

Summary

The Netherlands – the land of paperwork

Syrian permit holders and their experiences with participation policy in the Netherlands

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Summary, conclusions and pointers for policy

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5.1 Qualitative research among Syrian permit holders on their participation experiences in the Netherlands

The central questions in this study are how permit holders from Syria shape and give meaning to their participation in Dutch society and what their experiences are with Dutch participation policy. There have been signs that the participation policy designed for permit holders does not always meet their needs and expectations, partly due to a lack of relevant information. These signals have been observed in, for example, studies into civic integration policy (Netherlands Court of Audit 2017; Kahmann et al. 2018; Significant 2018). Qualitative research among permit holders from Eritrea (Sterckx and Fessehazion 2018) has also flagged up issues when it comes to reaching out and providing adequate support for this group through participation policy. This qualitative study focuses on Syrian permit holders, by far the largest group of refugees who have arrived in the Netherlands in recent years.

Section 5.1 Longitudinal cohort study of asylum seekers and permit holders

This study is part of a larger project involving a longitudinal cohort study of asylum seekers and permit holders, which looks at the position of people who have been granted a refugee status in the Netherlands after 1 January 2014. The project uses registration data (Statistics Netherlands (CBS) 2017, 2018a), surveys (Dagevos et al. 2018) and explorative qualitative research. The first qualitative study was published in 2018 and focused on permit holders from Eritrea in the Netherlands (Sterckx and Fessehazion 2018). This is the second in-depth qualitative study within that project. Using 49 in-depth interviews, 7 walk-along interviews and 2 focus group discussions, the experiences of Syrian permit holders were explored with regard to their participation into Dutch society (see Section 1 for a detailed methodological explanation). A focus on personal experiences allows us to get more insights into the decisions Syrian permit holders make themselves around participation into Dutch society; such as their prioritization, their access to information and their direct experiences with interactions with support organizations and specific members of staff.

A brief profile of the Syrian refugees under study

A total of 31 men and 18 women were interviewed, which corresponds to the gender ratio of Syrian migrants in the Netherlands. The group studied included people of different ages and levels of education, although those with a higher level of education were somewhat overrepresented. The Syrian permit holders in this study are offered housing throughout the whole of the Netherlands as a result of Dutch dispersal policy. The majority are Muslim, like the majority in Syria and also the majority of Syrian migrants in the Netherlands. Eight people with a Christian background were interviewed.

How people are fleeing from Syria: *fragmented, costly and perilous journeys*

The danger and turmoil of the war in Syria were the immediate reasons for fleeing their home country. Men were conscripted to fight and felt compelled to flee because they did not want to risk their lives in this war or were opposed to the regime. Cities were being bombed and people were living in fear for their lives. Because of the war, participation in education had become almost impossible and it became increasingly difficult to survive. Many of the Syrians in this study had been living in a different country before coming to the Netherlands, mainly Turkey. Respondents experienced life in these transit countries as difficult. There were limited opportunities for employment and, in so far as people were working, exploitation and abuse were commonplace. Financial problems and lack of future prospects, for the permit holders themselves and their children, were important reasons for travelling to Europe. The most frequent route taken was by sea through the Greek islands, and then via the Balkan route to the Netherlands. This journey almost always involved paying for the services of human smugglers, and was therefore costly. Those who ended up in camps in Greece have bad memories of the time they spent waiting there. The journey was often perilous, involved transit through various countries, and therefore also took a considerable length of time (see Maliepaard and Schans 2018 for comparable findings).

Arrival in the Netherlands

Many of the Syrians in this study are positive about their initial contact with Dutch people, whom they generally describe as friendly and helpful. The respondents did not mention the protests against the arrival of asylum seekers and permit holders around the time of their arrival in the Netherlands. They felt welcome, which is important for people who have fled from war. It is crucial to create a sense of security and trust, and the feeling of being welcome is essential for subsequent participation in society and the sense of having a place to call home (Ghorashi 2005). Earlier research also indicated that feeling welcome is closely linked with socio-cultural integration, participation and mental health (Dagevos et al. 2018).

