

Strengthening local governance of host countries

Opening your borders to welcome refugees from neighbouring countries proves to have a considerable impact. This is what Iraq and Lebanon did as the civil war in Syria escalated and large groups of displaced people sought shelter and safety. A [Letter to Parliament](#) on the [policy evaluation](#) of Dutch support to the reception of Syrian refugees in the region expresses positive appreciation concerning the partnership with VNG International. The [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) identifies an excellent initiative in the [Sustainable Development through Improved Local Governance \(SDLG\)](#) programme for working with local governments. Reinforcing local governments is an essential starting point for improving the situation in which displaced persons and host communities find themselves.

As VNG International Project Manager, **Miriam Collaris** is involved in strengthening local governments in Iraq. 'Municipalities are responsible for services such as waste processing, access to water and public space. The influx of displaced persons has put huge pressure on these services, which sometimes causes friction within communities and influences social dynamics.' Miriam regularly travels to Iraq for the projects of VNG International. The municipality of Rheden is one of the Dutch municipalities that shares good practices; for example, they share their knowledge and experience about services in relation to waste processing.

Listening to all residents

When it comes to refugee reception in the region, VNG International demonstrates in Iraq and Lebanon that 'inclusive decision-making' can mitigate conflict. Miriam: 'We encourage both refugees and host communities to express their needs and concerns. The programme provides space for all community groups to engage in discussions with local authorities, and we encourage local governments to listen.' These discussions are part of the SDLG programme, which is being implemented in 12 countries, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In Lebanon, Iraq, Kenya and Uganda, the thematic focus is on migration.

Engaging your municipality

What are the concrete advantages of this? Miriam gives an example. 'In one of the consultations, it became clear that the roofs of various schools in the Sheikhan District – a region that also receives displaced people – were leaking. Children did not have any place to play outside during school breaks, and the local government realised that the renovation of schools in this community was important. This approach proved to be a catalyst for further funding and new investors became involved.' Miriam explains just how extraordinary this is. 'This may all seem very logical from a Dutch perspective, but it's not that obvious in these regions. It's just great to see and show that municipalities may have very distinct and visibly positive impact on the lives of residents. That trust is crucial for a long-term impact.'

Avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy

VNG International also helps to improve intergovernmental relations. The budgetary rules in Iraq are highly obstructive for local governments. Municipalities are required to obtain ministerial approval for many expenditures. 'This has to be formulated on paper, so imagine the effect this bureaucracy has on organising facilities for refugees' Miriam says. VNG International helped assemble local and national government into a working group. This joint search for solutions has, for example, resulted in a mandate for certain financial expenditures, allowing municipalities to make a difference for their residents.

Continuing constructive dialogues

The inclusive approach concerning refugee reception also requires a great deal of future attention to collaboration with local governments in Lebanon and Iraq, and other countries sheltering large groups of refugees. In the Letter to Parliament, the Minister writes about the importance of supporting refugee reception in the region, emphasising that permanent results are not obvious. 'Be sure to continue a dialogue with host countries and maintain an open attitude to alternative approaches,' according to the minister, 'even when interests and perspectives vary widely.' Miriam agrees. 'The importance of constructive dialogue remains, and we remain committed to this within the partnership with the ministry. The process of building trust is a long-term endeavor.'

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In mid-March, the Parliament was informed about the results of the policy evaluation conducted by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Dutch initiatives have produced positive short-term effects for Syrian refugees and the host communities where they have been living. The same applies to VNG International projects in Iraq and Lebanon. Link to the Letter to Parliament/evaluation:

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2024/03/11/kamerbrief-inzake-beleidsreactie-op-iob-evaluatie-nederlandse-steun-aan-opvang-van-vluchtelingen-in-de-syrie-regio-2016-2021>