MIGRATION

PERSONAL STORIES,
GREAT MOVEMENTS,
AND THE PLACES
WE CALL HOME

IOM UN MIGRATION | THE NETHERLANDS

THE BRAZILIAN CLOG DANCE

This year the Dutch Forró community organized the fourth edition of its festival, Forró de Tamanco, an event run almost entirely by volunteers. The festival's name is inspired by the classic Forró song *Forró de Tamanco*. *Tamanco* means wooden clog in Portuguese, creating a playful link between a Brazilian cultural tradition and one of the Netherlands' most recognizable symbols.

Forró, a dance originating in Brazil, has been bringing people together across Europe for decades. While Amsterdam had a Forró scene long before, The Hague's community only began to emerge in 2019 through small dance parties. Everything changed in 2021 when Brazilian teacher Bruna Azevedo started offering weekly classes. During the first classes, it was a small group with sometimes only two students. Driven by her belief in the dance and its power to connect people, she continued building the community step by step. Today, Forró Den Haag offers six classes a week, and dancers from across the country travel to attend. Many credit Azevedo's determination and vision for transforming The Hague into one of the Netherlands' most vibrant Forró hubs.

According to volunteer Thanja, Forró's appeal is easy to understand. 'The music is cheerful, accessible and inviting.' She discovered the dance while studying in Stuttgart and immediately fell in love with it.

Forró is known as an approachable partner dance that focuses on connection. 'When I dance, I can show who I am and genuinely connect with others,' says one of the teachers. Its relaxed atmosphere is part of its charm. Sneakers are often more common than dance shoes, and dancers are encouraged to explore different roles on the dance floor.

Alongside dancing classes, it organizes film nights, percussion workshops, and samba activities. In doing so, the community stays connected not only to one another, but also to the Brazilian culture and history that gave rise to Forró. While the dance is now enjoyed around the world, its roots remain firmly in Brazil. ■

You have spent much of your career working on migration.

WHEN PEOPLE ASK YOU WHAT MIGRATION MEANS, WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

I usually begin by saying that migration is not a subject I discovered through reports, policies, or international meetings. I am a migrant myself, and for more than two decades I have lived and worked alongside migrants, witnessing almost every form of migration imaginable.



When I hear the word *migration*, I think first of people. I think of the men, women, and children I have met in Darfur, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, here in Europe, and many other places around the world. People uprooted by conflict, poverty, earthquakes, hurricanes, droughts, floods, Ebola, cholera, and crises that most of us can barely imagine experiencing ourselves. I think of families walking along roads with little more than what they could carry. I think of communities rebuilding after disaster. I think of people who spent years dreaming of returning home and eventually found a way to do so. I think of victims of trafficking whose journeys became stories of exploitation rather than opportunity. I think of members of diaspora communities who never stopped thinking about their countries of origin and remained determined to invest, contribute, and give back.

These individuals have taught me more about migration than any textbook, policy paper, or conference ever could.

But migration is not only something I have observed through others. It is also something I carry within myself.

I think of my wife, whom I met in the Congo. I think of friendships built across continents through deployments, departures, celebrations, and hardships. I think of my children, whom I sometimes jokingly call "born migrants." For sixteen years they have followed us across countries, languages, schools, and cultures. Along the way, they have learned something many migrants understand intuitively: home is not always a single place. Sometimes it is several places at once.

Perhaps that is why I have always believed that migration is, first and foremost, a human reality. The same forces that led the first humans to leave familiar horizons thousands of years ago continue to drive migration today and will continue to do so tomorrow: the search for safety, opportunity, knowledge, prosperity, adventure, or simply a better life.

'Home is not always a single place. Sometimes it is several places at once.'

What has changed is the scale. Our world is more connected and more mobile than ever before. Yet the essence of migration remains remarkably constant. It begins with a decision.

Every migrant remembers that decision. We remember the place, the circumstances, and the moment when staying and leaving stood before us as alternatives. What follows is a journey shaped by opportunity, resilience, setbacks, encounters, friendships, and sometimes sheer luck.

This magazine reflects that complexity. Its pages explore migration in its many forms. Different topics, different experiences, but one common reality: people moving in search of a future they believe is possible elsewhere.

Migration has given me far more than I could have imagined when I first decided to leave home. It has given me experiences, friendships, perspectives, and a family. Above all, it has strengthened my belief that human mobility, when it is safe, orderly, and humane, benefits migrants and societies alike.

I hope these stories help readers see migration not as an abstract concept, but as what it truly is: a deeply human journey that connects us far more than it separates us. ■

Fabien Sambussy
Chief of Mission
International Organization for Migration (IOM) the Netherlands

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Colophon
You are holding Migration, a magazine in which IOM the Netherlands takes a closer look at different aspects and forms of migration. The magazine would be far too extensive if it were to cover every aspect of migration, which is why a selection of stories has been made.

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WE ARE ALWAYS ON THE MOVE

The Cambridge Dictionary defines migration as *'the process of a person or people travelling to a new place or country.'* An easy definition, compact enough to fit between two commas. Yet behind those few words lies one of humanity's oldest stories: that of people leaving home, setting out on a journey and starting again somewhere new.

PHOTO: On 28 December 1960, 124 migrants left Amsterdam for Sydney, Australia. ICEM helped hundreds of thousands of European migrants and refugees resettle during this period.



MEMORIES AND TRADITIONS TRAVEL ALONG

We have been doing so for as long as we have existed. Polynesian seafarers navigated by the stars across the Pacific Ocean. Nomadic communities moved with the seasons. Empires emerged, expanded and eventually disappeared. People left their homes in search of food or safety, for work, love, knowledge, or simply in the hope of finding a better life elsewhere. Sometimes such journeys lead to the other side of the world, and sometimes no further than from a village to a city. The distance may differ, but the impulse is similar: to seek a life that offers something the previous one could not.

Today, people continue to move in a world that is constantly changing. Trade and knowledge cross borders, just as people do. When climate change, earthquakes, floods or conflict make places unsafe or uninhabitable, people may be compelled to leave. Sometimes, when conditions allow, people return. Others continue to build their lives elsewhere. Migration is rarely a single, clearly defined moment. But when people migrate, they do not simply move from one place to another. Memories and traditions travel with them, carried across the world in suitcases and bags.



PHOTO: In the late 1950s, Russian Old Believers were resettled via China to Brazil. ICEM, the predecessor of IOM, played a key role alongside UNHCR and the World Council of Churches.

Recipes find their way into new kitchens and become classics, like the *babi pangang* many Dutch people have come to regard as their own. A melody crosses a border and takes on a different rhythm. Words, skills and ideas reach places where they did not exist before. When people meet, new expressions and influences emerge that can no longer be traced back to a single origin.

Almost every society bears the traces of such movements. Cities grow as new residents arrive. Economies benefit from the knowledge, skills and ambitions that people bring. Cultures do not stand still. They are living collections of languages, flavours, customs and stories that continuously influence one another.

Therefore, migration is never only about departure. Every departure also involves an arrival. Alongside what a person leaves behind is what they bring and contribute elsewhere.



PHOTO: Following the suppression of the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, approximately 200,000 Hungarians fled the country, including around 180,000 to Austria.

Perhaps a more honest conversation about migration begins there: not with the question whether people will move, but with the recognition that people have always moved.

Migration is not an exception in human history, nor is it a modern phenomenon or a passing trend. People move because they have aspirations, see opportunities, seek safety, or want to build a future that may be beyond their reach where they currently live.

Thus, migration is more than movement on a map. It is a story of change and adaptation, of loss and hope, of the courage to leave and the perseverance to begin again. It is a story that stretches back thousands of years and will continue for as long as people do. ■

EVERY DEPARTURE INVOLVES AN ARRIVAL

HOME WAS WHEREVER MY PARENTS WERE

Delilah Warcup-van Eyck grew up in countries including Suriname, Sudan, the Gambia and Indonesia, learning from an early age that home is not necessarily a place. A conversation about starting over, the courage to change one's mind, and the stories that can bring us closer together.