The respondents were less positive about the time they spent in reception centres, which, they said, was characterised mainly by waiting: waiting for the outcome of the acceptance procedure and waiting to be allocated a permanent place to live. The lack of privacy in the reception centres and tensions between different groups of asylum seekers were often mentioned, which contributed further to stress and poor mental health. The respondents indicated that they were not very active during the reception period. No language lessons were provided, or these courses were already full. There was overcrowding during the period that the respondents were in the centres. The options for language lessons have since been expanded (through a pre-integration program). Relocations between reception centres, which occurred frequently around 2015, were also perceived as stressful by the respondents. Quantitative research also supports this: frequent relocations between reception locations are not good for the mental health of residents (Wijga et al. 2019; Weeda et al. 2018).

S.2 Four subquestions regarding participation

This report considers how Syrian permit holders shape and give meaning to their participation in Dutch society and what their experiences with Dutch participation policy are. This primary research question is subdivided into four secondary questions, which are answered below.

Which decisions do Syrian permit holders make with respect to their participation in Dutch society, and what are the priorities and considerations behind these decisions?

For all our respondents, learning the language was an important first step in participation in Dutch society. For the Syrian permit holders who were part of this study, social participation means: 'learning the language' and 'meeting Dutch people' in order to improve their Dutch language skills and learn more about the Netherlands. Research among Syrian permit holders in Rotterdam confirms this finding: integration means speaking Dutch and getting to know Dutch people (Damen et al. 2019). For all the respondents, learning the language was at the top of their list of *priorities*. Some wanted to learn the language as quickly as possible, to be able to start a career again, whereas others are struggling to master the Dutch language. The latter group may have psychological problems, that make it difficult or impossible for them to focus and learn the Dutch language.

For two years, I lived like a dead person. I went to school, but often I wasn't able to stay for long because I had so many psychological issues. I frequently had heart palpitations. Sometimes they were so bad that I could not move my body. The ambulance had to come almost every day. They didn't know what was wrong with me, and in the end they said I had psychological problems. My feet were swollen and very hot – it felt like you could cook food on them. When I went to school I had to take my shoes off in class, that's how swollen they were. I often couldn't go to school because I felt so bad.

Worries about close family – or family members who are still in Syria or on their way to Europe – also affected how successfully they were able to learn Dutch. Even in cases where families are reunited, this does not mean that their worries disappear and might still be difficult to focus. For example, several of our respondents divorced after their arrival in the Netherlands which had implications on their daily life and impacted their participation. Research among Syrian and Eritrean permit holders has also pointed to the frequent occurrence of divorces amongst refugees (Damen et al. 2019; Sterckx and Fessehazion 2018). The process of family reunification and the eventual arrival of the partner can lead to tensions and it is not uncommon that there are problems in the family which can lead to divorce. Such circumstances restrict the scope (and the psychological capacity) for social participation, including learning the Dutch language.

The research points to a strong work ethic and motivation to integrate into Dutch society amongst Syrian permit holders. This is partly related to the wish to earn their own living. Many respondents are in debt because of the costs of their journey to the Netherlands. They also need money to help support family and friends who are still in Syria. In addition

to their financial reasons for wanting to find employment quickly, respondents also do not want to depend on benefit payments. This is not a system they are familiar with. Being able to stand on their own feet financially is a sign of independence and self-reliance. For some Syrian permit holders, this is linked to the idea that they will be able to stay in the Netherlands permanently. Their reasoning is that if they are no longer receiving benefits, the Dutch government will have no reason to send them back.

Striving for financial independence sometimes leads to short-term decisions, such as people accepting any job simply in order to work. A number of respondents also experienced pressure from their case manager at the municipality to accept any job without, they say, being allowed sufficient time to orientate themselves properly to the Dutch employment market. The latter is particularly relevant among those with a higher level of education. In addition to learning the language, female permit holders often prioritise family life and 'settling in in the Netherlands' above finding paid employment. Survey data from the longitudinal cohort study confirm this finding: labour market participation among Syrian women is lower than that of men (Miltenburg and Dagevos 2019). Women who want to work may not be able to do so at present because they have too many other priorities, but this may change over time (De Gruijter and Hermans 2019).

