The City of Amsterdam has budgeted €100,000/year for sheltering four HRDs. Groningen budgeted €40,000 for two HRDs in 2015. The resolution proposed to the Nijmegen City Council contains a total budget for sheltering one HRD.³ The city put aside €40,000 for sheltering four HRDs during a two year period.

Summary

³ See

http://www2.nijmegen.nl/mmbase/attachments/1549721/Shelter_City_Nijmegen_Initiatiefvoorstel_februari_2014.pdf

In the last few years, Justice and Peace has catalyzed the creation of shelter cities in The Netherlands. It has articulated the programme and received funding for its implementation. In each of shelter cities, various partners play a role in implementing the programme. The city has provided funding while other key elements of support to sheltered HRDs, including working space and a dedicated support person, have come from NGOs and universities.

For further information

For further information on shelter cities in The Netherlands, and how they have been established, contact

Guus van Zwoll
Programme Officer Shelter City
guus.van.zwoll@justiceandpeace.nl

JUSTICE  PEACE

Local justice on a global scale

Justice and Peace Netherlands
P.O.Box 508
2501 CM
The Hague
The Netherlands
+31 (0)70 7631499
www.justiceandpeace.nl