For someone who moved frequently as a child, the question of where home is may have an unusual answer. For Delilah Warcup-van Eyck, at least, it was never a clearly defined place. There was no familiar house the family always returned to, no street where all her memories came together, no city that automatically felt like home. 'Home was not necessarily a location,' she says. 'It was wherever we happened to be living as a family at the time.'

Her father worked on projects in different countries. From an early age, Delilah became accustomed to leaving, arriving and starting over again after a few years. As a child, she did not consciously reflect on what this constant movement meant for her. Home was simply wherever her mother and father were. The rest of the family lived far away. When the family was in the Netherlands, she would see her Surinamese relatives on her father's side and her Indonesian relatives on her mother's side. The more vivid present Surinamese culture in particular left a recognizable mark on those visits. Yet she never felt that she was one or the other.

'I felt Surinamese, Indonesian, and Dutch.'

Some things travelled with them wherever they went. Her father, for example, always made sure they could have brown beans with rice on the table. A dish that became a small, everyday anchor. A familiar taste in an ever-changing setting.

Always the newcomer
During her primary school years abroad, Delilah was initially taught by her mother, using educational materials from the Netherlands. Between two assignments abroad, she would sometimes attend a Dutch school for several weeks or months. She would enter an already established classroom, with children who knew one another and routines that were new to her.

Looking back, she finds it difficult to say whether she really felt like an outsider at the time. Childhood memories do not always come with clearly defined emotions. Today, she can reflect on what such experiences may have meant for her, but she does not want to attribute feelings to her younger self that she cannot specifically remember.

One comment from a teacher did stay with her: she was apparently not very well 'adjusted' to the group. Fortunately, reading, writing, and mathematics went excellently.

The word 'adjusted' returns later in the conversation. Delilah believes she can move easily within new groups. At the same time, she questions the idea that people should constantly have to adapt themselves.

'If a few basic rules of decency are a given, surely you should otherwise be able to just be yourself? Be decent, behave respectfully, always see the other person as your equal, and then do what feels right for you. Don't adapt yourself.'

A soft landing
At sixteen, Delilah returned to the Netherlands permanently. Her father's project had come to an end, and her mother had already returned earlier. By then, her parents had separated. She did not arrive as a quiet teenager waiting to see what would happen. 'I was very much a teenager in Jakarta too,' she says matter-of-factly. The major difference was that she did not yet have any friends in the Netherlands.

Her parents tried to make the transition easier. Through friends and acquaintances, they introduced her to young people around her age. Delilah remembers a brother, a sister, and a group of friends around them. They were slightly older and could easily have regarded her as the younger girl who had simply been added to their group. Instead, they welcomed her wholeheartedly. 'They were so kind and warm. I spent two wonderful years with them.' ►



With her versatility, actress and voice-over artist Delilah Warcup-van Eyck (1975) has become a familiar presence in the Dutch media landscape. After her education as an actress at ArtEZ, she appeared in acclaimed series such as Sphinx and De Ring. Alongside her acting career, the Amsterdam-based artist lends her voice to numerous productions, including the telephone service of the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration. In 2026, she also made a strong impression on audiences with her appearances on Wie is de Mol? and De Slimste Mens.



The friendships from her early childhood did not last. From her student years onwards, that changed. The friends she met around the age of eighteen remain her closest friends today. It was as though lasting friendships only had the space to take root once she herself began to settle in one place.

Yet she has never felt that her mobile childhood took something away from her. She did not lose a permanent home or one stable place to return to, she says, because she had never had those things to begin with.

‘Growing up that way actually gave me so much.’

The suitcase paradox
Anyone who assumes that all those moves made Delilah a relaxed packer would be mistaken. Today, packing a suitcase can be precisely what throws her off balance. It really is about the belongings and the packing. It can completely drain me. I become unbearable, and everyone starts keeping their distance.’

She tells the story with self-deprecating humour, but also recognizes a possible connection to her childhood. Back then, packing did not mean going away for a weekend. It meant another country, a new life and a departure that could feel profound and final. Once the suitcase is closed, however, the tension disappears. Everything is then beyond her control, and she can surrender to whatever comes next.

When she and her own family considered moving abroad, the idea ultimately remained just that: an idea. New Zealand and England came up as possibilities because her husband has family there. But what keeps them in the Netherlands is their mothers. ‘I don’t want to move away from my mother at all. And he doesn’t want to leave his mother behind either.’

After a childhood in which home moved wherever her parents went, being close to family remains important.

The courage to change your mind
When the conversation turns to the Netherlands today, Delilah becomes more serious. She is concerned about polarization and the influence of disinformation. Not because people have different opinions, but because it seems increasingly difficult to remain genuinely curious about one another.

What gives her hope are precisely the exceptions. She mentions documentary filmmaker Qian van Binsbergen, who explores how the privileged position of white men in society is changing and how men are responding to these changes in the series *De Witte Man*. What moves Delilah is not necessarily what is being said, but above all the way Van Binsbergen approaches these conversations. ‘The way she sits there so calmly, with such composure, and manages to listen and have the conversation. I find that fascinating and beautiful.’

She was similarly moved when watching a teaser for Sander Schimmelpenninck’s *Sander en de Kloof 2*. In one of the conversations, a woman explains that she attended an open day at an asylum reception centre to see it for herself. Afterwards, she viewed some of her previous assumptions differently and admitted that she felt quite ashamed about them. ‘When someone says something like that, it brings tears to my eyes. Because I think it is so brave to dare to change your mind.’

It is a simple idea, but perhaps also a radical one at a time when taking a position can seem more important than having a conversation. ‘I wish everyone the courage to change their mind.’

Stories as bridges
That belief in human connection and imagination runs like a thread through her life. It is no coincidence that Delilah also seeks these qualities in literature, theatre, and film. While others might turn to talk shows or news programmes, she prefers, as she puts it, to escape into literature, film or art.

‘Theatre is almost a religion to me.’

Sitting together in a theatre. The lights dimming. Giving your full attention to a life that is not yours, but could have been.

For Delilah, there is something fundamental in that experience. A story does not ask you to pass judgement immediately. It asks you to look first. ‘You are sitting there together, watching something that could have happened to you. Or you see: this is what life is like for someone else. I truly believe it can help you understand something you might otherwise never have seen.’

She recognizes that same search in two books that have particularly moved her recently. In *Wij zijn hier door jullie. Een verzwegen geschiedenis*, Ragna Indra Heidweiller explores the history of her Hindustani-Surinamese ancestors, shedding light on the often overlooked and painful history and exploitation of Hindustani indentured labourers on plantations in Suriname following the abolition of slavery. In *Grenzend aan liefde*, Karin Amatmoekrim reflects on what the Netherlands looks like today, on migrants as part of that society, and on the question of how people can move forward together. The book makes a case for replacing fear and exclusion with openness and human connection.

For Delilah, these are important and hopeful books. She is drawn to stories that do not simply tell us that a society is changing, but also ask how it came to be this way. What history came before? What are the facts? And how can understanding the past create space to look towards the future? ‘I hope that many more people with a related story to tell will find a way to bring it to light.’

Hope begins with paying attention
This belief in stories is not naive. Delilah knows how easily pessimism can take over. Yet she feels hopeful when people come together to speak out against injustice. She finds hope when people make a genuine effort to connect with one another. And when stories do more than reinforce existing positions and instead open something up.

At the end of the conversation, Delilah is asked what lesson she would share with someone who has to start over somewhere new. She hesitates. Big life lessons are difficult to summarize. At first, she mentions respect for others. Then she makes it smaller and, at the same time, much bigger:

‘Be kind...Be kind!’ and then she adds
‘... and I would say the same to the people who already live in THAT place.’ ■

75 YEARS IN MOTION

For 75 years the history of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has reflected a world in motion. Established in 1951 to support the resettlement of millions of displaced Europeans, IOM has grown into a global organization with 174 Member States and offices in more than 100 countries. IOM has also been active in the Netherlands since 1991, including in the areas of voluntary return, resettlement, family reunification, integration, and migration and development. Its guiding principle has remained the same: humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society.



1951

Establishment in Brussels
PICMME is established to support the resettlement of approximately 11 million Europeans displaced by the war, primarily to North- and South America and Australia.