[What information do Syrian permit holders have about the opportunities for integrating into Dutch society? How do they get that information, and what do they think is missing?](#)

Various communication problems occur during Syrian permit holders' interactions with individuals and organisations providing support. The websites of official organisations are almost always in Dutch, sometimes with an English version. It is therefore unsurprising that much of this information is inaccessible for asylum seekers and refugees who arrive with little or no knowledge of the Dutch language. According to Syrian permit holders, the Dutch system of administration is highly fragmented and unclear to them. They have to search for information about social participation in many different places and often do not know where to look.

Syrian permit holders find it difficult to understand why they have hardly any say in the decision where they are housed. The policy of dispersal often led to frustration when people were not placed in the municipality where they themselves saw opportunities for development and/or where they had family members or friends and could therefore benefit from a social support network. Some permit holders had also noticed that they were housed in a municipality where good language schools and training opportunities are a considerable distance away (in absolute terms, but sometimes also in relative terms because they are dependent on public transport), and where they think it will be hard to find work in the sector they wish to work in. Furthermore, many wondered why single people had been placed in smaller municipalities, when there might be more opportunities for them to succeed in a larger city. The opposite was thought to apply to families, who had

sometimes been placed in large cities. A good match between permit holders and their allocated residential location would facilitate social integration.

One of the things that I really think should be changed is housing. I mean, young, single people they should not be sent to live in a village. Because that will delay their progress. I mean, if you put a young man aged 24 or 25 – who wants to study and work and go to events to network – in a village, that won't work. It's different for families. They need a school for their young children, and that can work better in a village, where the children can make friends with the other children more easily. That's more difficult in a big city. They should take these differences more into account. [...] Where you house people is also a factor in the integration process.

It was striking that the Syrian permit holders part of this study were constantly comparing between municipalities, for example with regard to the differences in facilities, specific reimbursements that can be claimed and the language schooling that is available. Where you end up living affects your living situation and opportunities for participation, said the respondents.

Smaller municipalities seem to be less popular because of the opinion among Syrian permit holders that they lack employment and educational opportunities. At the same time, some of the Syrians in the study were satisfied living in a smaller municipality because their lifestyle and habits better suited this particular way of living. Moreover, there are sometimes unique opportunities in a smaller municipality, such as setting up a new business (e.g. a Syrian hairdresser, see Section 5). In areas that experience population decline, economic opportunities might arise for newcomers such as Syrian permit holders. This qualitative study is not an appropriate means of gauging who is better suited to living in a village or a city, and it is important to emphasise that there are also important differences between individuals when it comes to this question. However, what we can say is that among the Syrian respondents there was a sense that housing decisions were arbitrary, and they believed that those decisions had a major impact on their opportunities for participation in the Netherlands.

In addition to the lack of clarity regarding the policy of dispersal, there was also criticism that related specifically to the position of Syrian permit holders with respect to integration policy. It was experienced that there was not enough information in their own language and that there was too much emphasis on 'personal responsibility' during a phase in which their Dutch-language skills were still very basic. Young people reported finding it difficult to choose a higher education programme as a result of lack of information. Moreover, Syrian permit holders criticised the way in which they were stimulated and supported to participate. We shall return to this later.

