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## A workvisit to Portugal

Across the bridge and beyond the bustling city, it is a cloudy day amidst a sunny week in May of 2023, as I arrive at the first stop of the day in the Lisbon suburb of Bobadela - the Portuguese Council for Refugees or *Conselho Portugues para os Refugiados* (CPR)'s original asylum reception centre. The centre was first built in 1999 for 21 persons, and in 2006 it was reconstructed to accommodate 42 asylum seekers.

Currently this centre houses approximately 100 persons; the library has turned into a safe haven for a mother and her baby, and some sleep on pull-out couches in the common living room adjacent to the shared kitchen – an unfortunate necessity at this time. CPR is a non-governmental organisation that for the past 30+ years has sought to support and house those that seek asylum in Portugal.



Nationwide there are various organisations and housing programmes intended for *resettled* refugees, but CPR is the only organisation that accommodates those that spontaneously claim asylum at Portugal's borders and airports. This centre is therefore the only location in the country that can house specifically these asylum seekers, and they do not turn anyone away.

The centre is responsible not only for its residents but for a total of 500 asylum seekers, most of whom CPR houses externally in rented apartments and hostels in the vicinity.

Their work in supporting the asylum seekers consists of various departments. There is a financial department in charge of issuing payment cards and transferring weekly stipends.

The 'social' department works hard to maintain relations with municipalities throughout the country, they look for suitable homes and ensure asylum seekers are given guidance by the various municipalities once they are housed there. Their 'integration' department organises activities such as Portuguese lessons, various professional development courses, and support in finding training and work opportunities.

The centre also has an in-house psychologist, a resource they fought hard to provide. All residents are able to speak to the psychologist, or are able to access further (mental) health resources at a nearby medical centre. This approach has been instrumental in ensuring that these necessary health services are truly accessible.

The local community had mixed feelings regarding the expansion of this reception centre in 2006, an issue that COA as well is all too familiar with in The Netherlands.

In order to ensure a smooth transition and positive relations, CPR asked locals what they felt was needed but was missing in their community. And thus, to accommodate the community's needs and to provide a space for connection between the asylum seekers and locals, the CPR building now includes a library and theatre that are also available to its neighbours. The local community was also in need of a childcare care centre. And so, next to its asylum reception centre, CPR built a childcare facility. It caters to both the asylum seekers and the local community, and families pay tuition based on their income to ensure accessibility for all.

After visiting the first asylum reception centre (CAR1) and the childcare centre, we visited CPR's newest reception centre (CAR2), which was built in 2019 using sustainable building materials and methods. This centre houses resettled refugees (*hervestigers*). There are multiple organisations in Portugal that house and support resettled refugees, so this particular centre never has to be over-capacity.

The programme that initially peaked our interest and initiated the contact between our organisations, leading up to the 2023 COA-IKP event on Sustainable Asylum Reception, was one that shared knowledge with asylum seekers on Energy Literacy. One of the social workers from CAR2 also came to The Netherlands to present their Circular Economy programme. The topics were threefold: repairing appliances and hardware, circular fashion, and circular cooking. At this reception centre residents could learn how to repair and reuse household appliances as well as clothing and fabrics, and they learned practicalities about how to prepare meals for their families in a sustainable and affordable way based on Portuguese produce.

The final visit of the day took place at an asylum reception centre for unaccompanied minors, located next to the CPR main offices. It was built in 2012 in a project that sustainably restored an old building at the base of a park (we had to drive through the park to reach it).

The centre was built to house 14 minors, but currently houses approximately 25 persons.

CPR is the only organisation in Portugal that houses these unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, and so they do not turn anyone away. The building houses a small library and learning centre, which they hope to expand, as well as an outdoor play area they hope to renovate soon to better serve the teenagers they house. The walls of the common area showed posters of assignments and photographs of the various activities the centre had organised for the minors.

It was an informative and inspiring day being able to witness the care and dedication of the CPR staff at their various centres and offices in the Lisbon area, amidst the difficulties that asylum reception organisations face. We at the International Knowledge Platform hope to continue to share inspiring practices with one another moving forward. Lastly, I myself would like to express my gratitude to CPR's lovely staff for warmly welcoming me, taking the time out of their busy schedules to share

their work, and for continuously feeding me homemade Portuguese pastries and coffee throughout the day – muito obrigada.

- *Sofia Oreel Milagros*