1956

Hungarian refugee crisis
Following the Hungarian uprising, ICEM assists 180,000 Hungarians who fled to Austria and Yugoslavia in reaching new countries of settlement.

1968 1969

Prague spring
ICEM provides accommodation in Vienna and supports the resettlement of 40,000 Czechoslovak refugees from Austria, in a politically sensitive operation during the Cold War.



1975 1982

Vietnamese boat refugees and Indochinese resettlement
Following the fall of Saigon, ICEM supports the reception, transportation and resettlement of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia. Its growing global role leads to its renaming as the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM) in 1980.



1973

Resettlement of Chileans
ICEM registers and resettles 25,000 Chilean political prisoners, asylum-seekers and family members across 38 receiving countries.



1990 1991

Gulf crisis
During the Gulf War, IOM assists hundreds of thousands of stranded migrant workers from Asia and Africa to safely leave Kuwait and the surrounding region and return to their countries of origin through emergency corridors.

1991

Opening IOM the Netherlands office
At the request of the Government of the Netherlands, IOM opens an office in The Hague to support voluntary return. Activities related to family reunification, integration and knowledge exchange through diaspora experts are introduced later.



1994

Genocide Rwanda
Following the genocide, IOM supports 1.2 million Rwandans returning from neighbouring countries, as well as camp management and the provision of essential health care.

2026

The Mediterranean route remains world's deadliest migration route
According to IOM's Missing Migrants Project, the Central Mediterranean route remains the deadliest migration route in the world. Since 2014, at least 26,859 people have died or gone missing along the route, while the actual number is likely to be higher.



2018

Assistance to Rohingya refugees
In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, IOM plays a central role in the humanitarian response for Rohingya refugees who fled Myanmar.

2022

War in Ukraine
Following the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, millions of people flee the country. IOM supports displaced people during their journeys, with reception assistance and with return, while some people travel home despite the risks.



2020 2021

Global COVID-19 response
During the COVID-19 pandemic, IOM supports governments and migrants around the world, including through vaccination sites in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and information provision, screening and testing in Afghanistan.

2016

IOM joins the UN
IOM formally joins the United Nations system as a related organization. The agreement is signed in New York by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and IOM Director General William Lacy Swing.



2015

Increase in migration across the mediterranean
IOM expands its assistance along European migration routes and, alongside operational support, provides data and policy advice to inform discussions on migration.



1999

Displacement Kosovo*
Through a humanitarian evacuation programme, approximately 80,000 Kosovars are transferred to 30 host countries. Later that year, IOM and UNHCR also supports returns home.



2011

Evacuation from Libya
During the violence following the Arab Spring, IOM and UNHCR assist more than 200,000 migrant workers to leave Libya and return to countries in Africa and Asia.

*All references to Kosovo shall be understood in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

WE EXIST. WE LIVE. WE BELONG.



Migration and international affairs have been a common thread throughout Tuba Kilinc's life and work. She grew up in Amsterdam, where she lived undocumented for a large part of her childhood. After completing a bachelor's degree in International Studies, she pursued a master's degree in Governance of Migration and Diversity. Amid these international themes, there is one identity she is equally proud of: being a true Amsterdammer.

I was born and raised in Amsterdam, just like my sister and three younger brothers. Amsterdam was, and still is, my home. It is the place I grew up, spoke Dutch, went to a Dutch school, had Dutch friends and knew all of the streets by the back of my head. And yet, I grew up undocumented for a large part of my childhood.

My parents came to the Netherlands in 1991, searching for a better life and a hopeful future. Five years later, I was born, the daughter of a Turkish father and a Circassian mother. Because of changes in the Dutch migration policy and the introduction of the Linkage Act, our family eventually lost its residency status

My parents lived without a residence permit for fifteen years. I did so for twelve.

As a child, I understood very little of what that meant. How could a law, a residence permit, or simply a piece of paper decide whether I belonged somewhere? For me, there was never any doubt. I spoke Dutch. I thought in Dutch. I went to school here, played in the Erasmus Park, and dreamed of my future here. Amsterdam was the only home I knew.

Yet the reality on paper told a different story.

During that period, my mother took part in a 39-day hunger strike. Together with fourteen other women, she fought for residence documents, her family, and for her future in which for her children would no longer have to grow up in uncertainty.

I was two and a half years old at the time.

Of course, I did not understand what my mother was fighting for. I only knew that I missed her. Every now and then, I was allowed to spend a little time with her. At that time, that was enough for me. I was simply happy to be able to sit with mom for a little while. As a child, I felt safe with her. Only now do I understand how uncertain and insecure the world around us actually was.

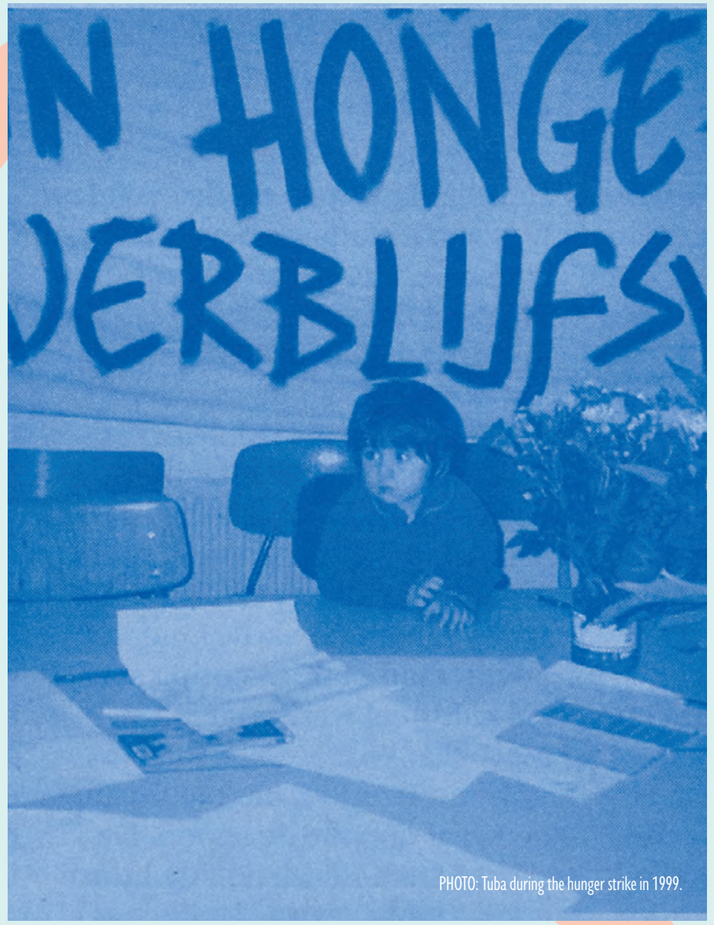


PHOTO: Tuba during the hunger strike in 1999.

When I was twelve, we finally received a residence permit.

It was only as I grew older that I began to realize how much those first twelve years shaped me. They taught me that migration is never just about borders, laws, statistics, or residence documents. Behind every decision, there is a person. And behind every person, there is a story.

People migrate for a variety of reasons. For safety, love, family, opportunities, curiosity, or simply the hope of a better life. These stories do not always fit neatly into the boxes in which policy attempts to place people.

Perhaps that is also why my work today feels so personal to me. I studied Governance of Migration and Diversity and now work at IOM, where I support migrants with voluntary return and reintegration. I was once a child whose life was shaped by decisions made through migration policy. Today, I work within that same complex landscape, sitting across from people who each have their own story, concerns and hopes for the future.

I understand that migration policy is necessary. But I also know how that policy can feel like from the other side. How something that is merely a decision, rule, or procedure on paper can impact someone's life for years to come.

That might be the most important lesson my own story has taught me: before someone is a migrant, a case number, or a residency status, they are a human being.

A human being with a family. With dreams. With memories. With a place that feels like home.

We exist. We live. We belong. ■

A RESIDENCE PERMIT MAKES YOU LEGAL...

At the language school *Iedereen aan Boord*, asylum-seekers began learning Dutch from the moment they arrived, even before it was clear whether they would be permitted to stay in the Netherlands. Four students show that language is also essential for connecting with others, expressing yourself and participating in society.