Syrian permit holders generally appreciated their interactions with *volunteers*. During the first phase of their arrival in the Netherlands volunteers played an important role. They had helped to a large extent to get their lives back in order. But, like with the dispersal policy,

feelings of arbitrariness were mentioned.. Some respondents had been lucky and encountered an active volunteer who had given them accurate information, while others had received incomplete or even incorrect information about vital matters such as rules regarding family reunification. In terms of support from volunteers, it seems that there is more support available in smaller municipalities, especially from older people, and that the intensity and continuity of support was also better in smaller locations. Several times, Syrian permit holders indicated that elderly people who had grown up during, or just after the war were able to empathise with their situation more easily. The question remains whether the complex questions and concerns from Syrian permit holders have in the Netherlands would be better handled through professional support, and whether relying on volunteers for this is appropriate. Moreover, support from the Dutch Refugee Council (VluchtelingenWerk) has a limited duration (some municipalities only provide three or six months of support), whereas there may still be many unresolved questions after that time and many permit holders continue to need support. In addition to inadequate expertise, the degree of continuity also varied. Volunteers sometimes drop out and are replaced and this can also lead to a lack of clarity in the information and support provided. In general, contact between Syrian permit holders and volunteers is often instrumental by nature and does not result in lasting friendships, with a few exceptions.

Another important theme relating to the provision of information and participation in the Netherlands is uncertainty regarding the respondents' future in the Netherlands. Would they be able to stay in the country? Will their temporary residence permit be converted into a Dutch passport or will they be asked to return to Syria one day? Here, too, many comparisons were made – this time not with other municipalities, but with other European countries. Denmark and Austria, for instance, have already sent some Syrians back to Syria, and there were questions about whether the Netherlands might do the same. This uncertainty about their status has an impact on Syrian permit holders' daily lives, and may affect their motivation to integrate into Dutch society.

[How do Syrian permit holders experience their interactions with Dutch institutions that are part of the arrival infrastructure in the Netherlands?](#)

Opinions on the support provided to Syrian permit holders varied to a large extent. Many respondents had been living in neighbouring countries of Syria before they arrived in the Netherlands, where they had received hardly any support in those countries. From that point of view, Syrian permit holders were very satisfied with the support they received in the Netherlands. This probably explains why earlier research shows a fairly positive picture of Syrian permit holders' experience with government bodies in the Netherlands (Dagevos et al. 2018). The present research adds further nuance to that picture. It shows that there are significant differences between municipalities. In some municipalities, for example, travel expenses for language lessons are reimbursed, while in others they are not. The range of facilities aimed at migrants and the number of volunteers also varies between municipalities. Moreover, Syrian permit holders regularly felt undervalued in the way they

were treated during interactions with support providers. They did not mention discrimination explicitly, but inequality and a lack of understanding were evident in their stories and examples.

Here in the Netherlands, people think Syrians are backwards. Sometimes they would ask if we have cars in Syria, or what our houses look like. Syria is not an underdeveloped country. It is well-developed, we have doctors and engineers and everything you can imagine in Syria. We came here to make something of our lives, we are not terrorists and we are not stupid.

Feelings of being undervalued also stemmed from feeling pressured to accept jobs that were not appropriate to their educational level or professional experience. Staff at the municipality would often focus on work that had little to do with Syrian's professional history or educational background.

When I was going to the job centre, they told me that I should accept a low-skilled job, but those jobs aren't right for me. I have a diploma. [...] I have professional experience [as an electrician], but they wouldn't listen to me. It doesn't matter to them if you have experience or not. No, you just have to work. And preferably low-skilled work. They lump all the Syrians together, and that's not good.

The fact that highly qualified work was considered beyond their capabilities due to their inadequate command of the Dutch language was a sign for some permit holders, particularly those with a higher level of education, that their education and professional experience were not valued in the Netherlands. But it was not only the fact that they, as highly educated people, were sent to do jobs in the hospitality sector or cleaning work that frustrated them. They also felt that they were not taken seriously as individuals. More generally, Syrian permit holders often find it difficult to accept support because accepting that they are in a position of dependence is a difficult transition for them to make. Often, support in finding employment involves more than just finding a job; it is also about reviving their previous identities and rediscovering, as Hannah Arendt (1943) articulated so elegantly, the possibility of being 'useful' again. Rediscovering their professional identity is an important aspect of the process of feeling at home somewhere and being able to give meaning to their life again.

