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**BRIDGING NETWORKS: LABOUR MARKET INCLUSION
OF ASYLUM SEEKERS IN A TIGHT DUTCH LABOUR
MARKET**

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Executive Summary

The Dutch labour market is experiencing persistent structural shortages, and the Netherlands is expected to become increasingly dependent on newcomers to sustain economic growth (UWV, 2024). Despite this structural reliance, labour market participation among asylum seekers remains comparatively low, and many are concentrated in temporary or low-skilled employment. This underutilisation represents both a social integration challenge and a missed economic opportunity.

While language barriers, discrimination, and the limited recognition of foreign qualifications remain persistent obstacles producing unequal labour market outcomes, this policy brief argues that insufficient access to diverse and high-quality social and professional networks can be a route to tackling structural challenges to labour market inclusion. Research on “bridging social capital” demonstrates that connections across socio-economic and ethnic boundaries significantly improve employment prospects.

Executive Summary

Two policy options are assessed. Reforming the strategic placement system to better align asylum seekers' skills with regional labour demand could improve long-term outcomes but would require substantial administrative restructuring, financial investment and political will. Alternatively, strengthening participation in voluntary organisations offers a cost-effective and scalable strategy to expand bridging networks. Evidence from the Netherlands and abroad suggests that structured support for engagement in voluntary associations enhances social cohesion and improves labour market integration.

This brief therefore recommends that the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment fund and to some extent coordinate a national initiative to systematically connect asylum seekers with voluntary organisations. Implemented locally through municipalities and reception centers, such a network-based approach could assist in improving labour market mobility, reducing segmentation, and contributing to addressing structural labour shortages in a tight Dutch labour market.

Introduction

The Dutch labour market is currently characterised by significant structural tightness. Economic growth remains strongly dependent on increases in labour input, yet labour supply is insufficient to meet demand (UWV, 2024). Shortages are visible across sectors, with particularly acute deficits in IT, specialised healthcare, machinery, construction, and defence-related occupations (UWV, 2024). Looking ahead, the Netherlands is expected to become increasingly dependent on migration to sustain economic growth. Migration has already contributed substantially to the Dutch working population, and although inflows fluctuate — for example, due to the temporary rise in Ukrainian beneficiaries — the long-term demographic outlook suggests continued reliance on migrant labour (UWV, 2024).

Despite this structural need, labour market integration, as well as the re- and upskilling of asylum seekers and migrants, remains a significant challenge. Workers and potential workers with a migrant or refugee background are frequently identified as an underutilised labour reserve. Recent evidence indicates that nearly half of EU labour migrants are employed in low-skilled positions, and labour market participation rates are lower among individuals born outside the EU (UWV, 2024). With the exception of knowledge migrants, relatively few highly skilled labour migrants enter from outside the EU-27. At the same time, participation rates among asylum seekers and migrants remain comparatively low, although the higher employment rate among Ukrainian beneficiaries illustrates that improved integration outcomes are possible (UWV, 2024).

Employers increasingly demonstrate flexibility in hiring practices. Wester (2024) reports that seven out of ten employers with vacancies have hired candidates who did not meet all formal job requirements, indicating openness to upskilling strategies. Nevertheless, asylum seekers and migrants remain disproportionately concentrated in precarious employment. This occurs within a broader labour market structure characterised by a high prevalence of temporary contracts — the highest in the EU-27 — and an above-average share of self-employed workers (European Commission, 2024; UWV, 2024). While flexibility can promote

dynamism, it may also reinforce labour market segmentation, entrench inequality, and inhibit productivity (European Commission, 2024).

Out of the general category of migrant (or people on the move), this policy brief focuses on asylum seekers (seeking international protection, and subject to certain Dutch institutional processes). It argues that beyond formal barriers such as language and qualification recognition found across different national settings, limited access to diverse and high-quality social and professional networks in the Dutch context constitutes a key structural obstacle to the labour market integration of asylum seekers and migrants. Strengthening bridging social capital should therefore be central to meeting these gaps.

Further Context: Structural Barriers and the Role of Social Networks

Language barriers and discrimination continue to shape unequal labour market outcomes (Hummel et al., 2022). Institutional obstacles, including the limited recognition of foreign qualifications, frequently force asylum seekers and migrants into employment below their educational level (Kanas et al., 2009). These factors contribute to persistent underemployment and occupational downgrading.

However, research increasingly highlights the importance of social capital. Labour market outcomes depend not only on formal qualifications, but also on access to information, mobility, and informal recruitment channels. Asylum often possess smaller and more homogeneous networks, primarily consisting of co-ethnic ties rather than connections to native-born workers or higher socio-economic groups (Meyer & Vasey, 2020). Such network structures limit exposure to high-quality labour market information and reduce opportunities for upward mobility.