'What makes something literature?' Sanne Terlouw asks as she opens the lesson with four advanced students from Türkiye, the Syrian Arab Republic and Angola. After two years of intensive classes, four days a week, they speak and read Dutch at B1-B2 level. Today, they are exploring Dutch literature.

Nermin begins to answer but struggles to find the right words. 'You are doing well,' Sanne says. 'Try again.' A little later, the students are discussing the purpose of literature. A list appears on the digital board: *behaviour, morality, enjoyment, emotions, improving language skills.* It is Thursday morning in the classroom behind Sanne's garage.

Sanne founded *Iedereen aan Boord* together with her daughter, Laura Faber. They focused on asylum-seekers who did not yet know whether they would be able to remain in the Netherlands. Their starting point was simple: even without certainty about the future, people benefit from language, structure and social contact from day one. The personal approach proved effective, but without continued funding, the project could not continue in its original form. Sanne now teaches the classes on a voluntary basis together with her colleague Petra Vink.

'Even without certainty about the future, people benefit from language, structure and social contact from day one.'



The group opens *Code Plus*, the fourth course in a Dutch-language learning programme for non-native speakers. Today, they are reading an article about Hella Haasse. Nicolau reads the first paragraph aloud. When he drops the end of a word, Sanne steps in. Even a full stop should be audible when reading aloud. 'You should be able to hear it in your intonation.'

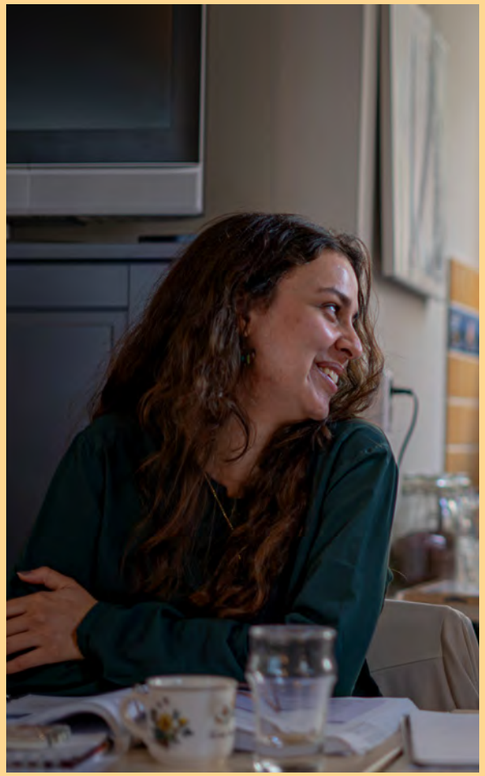
'We skipped a question', Taima points out. She indicates the question about the purpose of the text, something she finds difficult.

The article discusses Haasse's work and her background in the former Dutch East Indies. Sanne talks about the Netherlands' colonial history. 'I am not proud of it', she adds. They discuss unfamiliar words such as *plantation* and *rubber*. Nicolau knows what rubber is but searches for the right Dutch words to explain it.

'What I like is that the material itself is genuinely interesting, and quite complex,' Sanne says. Precisely because the texts challenge the students in terms of content, the language lessons become more engaging as well. They learn new vocabulary and grammar while discussing history and culture together.

Next, they read an excerpt from *Oeroeg*. The narrator in the book does not want to go to the Netherlands: it is cold and wet, and the streets are dull. The students recognize the last point. Compared with their countries of origin, the streets of the Netherlands can feel quiet in the evenings.

Break. ►



... LANGUAGE LETS YOU JOIN



Sümeyra makes coffee in the small kitchen next to the classroom. It is clear that she has done this before. Asked about her favourite Dutch word, she pauses for a moment. *'Gezellig,'* she says.

Together, the students bring many languages into the classroom. Sümeyra speaks Turkish. Taima and Nermin speak Arabic. Taima also speaks Spanish, while Nermin speaks English. Nicolau turns out to be a true polyglot. In addition to Portuguese, he speaks Kikongo, Lingala, Russian, French and Spanish. Dutch is approximately his sixth or seventh language.

Yet learning another language is not necessarily easy. Sümeyra has noticed that her English has declined since she started learning Dutch. For Nermin, speaking remains the main challenge. 'I need to practise, but I don't have anyone to speak Dutch with.'

'You can study from books for a very long time,' says Nermin, 'but that is not enough to truly learn how to speak a language.'

Dutch people also tend to switch quickly to English when someone is searching for the right words. While this may be intended to help, it can also take away an opportunity for learners to practise. 'You can study from books for a very long time,' says Nermin, 'but that is not enough to truly learn how to speak a language.'

For these students, language is more than a grammatical puzzle. Sümeyra describes how she was allocated housing after leaving an asylum reception centre. That same week, she received an invitation to begin her civic integration course. While she was still trying to furnish her home, something new was already being asked of her.

She tried to explain that it was too much at once. The course was postponed by one week, but Sümeyra did not feel truly understood. 'That is when I feel I no longer have the strength to continue the dialogue.'

The conversation also turns to the way migration is discussed in the Netherlands. Terms such as *inflow* and *outflow* can reduce people to movements or numbers. Taima feels that the focus is often primarily on the negative. People ask her whether she will return to the Syrian Arab Republic. 'We are not here for pleasure,' she says. 'We experienced dangerous situations in our country and are trying to build a new life here.'

That is why Taima believes it is important for people to learn Dutch as soon as possible. Without the language, it is difficult to express what you think, explain what you need or connect with others. Sümeyra puts it in the words of something she once heard from a friend: 'A residence permit makes us legal, but language makes us part of social life.'

After the break.

The students watch a scene from the film adaptation of Oeroeg. Nicolau recognizes something from his own school years in Angola. Just as Oeroeg had to learn Dutch place names, Nicolau learned the geography of Portugal, Angola's former colonial power.

Finally, the group reads a fable by Toon Tellegen about a squirrel and an ant. The text leads to a conversation about different ideas of the afterlife. The students understand this form well, even though, or perhaps precisely because its meaning is not explained literally.

According to Sanne, conversations like these can only emerge when students feel comfortable. 'Safety has become a bit of a buzzword,' she says, 'but in our classes, it is important to build trust and create an atmosphere in which everything can be discussed.'

If someone does not show up, the teachers call them. They also take into account trauma and mental health challenges, which can sometimes make it temporarily difficult for someone to absorb new material. Sanne believes it is appropriate to set expectations, but these should be accompanied by understanding. Students should never feel like a number.

Then it is time for homework. The students are asked to make an audio recording of themselves reading the Toon Tellegen text as beautifully as possible and send it to Sanne. 'Preferably not on Thursday morning,' she adds. ■



In a living room in Assen, we meet the six-year-old Omar and his family: his grandmother Noor, his father Jamil and his half-brother Abdeen.* Everyone is busy bustling about, and the table is laden with food. They prepared a typical Arabic breakfast for our arrival. Homemade Syrian cheese, eggs, vegetables, makdous (baby aubergines stuffed with bell pepper and walnut), Lebanese flatbread, and tea fill the table. Because breakfast comes with tea. Turning it down is not an option, so we gladly accept their warm welcome.



SOMEONE WAS ALWAYS MISSING

Omar has only recently arrived in the Netherlands. After years of separation from his father and grandmother, they are finally together again. His family history began long before he was born. His parents left Syria in 2012 because of the war and settled in Lebanon, seeking safety and better living conditions. Omar was born there. A year after his birth, however, his parents separated.

Omar's mother remarried in Syria, while his father, Jamil, moved to the Netherlands with his own mother. He was determined to bring his son to the Netherlands as soon as possible. Through people he knew and organizations he had been in contact with, he learned that he could apply for family reunification once he had received a residence permit. ►

*We use fictitious names for privacy reasons.

‘When I said goodbye to Omar, he could barely walk. At the airport, he ran towards me. That was when I realized just how much time had passed.’