[How do Syrian permit holders view Dutch policy on participation and how does this work out in practice?](#)

Syrian permit holders regularly point out that in the Netherlands everyone is equal and that the system is fair and, compared to Syria, not corrupt. However, some of the respondents still got stuck in this well-organized system. One example of this is related to the emphasis on having the right paperwork, whereas asylum seekers often have no paperwork due to the events of the war, or their diplomas are not recognised or valued here, leaving them unable to take part in education or find employment. Syrian permit holders in the Netherlands are also confronted with the regulation that those older than 30 are not eligible for a student grant. And Syrian permit holders who wanted to take part in educa-

tion or find a job often encountered entry requirements that meant that they had to enter at a lower level than they had expected. These experiences had made Syrian permit holders feel that, despite the emphasis on people's own responsibility within integration policies. They were offered limited opportunities to participate in Dutch society due to issues with paperwork.

Syrian permit holders were ambivalent when it comes to Dutch integration policy. They see learning Dutch as the most important indicator of how integrated they are, and also as a requirement for participating in society. They therefore view arrangements for learning the language as very important. And they were particularly disappointed and frustrated when language lessons turned out to be less well-organised than expected. The market for language schools is opaque, especially for those who are new to the country and do not yet speak the language. Syrian permit holders in this study found that the language school they attended offered only a few hours of lessons, they questioned the quality of the teachers and some were placed in groups where they suffered from large internal variation in terms of language abilities. Fraud by language schools has been reported, for example when high fees are charged but little is offered in return. According to Syrian permit holders, there are not enough opportunities to practise the language and courses are not enough practically oriented. Respondents were concerned about the low level (A2) that they had ultimately achieved, which is actually inadequate for participation in education or the employment market. Several respondents pointed out the importance of combining work with learning the language. They had felt pressured to pass the civic integration exam within the stipulated period of three years and therefore had not always chosen the highest level of linguistic attainment. Several of these remarks have been reported earlier and are currently under debate in the context of redesigning a new policy on civic integration, which will give municipalities a more central role (also see section 5.3).

Syrian permit holders' experiences with participation in Dutch society and with Dutch participation policy: Conclusion

All in all, it appears that Syrian permit holders are very focused on improving their participation in Dutch society. This was most evident from the time and effort invested in learning the Dutch language. But also the pertinent wish by most Syrians to get out of benefits as soon as possible and into paid employment indicates a drive for participation in Dutch society. Work means an important step towards independence and financial self-reliance, which Syrian permit holders want to achieve to meet financial obligations in their country of origin and to settle debts incurred during their flight from Syria. They also believe that earning their own money could improve their chances of remaining in the Netherlands. Syrian respondents' critique on Dutch participation policy consisted of several elements. They saw limited opportunities to take the initiative regarding their own participation in Dutch society, which they attribute in part to the dispersal policy. In addition, respondents indicated that living in a country where everything seems to involve bureaucratic regulations and paperwork is very different from the lives they were used to in Syria. Many respondents felt nervous and stressed by the exams they had been required to pass by a

particular date and by the sanctions that would result if they failed. This stress had caused them to take short-term decisions and choose the safer option, such as taking a civic integration exam at a lower language level or accepting low-skilled work. They greatly appreciated the contact with volunteers. However, contact with volunteers was often purely practical in nature and did not generally result in lasting relationships or more contact with Dutch people, which they had been hoping for. Moreover, their dependence on those volunteers was sometimes very high, including for matters where professional support would have been appropriate. Respondents had seen their access to education or employment that matched their level of education and professional experience blocked. They saw few opportunities to challenge themselves, as they had been used to doing before.

