

## COA International Exchange Event 2025 – Self-reliance through Digitalization in Asylum Reception: 15 & 16 May

The 2025 edition of the COA International Exchange Event took place in the futuristic setting of the Next Nature Museum in Eindhoven. This year's theme, *self-reliance through digitalization in asylum reception*, brought together professionals, residents, and international guests to exchange knowledge on how digital tools can support greater self-reliance.

Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> of May | Day 1

Bright Richard, who served as host of the event, opened the day with warmth and energy. Shortly after, resident of a COA reception center, Maksim, welcomed the participants with a beautiful piano performance. Energized by this start, the event was officially opened by the director of COA's policy department: Gertru Diender. She posed a central question: What could self-reliance for asylum seekers look like in the future? Could Virtual Reality be part of that answer? Participants were invited to reflect on this question via an interactive Mentimeter session, setting the tone for a day of discussion and dialogue.



Building on Gertru's opening speech an animated [video](#) was presented that illustrated COA's vision for a digitalized future: residents choosing their own locations, staff able to focus more on tailored guidance and systems designed to benefit everyone. While this video showed a more top-down perspective, the program shifted to bottom-up insights on the need for self-reliance. Fien kamer from UNHCR shared personal stories from the field, followed by Patricia Vermeulen from Movement on the Ground who addressed why self-reliance is important. Alberto, a COA resident who has a background in the IT concluded the session with sharing his perspective.



To elaborate on the discussion, a compilation [video](#) showed best practices from other sectors. From holographic assistant to intelligent matching systems: the examples highlighted how digitalization can promote autonomy in various contexts. Pietro Orfei from the EEUA closed the plenary session with an overview of digitalization in asylum and reception systems across the EU+. He explained how these tools support self-reliance on a systemic level and shared key EU-level developments. Participants were invited to ask questions and exchange their own insights.

Following the plenary, participants of the event joined interactive workshops and excursions to Arendonk (Belgium) and Budel (the Netherlands). Others explored the Next

Nature Museum or visited Stroomz Strijp pharmacy where a hologram now supports customers instead of staff. The workshops are described in the box below.

In the afternoon, live visual notetaker Ymke Wieringa presented her illustrated impressions of the day. She gave a light-hearted retrospective of the day that captured key themes and moments. The final act came from New Dutch Connections. They featured a performance with a kora player and a personal story from Bright Richards, who shared how digital tools supported him during his own journey to the Netherlands.



The day concluded with a networking reception and an inspiration market, featuring contributions from Trigion, Shkorey and Radboud University.

### Friday 16<sup>th</sup> of May | Day 2

Day 2 of the event began once again with a warm welcome from Maksim at the piano. Host Bright Richards then recapped the discussions from the first day. He reflected on the insights and ideas shared about self-reliance and digitalization.

The program opened with a panel discussion on the ethical aspects and the risks of digitalization and the use of AI. The panel featured Koen Leurs from Utrecht University, Jessica Bither from the Robert Bosch Foundation and an interview with Ali, a resident of a COA reception center. The

conversation explored whether digital systems are truly designed around human needs, and whether they contribute to personal agency. It also raised a critical point: what seems effective in theory can turn out quite differently in daily practice.

Following the panel, a video interview with COA board member Anita Bastiaans was shown. She discussed COA's multi-year strategy and shared her vision on how digital tools can shape the future of asylum reception. A second panel then took the stage. This time, the panel brought together Marjolein Lanzing from the University of Amsterdam, Jet de Ranitz from Microsoft and Alberto, a resident of a COA reception center. The discussion explored the potential of AI in asylum reception, while also posing a fundamental question: *just because we can, do we want to?*



Like the day before, participants had the opportunity to join two rounds of workshops and an excursion to Budel.

To summarize the day, visual notetaker Ymke Wieringa once again shared her illustrated reflections, capturing the key themes of the discussions. Followed by the final act of the event: a performance by spoken word artist Sunni Lamin, who spoke about his personal journey bringing him here on stage. When participants were asked what they took away from the event, several reflections stood out. Many described the event as "*inspiring*" and spoke of "*new possibilities*" coming from the discussions. The international nature of the

event was valued, noting the importance of *"new connections"* and others highlighting *"the diversity of perspectives that brought nuance to every conversation"*. Overall, the event was seen as empowering and a step towards an inclusive approach to asylum reception.

### Thank you

This international event offered a valuable opportunity for stakeholders from a wide range of sectors and countries to exchange knowledge and gaining inspiration. We hope it marked a meaningful step toward realizing a future where digitalization supports greater self-reliance in asylum reception in the Netherlands and across Europe.

The digital goodie bag, with links to all online workshops as well as the after movie are available at the [website](#) of the International Knowledge Platform.

Appreciation and thanks to everyone involved: the moderators, the speakers, the organizers of the workshops, the helping hands, the organisational team and of course the participants, who actively took part in the event.

### Workshops

**Empowering migrants by using big data for better matching** Organized by the Immigration Policy Lab, Stanford University and COA: Angie Delevoye, Michael Hotard, Sarah Pennington de Jongh and Tugrul Ejder

**Examples from other sectors to empower individuals by digital solutions** Organized by Microsoft: Matt Bishop

**Co-creation workshop: how to foster more self-reliance through digital tools** Organized by Conversation Culture: Patrick van der Hijden and Iyad Sandid

**Connecting residents and the shelter organization** Organized by UDI and COA: Warda Holm, Gerrit de Lang and Michiel Bennebroek

**Opportunities and restrictions within legal and technical frameworks** Organized by asylum consultant Maria Victoria Messeri, COA and Utrecht University: Geerten Weening, Marielle van Dongen and Kinan Alajak

**Digital academy and vocational training for refugees** Organized by Movement On The Ground: Patricia Vermeulen and Maria Giulia Casini

**Co-creating solutions for language learning** Organized by UAF Academy: Kerim Yildiz and Miriam Lauers

**European policy frameworks and funding** Organized by the European Commission: Guido Castellano

**Participatory Workshop Inspired by Refugee Women's Experiences** Organized by Radboud University: Araa al Jaramani and Noemi Mena

**Rethinking digitalization for self-reliance, dignity and inclusion** Organized by Utrecht University: Kinan Alajak and Karin Geuijen

**How to prevent exclusion of digitally less skilled** Organized by Ghent University: July de Wilde and Katrijn Maryns

**Introduction to the DigiKlik Program** Organized by the Dutch Refugee Council: Genesis Yagual

### Excursions

**Excursion to Arendonk reception center**

**Excursion to Budel reception center**

**Exhibition in the Next Nature Museum on mental health aspects of digitalization**