Following his parents’ separation, Omar lived with his mother in Syria. According to the family, however, he could no longer stay with her after she started a new family. That is why, Omar went to live with his uncle in Lebanon while waiting for the outcome of the family reunification application, which Jamil submitted as soon as he received his residence permit.

The fact that Omar, a Syrian child, was born in Lebanon made obtaining the documents required for his journey more complex. In addition to a birth certificate, further documentation was required, as well as authorization from the Lebanese authorities for Omar to leave the country. Obtaining these documents proved difficult. When the IND approved the family reunification application, Jamil celebrated the good news by sharing sweets and desserts with everyone at the asylum seekers’ centre. Still, the family had to be patient. Omar could not leave Lebanon due to bureaucratic requirements. For the family, it felt as though every obstacle they overcame was followed by another.

While the family waited for the required documents and authorizations, Omar was growing up in Lebanon without his parents. From the Netherlands, Jamil tried in every way he could to speed up his son’s journey. In the meantime, he remarried and had two children with his wife, a son and a newborn daughter. He found full-time work as a postal worker. His mother, brother and sister lived only a few minutes’ drive from the asylum seekers’ centre.

Although Jamil was surrounded by family, Omar’s absence was felt every day. ‘There was always someone missing,’ Jamil says. ‘My son was supposed to be with us.’

Three years after Omar received approval to join his father in the Netherlands, there was finally movement in the process. Through the Dutch Council for Refugees the Netherlands, Jamil came into contact with IOM. IOM was able to provide support in addressing the remaining administrative obstacles preventing Omar from travelling to the Netherlands. Within a month, arrangements could be made for Omar’s journey. Given his young age, an IOM Lebanon staff member accompanied him during the journey.

On the day of Omar’s arrival, his family waited anxiously at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. After five years, Jamil could finally hold his son, now six years old, in his arms again. With a broad smile, he shows us a video of their reunion. ‘I couldn’t believe it,’ he says. ‘After such a long time, the moment had finally arrived. When I said goodbye to Omar, he could barely walk. At the airport, he ran towards me. That was when I realized just how much time had passed.’

The boy Jamil met at the airport was no longer the small child he had said goodbye to. ‘He has grown so much.’

The family is now going through another period of change and adjustment. Jamil lives with his wife, Omar’s younger brother and sister at the asylum seekers’ centre while they wait for a home of their own. Omar lives with his grandmother Noor in her apartment, where it is quieter than at the centre. He needs time to adjust to life in the Netherlands and to being with his family again. The family is getting to know one another again. For everyone, this is a process of adjustment. During the years they were separated, they missed many moments in Omar’s early childhood. Now, step by step, they are building their relationship again.

Omar feels most at ease with his grandmother. He enjoys drawing and playing outside with the other children at school. He says he likes living in the Netherlands more than in Syria or Lebanon. He also thinks the streets are cleaner here. He stays in touch with his mother through video calls. His grandmother Noor regularly sends her videos of Omar playing and eating.

For now, happiness can be found in small, everyday moments: going for walks together, sitting around the same table and watching the children play together. After years of waiting, they are together again. There is no longer someone missing. ■





PHOTO: Solomon in the common room at the Diaconie in Amsterdam.

IT TAKES COURAGE TO RETURN

During his work with IOM, Solomon supported thousands of people with voluntary return. After 26 years with the Organization, he retired and made a return journey of his own, to Ethiopia, the country he left at the age of 19. We speak online from his apartment in Addis Ababa, where he shows me the view: a green walking path, the city, and beyond, the mountains. What follows is a conversation about privilege, memories and identity, without a single power cut, something Solomon says is rare.

Before the interview, he writes that his situation is fundamentally different from that of the people he supported. He is retired, financially secure and holds both Ethiopian and Dutch nationality. He describes himself as 'a privileged global citizen'. 'What I do recognize are the small but meaningful things, such as the smells, the sounds, the light and the food that immediately take you back to your childhood. But there is also a sense of unfamiliarity. The realization that I can be at home and, at the same time, feel like a stranger in my own country.'

An old place, new challenges

Solomon explains that returning is not easy. You have to adapt again and find your place in a society that has changed enormously. In Ethiopia, he says, there is hardly a middle class anymore, and the divide between rich and poor is significant. Old friendships and social networks no longer exist. 'You return to a past that no longer exists. Habits, culture, everything is different. You return to a society that has continued without you.' This can be challenging both mentally and socially. There are also numerous practical challenges, such as finding reliable information about administrative procedures and arranging housing, health care, and education. Documentation is extremely important, and navigating these processes takes time and patience. A great deal of patience. The economic situation is changing, and the cost of essentials such as housing has risen considerably. This can make returning particularly difficult for someone who does not have a strong support network. 'Ultimately, return is about so much more than the physical journey. It is about reintegrating into society, and that process can only really begin once you are there,' Solomon says. Friends from the past may no longer be there, your own social position and that of your network may have changed, and expectations need to be adjusted. 'When you return, you should not return based on your memories. You have to look at the reality, because the past no longer exists.'

Having a support network upon return is extremely important, both financially and socially. ►

‘WHEN YOU RETURN, YOU SHOULD NOT RETURN BASED ON YOUR MEMORIES. YOU HAVE TO LOOK AT THE REALITY, BECAUSE THE PAST NO LONGER EXISTS.’

Society has changed, and so have people’s needs. It can be difficult to compete with people who have lived there all their lives. Returning takes courage, both practically and mentally, because returning to a culture you no longer know well is a significant step.

Solomon says he would prefer to live in Tigray, where he is also involved in supporting education for young girls. His days are filled with organizing volunteer activities, meeting friends and family, and adjusting to a different pace of life, where every journey across Addis Ababa takes time. His wife and daughter find it more difficult to be there, partly because they miss their work and friends. Solomon says returning can also be more challenging for women. ‘Ethiopian society has changed, but the position of women is different from that in the Netherlands.’

Missing and longing

What Solomon misses most about the Netherlands is the predictability of an organized society and its public services. The certainty of electricity, water, internet access, health care, and a bus that arrives as expected. But he also misses the openness he experienced in the Netherlands, his friends and meaningful conversations. ‘Home no longer exists in the same way. I am more Dutch, more a global citizen, than an Ethiopian. I see that as something enriching, but it is also difficult because you never fully feel that you belong anywhere. When you are in Ethiopia, you long for the Netherlands, and vice versa. When I was in the Netherlands, I was always longing for the Ethiopia of the past.’

Pride

‘I am proud of the person I have become. I started with very little and worked my way up because I was given opportunities in the Netherlands. I have three wonderful children and had a fantastic career. I learned the value of solidarity. For me, helping other people gives meaning to why I am here on this planet. I have organized many initiatives to support people, both in the Netherlands and in Ethiopia. Here in Ethiopia, that is more difficult, but I want to take on the challenge of staying here. I am not someone who gives up easily.’ ■

PHOTO: Solomon in his neighbourhood in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

On a dusty road in Worabe, Ethiopia, a small crowd follows a cow as it makes its way home. Children weave in and out of the procession. Neighbors stop watching. Someone laughs as the animal stubbornly veers off course. It is an ordinary scene, the kind that unfolds every day in rural Ethiopia. Except that today, the cow represents far more than livestock.



THE WEIGHT OF A COW



For one family, it represents income. For another, security. For a community that has seen many of its young people leave in search of opportunities elsewhere, it is also something harder to quantify: faith in a shared future.

When people imagine return migration, they often picture scenes from movies. A homecoming, a reunion, a happy ending. Reality is usually messier.

Many migrants return carrying experiences they never expected to have. Some come home after years abroad with little to show for their journey. Others return burdened by debt, disappointment, or the feeling that they have somehow failed. They may have left their community as ambitious young people. They come back older, changed, and uncertain of where they fit. This also holds true for those who did succeed elsewhere but are returning to reconnect with home or family, or because of career opportunities.

Returning home, it turns out, is not the same as belonging there. That is one of the great paradoxes of migration. Leaving is difficult, but returning can be just as hard.

'Returning home, it turns out, is not the same as belonging there.'

In Ethiopia, communities facing high rates of migration have been grappling with this challenge for years. Through the Dutch funded COMPASS programme implemented by IOM, local communities have been exploring a deceptively simple idea: what if reintegration is not just the responsibility of the person returning, but of the entire community?