All in all, Syrian respondents in this study were fairly critical of Dutch participation policy (cf. Damen et al. 2019) found similar evidence in Rotterdam amongst Syrian permit holders. Without wishing to detract from these conclusions, it is useful to put them into perspective. Research into experiences of policy risks to overshadow positive conclusions because it easily becomes an exercise in compiling a list of issues and bottlenecks. But there are positive conclusions to be mentioned too. The contact with and support from volunteers has already been addressed. Moreover, Syrian permit holders realise that in the Netherlands they have access to facilities that are of a much higher quality than in the transit countries. More generally, Syrian permit holders are happy that they are able to live in safety in the Netherlands, which is reflected in high satisfaction scores about their lives in the Netherlands, for instance (Dagevos et al. 2018). In addition to their criticisms, there was also a lot of satisfaction. The fact that people are critical about the design and implementation of policy cannot be seen in isolation from the importance that Syrian permit holders attach to participating in Dutch society. Syrian permit holders have a strong focus on learning the Dutch language, with the aim of building a full and independent life in this country. When there are issues with the way in which policy works in practice or with interaction with officials or volunteers, this is therefore of great importance to this group. Something to be aware of, is that this study is based on the experiences of Syrian permit holders and does not include policy makers' point of view was not included. Adding the perspective of policy makers would have yielded more insight into the background of the issues identified by Syrian permit holders (cf. Sterckx and Fessehazion 2018, who in addition to Eritrean permit holders, also interviewed policy makers). Syrian permit holders in this study might not always be aware of the background of certain policies. One of the reasons for implementing dispersal policy in the Netherlands, for example, was to prevent permit holders from settling in particular regions, which could have overburdened those regions and have had adverse consequences for public support. Another example of possible lack of background information behind participation policies is the fact that municipalities mainly offer jobs at the lower end of the employment market with the expectation that a low-skilled job may be a stepping stone to a better one (from basic job to dream job, as some municipalities call it). This study focused on the perspectives of Syrian permit holders and did not take into account how policy came into place and why it has been formulated the way it is. This inside perspective based on qualitative research is still useful

because it involves a detailed exploration of the experiences of Syrian permit holders with participation in the Netherlands. Even when these experiences are based on incomplete information, they are important to the way in which participation occurs. And they can inform policy makers about possible improvements that need to be made. We will discuss this in the next section.

S.3 Pointers for policy

This qualitative study confirms some of the results from the longitudinal cohort study among asylum seekers and permit holders (e.g. with regard to civic integration policy), yields new findings (e.g. about interaction and experiences with participation policy and the obstacles encountered by Syrian permit holders) and nuances previous results (e.g. regarding areas of satisfaction with public authorities). The insights from this study give rise to various pointers for future policy.

Twin pathways that combine education or employment and language skills simultaneously

Education entry requirements and paperwork create obstacles to participation in education or the labour market. There should be more opportunities to access 'non-suitable' educational programmes in order to participate in subsequent programmes / employment. This research also indicates issues relating to learning the Dutch language. The language level attained is too low, language education is not sufficiently practical in its orientation and there is not enough practice. Previous research in this series has already produced the following ideas: (a) adding a practical component to language learning; (b) reducing the entry requirements for education and employment; and (c = a + b) combining work/education with language learning (Miltenburg et al. 2019; Sterckx and Fessehazion 2018). Various international studies have also shown the importance of integrated programmes that combine language and professional training with work experience (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2016). Such combined programmes give the Syrian permit holder an opportunity to work on their Dutch and gain professional experience or prepare for education simultaneously. There is no need to lower entrance and job requirements for Syrian permit holders but granting an extended period of time in which they can meet the requested requirements and at the same time continue learning Dutch would be a solution. Combined pathways would seem to offer great potential for integrating Syrian permit holders, yet few Syrian permit holders currently combine learning Dutch with working or taking part in education (Miltenburg and Dagevos 2019). Such combined pathways appear to be difficult to organise in practice (Oostveen et al. 2018). Given the particular needs of Syrian permit holders and the expectations surrounding the effectiveness of participation, an extensive introduction should nevertheless be the goal. The new civic integration policy will give municipalities more opportunities to organise such programmes. However, even before the new policy is introduced, an increase in the number of combined pathway programmes is desirable.