Granovetter's (1973) theory of the "strength of weak ties" demonstrates that bridging connections — weak ties that link individuals to different social groups — are particularly effective in facilitating employment opportunities. When asylum seekers rely predominantly on strong but homogeneous ties, they risk remaining confined to segmented labour market niches. Meyer and Vasey (2020) show how such dynamics can reinforce ethnic segmentation in

low-skill labour markets. Similarly, Alesina et al. (2015) argue that strong family ties combined with limited broader networks can reduce mobility and weaken bargaining positions in less regulated labour markets.

The absence of bridging capital thus contributes to a cycle of underemployment and social exclusion. Limited networks lead to reduced access to quality employment information, which in turn reinforces occupational downgrading and labour market segmentation. Addressing network deficits is therefore not merely a social objective but an economic necessity.

Policy Option 1: Reforming Strategic Placement

Under the current system, once asylum seekers receive residence permits, the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) provides a recommendation for placement within one of 35 labour market regions. The aim is to facilitate labour market integration through “promising matching,” aligning individual characteristics with regional labour market conditions (Jongen et al., 2020). However, placements are constrained by municipal quotas based on population size.

Research indicates that this system does not consistently achieve optimal matching outcomes. Permit holders often experience limited agency in determining their place of residence and may be assigned to municipalities with restricted employment prospects, weak language infrastructure, or limited professional opportunities aligned with their skills (Van Liempt & Staring, 2020). Evidence suggests that better alignment between individual profiles, local labour demand, and existing social networks would enhance integration outcomes (Jongen et al., 2020).

Switzerland provides a comparative example. There, refugee placement is aligned more explicitly with regional labour market demand, and individuals may request relocation when family ties exist. Combined with targeted labour market preparation, this model has produced strong employment outcomes: after five years, employment rates among migrant men approach those of Swiss-born men (Favre et al., 2020; Swiss State Secretariat for Migration, n.d.).

While reforming Dutch placement policy could yield long-term benefits, it would require significant administrative restructuring, inter-municipal coordination, and financial investment. It is therefore a high-cost and politically complex reform.

Policy Option 2: Strengthening Bridging Social Capital Through Voluntary Organisations

Participation in voluntary organisations offers a more immediately actionable and cost-effective mechanism to strengthen bridging capital. Voluntary associations are typically socially heterogeneous and open to broad participation, thereby facilitating connections across socio-economic and ethnic boundaries (Coffé & Geys, 2008; Häuberer, 2014).

Empirical research demonstrates that participation in local associations enhances social cohesion and reduces antisocial attitudes (Scheerder et al., 2004). Moreover, exposure to non-co-ethnic networks significantly improves labour market outcomes for migrants, as evidenced in the Canadian refugee sponsorship context (Soehl & Van Haren, 2023). Gericke et al. (2017) further emphasise the importance of “vertical bridging capital,” whereby connections to higher socio-economic groups positively affect refugees’ employment trajectories.

In the Netherlands, asylum seekers are permitted to engage in voluntary work during their asylum procedure, and no formal barriers prevent association membership (Bakker et al., 2018). Nevertheless, participation rates remain lower among refugees compared to the general population (CBS, 2024). Bakker et al. (2018) identify informational barriers and uncertainty regarding access pathways as key obstacles.

Germany's Bundesfreiwilligendienst programme provides a relevant example of structured support. During the 2015–2016 refugee period, the federal government actively facilitated placements of asylum seekers and migrants in voluntary organisations (Pressemitteilung: bundesfreiwilligendienst.de, 2015; Blond & Welters, 2016). Germany's comparatively strong migrant employment rates suggest that such structured integration mechanisms can contribute to positive outcomes.

Compared to placement reform, strengthening participation in voluntary organisations requires fewer structural changes while directly targeting the network deficit that underlies labour market segmentation.

Concluding Policy Recommendation: funding allocation towards Voluntary Opportunities

This policy brief makes recommendations for the national level, although the asylum system constitutes multistakeholder cooperation between national level, municipalities, civil society and private actors. To set the tone, it would be important that the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment act as a facilitator at the national level, to systematically promote and facilitate participation of asylum seekers and migrants in voluntary organisations. The initiative should be funded at the national level and implemented locally through municipalities and AZCs in cooperation with COA.

The programme should raise awareness among asylum seekers and migrants about opportunities for association membership, provide clear and structured matching mechanisms between individuals and organisations, and offer financial support to voluntary associations that host participants. Embedding network development explicitly within the framework of the Wet inburgering 2021 would strengthen coherence with existing integration routes (Rijksoverheid, n.d.).

By incorporating a network-based strategy into integration policy, asylum seekers would gain opportunities to build social capital that enhances labour market mobility. This approach reduces reliance on compulsory low-quality job placements tied to welfare conditionality (Rijksoverheid, 2025) and instead empowers individuals to access higher-quality employment pathways.

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