The answer, in some places, looks like a cow.

The cattle-fattening project in Worabe was not designed at a desk in an office. It emerged from conversations among returnees, local authorities, religious leaders, farmers, young people, and other residents. Together they asked a practical question: what could create opportunities not only for returnees, but for everyone? Among the ideas that surfaced, cattle fattening stood out as an investment rooted in local knowledge and realities.

To an outsider, the project might seem almost modest. A few cows. Training. Local cooperation. Yet its ambition runs deeper than economics.

Migration can leave invisible fractures inside communities. Those who leave are sometimes viewed with admiration. Sometimes with envy. Sometimes with suspicion. When support is directed exclusively towards returnees, these tensions can grow. Why should one person receive assistance while their equally struggling neighbor receives nothing?

Community-based reintegration takes a different approach. Instead of dividing people into categories of returnees and people who stayed, it asks what can strengthen the entire community. The goal is not simply to help someone come back. It is to create an environment where opportunities are shared, rather than competed for.

As a result, people who never migrated become part of the solution. Community members help identify opportunities, local leaders facilitate discussions, and families share knowledge and resources. Benefits are designed to ripple outward rather than stop with a single household. Similar approaches in other countries and regions have gone so far as to integrate support for reintegration into community structures and local decision-making processes.

What emerges is something more valuable than a livelihood project. This approach creates ownership. And ownership matters because the hardest part of reintegration rarely appears in statistics. It is the quiet question many returnees ask themselves: 'Can I still belong here?'

A stable income helps answer that question. So does being welcomed by neighbors and participating in decisions about the future of the community. Reintegration is economic, certainly. But it is also social and shaped by a wide range of emotions.

Migration is often discussed in the language of borders, policies, and numbers. Yet on the ground, its consequences are intensely human and personal. They can be found in the conversations that happen after a return, in the opportunities available to start again, and in the willingness of a community to embrace those coming home.

'Reintegration is not a moment when a migrant crosses a border in the opposite direction. It is a process of rebuilding trust, purpose, and connection.'

Back in Worabe, the procession eventually reaches its destination. The cow disappears behind a gate. The crowd disperses. The scene lasts only a few minutes. Yet it captures something profound. Reintegration is not a moment when a migrant crosses a border in the opposite direction. It is a process of rebuilding trust, purpose, and connection. It happens one relationship at a time, one opportunity at a time, one act of community at a time. And sometimes it begins with a cow being fattened to be sold on the market for profit. ■



How the name SJIRK made its way from IDSKENHUIZEN to ABOKOBI



On Tuesday morning, 25 July 1995, we drove Simeon to Schiphol in our aging VW. At 11.35, his flight departed: KL585, Amsterdam–Accra. The return agency [IOM. red.] arranged a one-way KLM ticket for him, as well as a laissez-passer issued by the Ghanaian Embassy in Brussels.

At Schiphol, Simeon signed a declaration stating that he was 'withdrawing all his procedures'. After passing through passport control, he received the promised 'support allowance' of 500 Dutch guilders from IOM. Earlier that morning, we had given him a small stack of dollar bills in a sealed envelope, so that he would not return to his mother empty-handed.

The evening before, we had held a bittersweet farewell party with his African friends. They had bought groceries at a tropical supermarket in the Bijlmer, so that, for once, he could cook a truly authentic African meal, after all the bland potatoes and pasta from Poiesz that we had served him. I have never seen such homesickness in someone's eyes as I did in Simeon's that summer of 1995. Two years earlier, his hope was pinned on Europe; now, he yearned for the smells and warmth of his homeland.

Simeon was a migrant from a safe country of origin, as we would say today, or, more judgmentally, as an 'ordinary fortune seeker'. After arriving in the port of Vlissingen on 24 December 1993, he had claimed that he came from Liberia and had been born in Monrovia. After a few months, we knew otherwise, but that did not stand in the way of the warmth between us.

After spending a period in the reception centre in Zeewolde and in the asylum seekers' centre in Almelo, Simeon was placed in temporary accommodation in our town, together with three other young men from West Africa. On Sunday mornings, they would attend a local church, and after the service we invited them to join us for a meal. We shared stories and soon became friends.

Migration is a phenomenon of all times and places; at times it brings progress, at times it ends in a deception.

Migration is a phenomenon of all times and places; at times it brings progress, at times it ends in a deception. We knew this from our own family: after the war, relatives had started a new life in Canada, only to return to the Netherlands in the 1960s, several children richer and a few illusions poorer.

My own 'deeply Frisian' first name was a reminder of a domestic, but no less significant, move. I was named after my grandfather Sjirk, who was born in 1889 in Idskenhuizen – in the municipality of Doniawerstal. He was given the same name as his firstborn brother, who had died at the age of four. In search of work and a better life, he moved some 30 years later to the Zaan region, and later still to the Gooi. There, as his grandson, I was named after him.

When I later moved to *Fryslân* myself, for work and in pursuit of happiness, everyone assumed that I had Frisian roots and was returning to it *heitelân*, the homeland. If your name is Sjirk, people spontaneously start speaking Frisian to you, so I quickly became familiar with the language and culture.

We continued corresponding with Simeon for many years. His letters were filled with blessings, and he always ended them with a Bible verse and 'due, due, due!' which was how he transcribed the Dutch farewell 'doei!'. After we had three daughters, his wife Raheal, whom he had married by then, sewed three Ghanaian garments for them.

In 2008, they had a son of their own whom they named Sjirk: after a distant, old friend in the Netherlands. Fortunately, Ghana is not an Islamic country, because in Arabic, *shirk* has a blasphemous meaning. Sjirk Kodjo recently turned eighteen. I sent him a photo of Idskenhuizen from around the turn of the last century, as well as one of pake Sjirk, whose name he bears. ■

Sjirk Kuijper (1966) is a columnist and former editor-in-chief of the Dutch newspaper Nederlands Dagblad.



COUNTING IS CHOOSING:

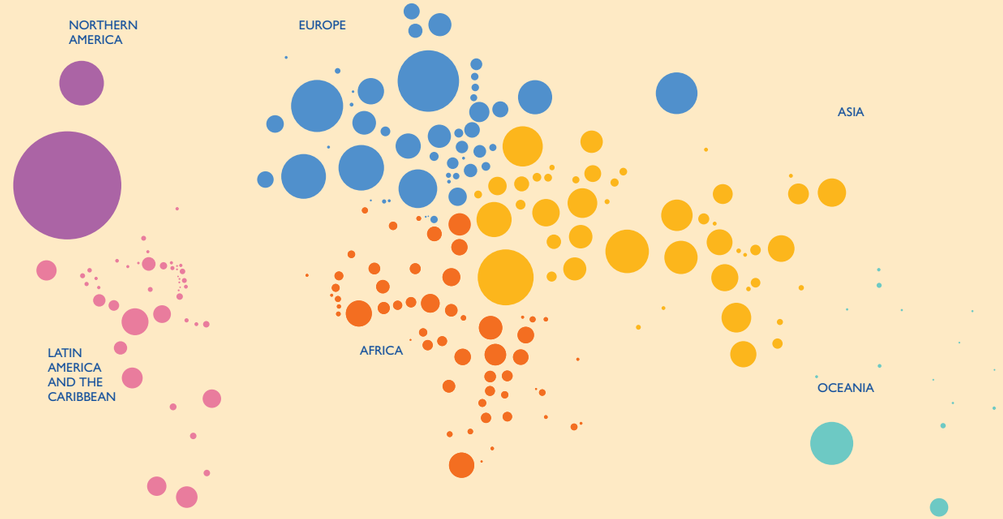
WHY MIGRATION DATA DO NOT TELL THE WHOLE STORY

Personal stories make migration tangible, while data show the scale and scope of the reality. A single story can stay with us. Data can reveal whether it is exceptional or part of a broader pattern. They help test assumptions and bring to light trends that might otherwise go unnoticed. Yet fnumbers never speak entirely for themselves: what we count, and how we count it, also shapes the picture that emerges. Together, data and stories provide a more complete, honest, and often surprising picture of migration. Understanding migration data is therefore essential.