Better matching between permit holders and residential locations

Syrian permit holders in this study felt little or no control over where they were housed, but in their eyes this played a crucial role in how well they were subsequently able to participate. The allocation of refugees to municipalities could take more account of the qualification profile of refugees, so that their profile is a better match with the training and employment opportunities available in that region. The presence of social networks and the demographic characteristics of permit holders (e.g. single people who previously lived in a large city) could also be taken into account. In mid-2016, pilot schemes were launched by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) in a small number of municipalities to trial the screening and matching of permit holders based on their education and employment history. The purpose of these pilots is to try to place permit holders in a municipality where they will be most likely to find employment after leaving the COA reception centre (COA 2016). These pilot schemes are consistent with the findings of this study. Further research should reveal whether the intended effects actually occur. The placement policy could be adjusted on this basis.

Take more account of the skills and aspirations of permit holders

Syrian permit holders in this study felt that participation policy in the Netherlands takes little account of their skills and aspirations. Decisions are made for them, and permit holders sometimes feel that stereotypes about their group played a role in justifications about certain decisions. Against this background, it would be advisable to examine how Syrian permit holders can be actively involved in the design of their own participation process in a meaningful and effective way (cf. Klaver et al. 2019). There are examples of positive experiences with individual action plans from various other countries (Scholten et al. 2017). Hagelund (2005, quoted in UNHCR 2013) shows for example that by involving permit holders themselves in their own action plan, they are no longer seen as clients, and they no longer see themselves in this way, but as participants who are able – with some support – to resolve their own problems. Evaluation research in the UK also shows that an individualised, tailored approach helps permit holders (Schultheiss et al. 2011, quoted in Bertelsmann Stiftung 2016). For a few years now, Sweden has used individual 'location plans' that the Swedish employment service draws up in partnership with the permit holders the municipality and possibly other relevant organisations. The plan includes agreements on language training, civic integration and preparatory activities focusing on work, education or entrepreneurship such as the evaluation of qualifications and the recognition of skills acquired and internships (UNHCR 2013). In the new civic integration policy, every permit holder has a personal Integration and Participation Plan. There should however be sufficient scope for the permit holder to communicate his or her own ambitions and strengths. Actively involving permit holder in their own integration programme should, hopefully, help to address what is known in the literature as the 'agency paradox' (Klaver et al. 2018): the inventiveness and determination shown by refugees during their flight appears to disappear upon arrival in the host country and to be replaced by a lack of initiative and action.

Support for far-reaching changes to the new civic integration policy

The Dutch government has announced far-reaching changes to their civic integration policy, which will take effect on 1 January 2021. Various findings from this study underline the importance of these changes. Syrian permit holders in this study for example found it difficult to find their way through the current Dutch policy of civic integration, the functioning of language schools leaves something to be desired, their level of attainment in the Dutch language is too low and there is not enough focus on differences between permit holders in terms of the abilities and aspirations. The new system seeks to address these issues. Responsibility for integration will be moved back to the local government and the intention is that from now on municipalities will purchase language tuition themselves. This will – hopefully – improve the quality of the services provided by language schools and reduce the risk of fraud. There will be three different routes, and every participant will have their own individual plan (the PIP), as mentioned above.

Based on our findings, this tailor-made approach would seem to take better account of the different needs and abilities of Syrian permit holders. The final level of civic integration under the new plans ranges between A2 and B1. This change reflects the concern raised by Syrian permit holders in this study regarding the low value of the A2 level for participating in Dutch society. However, B1 level will not be achievable for everyone. This is due to the differences within this group, such as age and level of education. In addition, according to this study, personal circumstances play a vital role, such as mental health and family problems. The new civic integration policy will also need to take account of those who are not ready, psychologically, to study and absorb new information. These people cannot integrate quickly, and there is a risk that they may end up in the self-reliance route, a route that is actually intended for people who are unable to meet their obligation to participate in any of the other two routes of civic integration. Taking personal circumstances into account remains an important point of attention. The new civic integration policy will need to tailor support according to different needs and be more sensitive towards variations in timing.

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