



EMN NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2017

This year, on the 18th of May, the Dutch EMN National Conference was held at the Europe House in the Hague. The topic of the conference was family reunification in both the Netherlands as well as Finland, France and Sweden. This topic is connected to the EMN study on Family Reunification, which was carried out earlier this year. The main purpose of the conference was to provide a comparative overview of the family reunification policy in different EU Member States. The conference gave extra emphasis to family reunification for beneficiaries of international protection

Welcome

The day was opened by the conference chair, **Annemieke van Dam** (Director Strategy and Implementation Advice Department), who gave everyone a warm welcome and briefly went through the programme of the conference. Additionally, **Anna Matus** of the Europe House took the floor and welcomed the audience on behalf of the Europe House.

Opening Address

Renger Visser (Director Asylum and Protection Department) gave an opening address at the start of the conference. Renger welcomed the audience and the participants to both the conference as well as the city of The Hague. After providing a history of The Hague and the parliament that is seated closely to the Europe House, he spoke about importance of family reunification. Renger stated he was looking forward to the conference as well as the fruitful results the conference would provide to its audience.

Presentations

The first presentation given was about the Dutch family reunification policy by **Laura Seiffert** (Researcher, Strategy and Implementation Advice Department). Laura provided an overview of the Dutch policy concerning family reunification and presented some figures on this topic. This was followed by a presentation from **Tatiana Kistruga** (ICF International) on the synthesis report of the study on family reunification. The synthesis report provided an overview of all policies from all EU Member States (and Norway). She discussed the main findings and provided some fruitful insights into both similarities and differences between all (Member) States.

Panel I

The first panel consisted of four speakers and was chaired by **Dennis Timmerman** from the Strategy and Implementation Advice Department of the Immigration and Naturalisation Service. The topic of the panel was *"Family reunification in an international context, case studies of Finland, France and Sweden"*. In this panel, **Pauline Chaigne** (UNHCR) firstly provided an overview of family reunification in Europe. Pauline also provided an insight on the practical obstacles as well as future trends and proposals. The proposals include expanding the definition/scope of family reunification and providing for common application forms and travel documentation. After Pauline, **Jonas Hols** (EMN Sweden) provided an interesting presentation about the family reunification policy in Sweden. He stressed that the temporary act on restrictions of the possibility of being granted a residence permit in Sweden, initiated in 2016, is currently an important measure to contain the high influx. During the presentation of **Johanna Väänänen** (EMN Finland), it became clear that the Finnish and Swedish policies share many similarities, although Finland has a smaller amount of applications. One of the main insights Johanna pointed out, is that applicants can fill in a online form, but have to visit



a Finnish embassy nonetheless. The final presentation for the panel was given by **Marie-Frédérique Whitley** (French Ministry of Interior). She mainly stated that the French constitution includes the right on family life but that there is a strict line between regular family reunification and the family reunification of refugees/beneficiaries of international protection. After this presentation, the audience was able to ask some (critical) questions to the speakers. Most of the questions were aimed at the comparison between the three Member States in the panel. The audience appeared to be especially interested in how the Member States deal with the lack of documentary evidence.

Interview

After the coffee break, **Hans Lemmens** (Coordinator EMN Netherlands) interviewed **Ahmad Hamwi**. Ahmad is a Syrian refugee who experienced first hand how the family reunification procedure works in the Netherlands after applying for family reunification with his wife (who had been in the Netherlands for only two weeks at the time of the conference). The interview was roughly shaped in three parts. How did he get to the Netherlands? How was the family reunification procedure? What is The Crisis Movie Project about? After the interview there was room for questions, which the audience gladly used to express their interest.

Panel II

The second panel of the day consisted of various national experts on the topic of family reunification. It gave opportunity for a reflection and discussion into the insights of other Member States and international organizations in a Dutch perspective. In this panel, **Bart Crijns** (Ministry of Security and Justice), **Corrien Ullersma** (Law Firm van der Woude – de Graaf), **Anja van Loon** (Immigration and Naturalisation Service), **Mark Klaassen** (Leiden University) and **Ariane den Uyl** (Dutch Council for Refugees) responded to questions from both Dennis Timmerman and the audience. Especially near the end, the best interest of the child appeared to be a topic that sparked debate between the panel members and the audience as well. Similar as during the first panel, the lack of documentary evidence was an important part of the discussion. Questions asked specifically for the Dutch procedure, f.e. when a DNA test is used and how applicants without documents are assisted.

Closing Remarks

Lastly, **Annemieke van Dam** summarized the day by stating that there was a lot to discuss on family reunification. She stressed that there is a lot to be proud of since many Member States, including the Netherlands, developed advanced policies and procedures and everyone who submits an application can be guaranteed that it will be handled with due care. But she also stressed that there are several areas of improvement. These include the delays caused by the high influx of asylum seekers, the trouble of refugees to reach the embassies and children to be taken care of. Annemieke van Dam rounded of the conference by calling on all organisations to work closely together and exchange ideas and insights into the policy of family reunification, to make it even better.