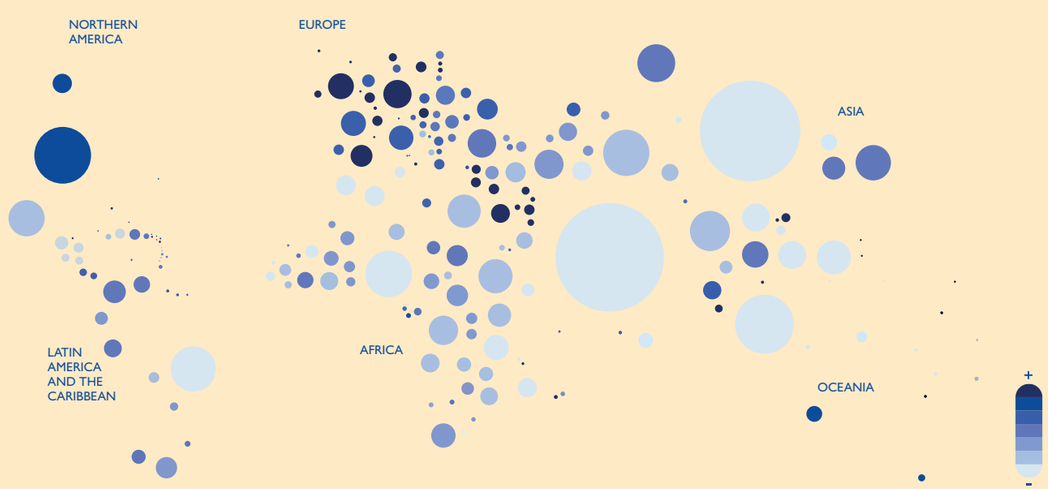
A SMALL SHARE OF THE GLOBAL POPULATION

Based on media reports, one might think that migration levels are higher than ever before. Yet only a relatively small share of the world's population migrates. Most people continue to live in the country where they were born. Displacement due to conflict, climate issues, and economic hardship has risen sharply in recent years. But the majority of displaced persons remain within their own countries: in 2009, an estimated 740 million people were internal migrants. In 2024, an estimated 304 million people were living outside their country of birth, representing 3.7 per cent of the global population. This makes migration more than a national or European issue: it is part of a global reality.

The map shows the total number of international migrants within each country.



The map shows the share of international migrants within each country.



Global averages conceal significant differences. If you ask, 'Where do most migrants live?', the answer depends on how the question is framed. In absolute numbers, the United States ranks first, with more than 50 million international migrants. However, when looking at the share of the total population, the United States does not rank among the top 25 countries.

In the United Arab Emirates, more than 74 per cent of the population are international migrants. Whether a country has 'many' migrants therefore depends on what you measure: absolute numbers or the share of the population. Are you counting people, or ratios?

ESTABLISHED ROUTES: MIGRATION CORRIDORS

Migration patterns change from year to year, but recognizable patterns can emerge over time. When large numbers of people migrate between the same country of origin and destination over many years, this is referred to as a migration corridor. Its size is measured by the number of people born in one country who are living in another.

01 MEXICO → UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
02 AFGHANISTAN → ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN
03* SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC → TÜRKIYE

*Largely comprising refugees displaced by the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic

IOM AS A GLOBAL SOURCE OF MIGRATION DATA

Through the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), IOM collects migration and displacement data in more than 90 countries.

The Migration Data Portal brings together international migration data and makes them more accessible and comparable.

The biennial World Migration Report is a leading publication on global migration trends.

The Missing Migrants Project records cases of migrants who have died or gone missing during their journeys.

HOW MIGRATION DATA ARE PRODUCED

Behind every migration statistic is a registration or data-collection system, and these systems do not all measure the same thing. The IND registers only non-Dutch nationals who apply for a residence permit and does not collect data on emigration. Statistics Netherlands (CBS) takes a broader approach, recording immigration and emigration among all people, regardless of nationality. A person is counted as an immigrant when they arrive from abroad and register with a municipality. Asylum-seekers are included only once they have been granted a (temporary) residence permit, or after they have stayed in an asylum reception centre for more than six months with a registration. Undocumented migrants on are not included in these statistics.

Definitions also vary internationally. IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) does not measure regular migration flows, but tracks displacement in crisis situations, often based on field observations. Consequently, a DTM estimate cannot be directly compared with a CBS figure, even though both concern migration-related data.

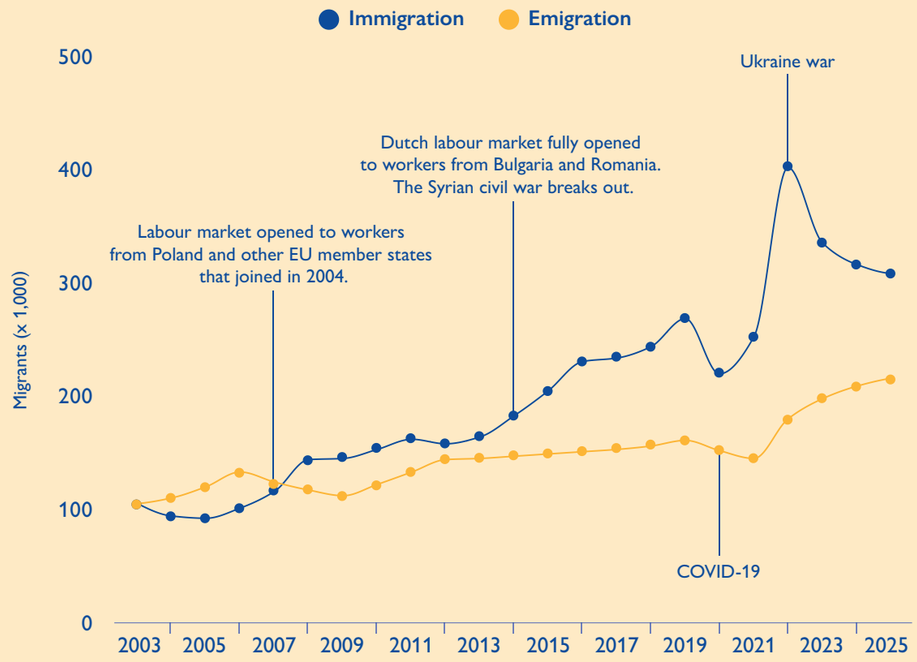
Sources: CBS, IND and data sources of IOM.

WHO COUNTS WHAT, AND WHEN?

So how many people migrated to the Netherlands this year? Here too, the answer depends on the source. CBS and the IND use different methodologies, while international organizations such as IOM apply their own definitions and methodologies. Migration is also much broader than asylum-related migration alone.

People migrate for reasons including study, family, temporary protection, as well as return and onward movement.

MIGRATION IS MORE THAN ASYLUM



AN UPWARD TREND MAY INDICATE MORE ARRIVALS, FEWER DEPARTURES, OR BOTH

Statistics are not isolated facts. Looking only at the figures tells us how many people arrive and leave. Looking at the context helps us understand why. Behind every increase or decrease are developments such as conflicts, economic changes, policy shifts and international events. These patterns also reflect how closely the Netherlands is connected to the rest of the world.

GROSS MIGRATION?

Gross migration refers to the number of people who arrive in the Netherlands in a given year (immigration) and the number who leave (emigration), with each measured separately. Net migration, or the migration balance, is the difference between the two: immigration minus emigration.

High levels of both immigration and emigration in the same year can therefore result in a relatively low net migration figure. In 2022, immigration from Ukraine was high, while emigration remained low. As a result, the migration balance increased considerably. When looking at a graph, it is therefore important to ask: does it show gross migration, net migration or a specific migration flow?

WHO IS THE LABOUR MIGRANT?

They sail across the world, clean homes, build walls, and perform classical music. An estimated 900,000 labour migrants live in the Netherlands, each with their own background, experiences and plans for the future. Some arrive with an employment contract in hand, while others work for years without the required documentation. Who are the people behind the labor? Seven labour migrants share their experiences of life in the Netherlands, the opportunities they found and the obstacles they encountered.

‘Water in a cup will stink if stays still too long, you have to change it.’



Ebu* grew up in a coastal city in Ghana. From an early age, he was drawn to the sea. He did not complete his education and began working on ships at a young age. For more than twenty years, he sailed around the world, working in engine rooms. His journey eventually brought him to the Netherlands, where he first worked in a slaughterhouse and later for a shipping company. After an accident, he lost his job. From then on, he worked as a cleaner and took on various other jobs. He stayed with acquaintances and at times experienced homelessness. After 25 years, he feels it is time to return to Ghana. He is not worried about going back. He is returning to the place he came from, close to the sea.

‘Work alone is not enough for me.’



Karin came to the Netherlands twelve years ago to help her mother, who had already been working here to pay for her children’s education. The work took a heavy toll on her mother, and Karin stepped in to help so that her brother could also pursue his studies. For Karin, cleaning work alone is not enough. She is curious and always wants to continue learning. She also wants to understand her rights and support others. She volunteers with several organizations that assist people without regular residence status and is a member of the FNV trade union for cleaners. ‘Through my volunteer work, I have really come to know the Netherlands,’ she says. At the same time, she misses Indonesia. A sense of safety and community is important to her. Now, she lives with her mother and hopes to open her own restaurant in Indonesia in the future.

‘There are more opportunities in classical music in the Netherlands.’



When **Galit** came to the Netherlands from Israel fourteen years ago, her plan was to study and then return. As a recorder player, she found more opportunities in the Netherlands to perform and collaborate with other musicians. During her studies, she met Punto, an Indonesian lute player. They now live in The Hague with their daughter. Galit feels connected to her neighbourhood and has both Dutch and international friends. Still, official correspondence and administrative systems can sometimes be difficult to navigate. Israel also feels like home. Her parents live there, and she misses the food, the weather and the people. The safety situation also influences her decision not to return. In the Netherlands, she has found a different sense of calm. For Galit, home is therefore not just one place: Israel, Amsterdam and The Hague all feel familiar. She sees her future in the Netherlands, where her daughter is growing up. ►

*We use fictitious names for privacy reasons.

‘How can I earn enough money for my children?’



Maria* is 74 years old, is from the Philippines and works as a cleaner. She came to the Netherlands 23 years ago to earn money to pay for the education of her three sons. She cleans the homes of doctors, lawyers and businesspeople, as well as real estate offices. Her first years in the Netherlands were difficult. She worked so hard that she was hospitalized and recovered slowly. She has already been employed by some families for more than 22 years. Now that her children are adults, she is working towards her own future. She dreams of having a small home with chickens and a garden in her home village. For now, she remains in the Netherlands and continues caring for others. She would especially like to volunteer with older people, as she often sees how lonely they can be.

‘As the eldest man in the family, I have a financial responsibility.’



Alisher* is 22 and from Uzbekistan. As the eldest son in a family of five children, he has felt responsible for financially supporting his family since his father passed away. After spending several months working in Bulgaria and Poland without receiving payment, he came to the Netherlands about three months ago. Here, he worked as a plasterer, although work has been irregular. While playing football, he broke his thigh bone. The accident jeopardized his plans for the future. When he told his mother the bad news, she replied: ‘Come home.’ Alisher is concerned about whether doctors in Uzbekistan will be able to remove the metal pins that were inserted during his treatment in the Netherlands.

‘I wanted to lift my family out of poverty.’



Karla* is from the Philippines. To pay for her children’s education, she worked abroad as a domestic worker. While working for a diplomatic family in the Netherlands, she experienced exploitation. She worked 16 hours a day, was mistreated, and was given very little food. Her passport was taken away, and she was not allowed to leave the house. ‘I felt like a dog,’ she says. Through the internet, she came into contact with someone from FairWork, an organization that supports victims of human trafficking and labour exploitation. She eventually managed to escape and received support. She now has a residence permit and is working hard to build her future. She is learning Dutch and hopes to work with older people in home care in the Netherlands. This year, she saw her children again for the first time in years. They are now old enough to take care of themselves.

‘It was never my dream to come to the Netherlands.’



Eight years ago, **Mariana** left her life in Mexico for the Netherlands. Not because she had dreamed of emigrating, but because her husband was offered a job. She spent months considering the decision. In Monterrey, she had a job she loved, her own income and family, and friends nearby. In the Netherlands, she had to start again. She did not know anyone, missed her family, and was initially dependent on her husband. To remain active, she started volunteering two days a week at a non-profit organization for children. She later secured a paid position there. She and her husband have since built a life in the Netherlands, with jobs, friends and a social network. Still, migration can sometimes feel like living between two worlds. Her family, friends and memories are in Mexico, but every time she visits, she realizes that life there has not stood still, and neither has she. ■

*We use fictitious names for privacy reasons.

HET HUIS VAN EUROPA

mijn buurman heeft een continent bedacht
een glooiend rijk met weinig eigenschappen
geen wind of echo: instapklare vlaktes
maken het leven lang en af

de burgers zijn beschaafd aan alle kanten
volledig rond en eengemaakt
gelijken zij hun munten, talen, hun tomaten
vredig rollen ze over straat

ook in mij gedijt dat eindeloos
verlangen naar orde, huiselijkheid
buurman en ik, wij aanvaarden elkaar
vormen het schuim op onze idealen

maar soms, wanneer de wereld brandt
vlak voor het slapengaan
soms denk ik zachtjes aan mijn afkomst
dan ruik ik u op afstand

daar, onder gladde jongenshuid
ontwaakt in honderdduizendvoud
een ronduit tegenstrijdig gaat

een hol gevuld met kelten en katharen
etrusken, moren, magyaren
het stinkt er naar melk en mannenvacht

naar visigoten, protoslaven
lappen trekken op jacht naar de kruin
vandalen bevolken mijn onderbuik

mijn vlees puilt uit, begint te smelten
bask! saks! merovingers
haken zich vast aan tere ribben

ik val uiteen, kom samen in horden
ik word een goede barbapappa
voor al mijn reizende voorvaderen

hier gaat de mikmak van europa

mijn buurman had een continent bedacht
maar ik zoek een kamer voor mijn gasten
een huisje voor gemengde komaf
of gewoon een vat om in te slapen

ik zoek een plek vol ongemak
liefst hoekig zoals vroeger: slecht geregeld
tochtig en half af, maar écht -
geef me houvast tussen kelder en dak

bouw voor mij een roestig huis
tegen een merelveld vol schone mythen
tegen de klaprozen van poperinge
en de gouden kiezen van auschwitz

tegen een uitzicht op mist en zuiverheid
bouw mij een moeilijk, pijnlijk huis

Dichter der Nederlanden — Ramsey Nasr
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Translation: David Colmer

of visigoths and proto-slavs
lapp hunters head up north
vandals settle at gut level

my flesh bulges and starts to melt
basque! saxon! merovingians
hook onto tender ribs

in hordes I fall apart and come together
turning into a good barbapapa
for all my travelling forebears

that's europe with the works

my neighbour conceived a continent
but I need a room for my guests
a home for my mixed origins
or simply a barrel to sleep in

I need a place with discomforts
with old-style corners: badly arranged
draughty and incomplete, but real –
something to grip between cellar and roof

build me a rusty house against
the dizzy myths of the field of blackbirds
against the poppies of poperinge
and the gold teeth of auschwitz

against a prospect of mist and purity
build me a difficult, painful house

my neighbour conceived a continent
a rolling realm where features are few
no wind or echoes, just furnished plains
to make our lives complete and long

the citizens are civilised to uniformity
rough edges gone and rounded off
like their languages, their coins and tomatoes
they roll on down the road in peace

it also thrives in me, this endless
longing for order, domesticity
my neighbour and I accept each other
we are the froth on our ideals

but sometimes when the world's on fire
just before I go to sleep
I think softly of my origins
and smell you in the distance

where, under smoothly boyish skin
a pit of gaping contradiction
awakes a hundred-thousand-fold

a hole full of celts and cathars
etruscans, moors and magyars
reeking of milk and manly hides

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THE HOUSE OF EUROPE